

ON THE OUTS



Paola Mendoza playing Marisol in "On the Outs"

On the Outs is very in

Film tells poignant tales of girls in a juvenile detention center

By Wickham Boyle

On the Outs, a new indie film, began its run at Film Forum and is now showing at the IFC Center. It tells the story of three adolescent girls from Jersey City who divide their time between the streets, shaky home ground and juvenile jail. It is real reality television with raw emotion, shocking choices and heart-rending outcomes. This is a feature film made with actors but completely infused with the spirit of the girls whose story it portrays.

Filmmakers and co-directors Lori Silverbush and Michael Skolnik collaborated not only with each other but also with a host of girls that they met while working in a juvenile detention center in Secaucus, NJ. According to Silverbush, "These young women generously shared their stories with us, which became an acting workshop and then a screenplay about their lives. We filmed out on the streets of Jersey City in brutal November cold, surrounded by the people in the community — mothers, fathers, curious little kids, gang members and drug dealers — many of whom helped out or appear in the film."

When I caught up with filmmakers Silverbush and Skolnik in the lobby of the Film Forum before a matinee performance that had been graciously purchased by the restaurant Craft so that the entire audience of adolescents could be admitted free, there was a palpable buzz. Silverbush was

chatting with urban intensity to two young women, Jasmine Long age 17 and Sade 20. Both worked on the film and Jasmine, who was decked out in ghetto pink (in the film you learn that only "true gangstas wear pink"), was the inspiration for one of the pivotal characters named OZ. According to Jasmine, "Working on this movie taught me patience, it takes a long time to make a movie and we were impressed, really, that they let us help keep it real."

The movie is so real that at times you may have to avert your eyes, or artfully look down into your popcorn to avoid being overwhelmed by the raw nature of children with guns, crack mothers, a game of Russian Roulette or just the heart break of a teenage mother crooning into a prison phone to her baby. But the film has a quasi-hopeful ending and both filmmakers and all the local consultants fought, debated and finally came to the conclusion that some hope was the way to wrap this up. According to Jasmine, "Now I have hope too. I could watch this 100 times."

The film was made for under a half-million dollars and the investments were taken in small denominations so that the filmmakers could continue to make risky choices. It has been garnering awards in film festivals around the world. Silverbush and Skolnik hope it prompts people to realize that taking care of young people and giving them opportunities is not, according to Silverbush "a political issue, it is a human issue."

Skolnik feels "this is a story that needs to be told." And Skolnik should know, as well as being a filmmaker, he is a long-time youth activist and educator. At the age of 18, while at UCLA, he started an organization in California called Equal Opportunity Productions that reintroduced arts programming to inner city schools. The program still exists today as a testament to his tenacity.

Michael Skolnik is working on a documentary called "One Strike for Life" about the Rockefeller drug laws. Lori Silverbush is working on a film called "Higher Ground" about crossing the border into America and what she calls "our criminal policy regarding immigration."

On the Outs was originally slated for a two-week limited engagement at the Film Forum, which proved to be very successful. This is important because indie theaters around the country look to a film's performance at the Film Forum — considered to be one of the country's leading art-house cinemas — when making their own programming decisions. A successful run at the Film Forum could mean that On the Outs makes its way all around the country as has happened to other indie films that began their lives there (i.e. Born into Brothels, Spellbound, etc.) The film is now showing at the IFC Center.

Run to see this film and if you can, follow the lead of Craft restaurant, offer to sponsor some kids to boast the attendance for the folks who really need it.

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