

News

Brookline filmmaker turns lens on Argentina's vanished residents

By Ed Symkus/Senior Staff Writer
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None
Juan Mandelbaum and some friends march through the streets of Buenos Aires in commemoration of the disappeared.

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When Juan Mandelbaum was about 12 years old, growing up in Buenos Aires, he began experimenting with his mother's 8mm camera, making little abstract movies of nature and cityscapes. When he was 19, he set off to travel around Europe and Latin America, this time recording the sights of everything from bullfights in Spain to Machu Picchu in Peru.

But it was when he moved to the United States that he really got serious about filmmaking, first studying communications at the University of Pennsylvania, later finding work as a producer-director at a small media company, then starting his own firm, Geovision, for which he produced a variety of Latin American-based TV shows, including work on the 10-part series "Americas."

Geovision eventually specialized in a number of public health issues, turning out pieces on an anti-smoking campaign, substance abuse and stroke prevention. Somehow, in the middle of it all, Mandelbaum also made a number of segments for "Sesame Street" over a five-year period in the 1990s.

Then one day, he decided to Google the name of an old girlfriend, Patricia Dixon, who he hadn't heard from in years, and found, to his shock, that she had become one of Argentina's "disappeared." Make that one of the many thousands of people who had vanished under the military dictatorship that ran Argentina from 1976-1983.

That revelation led him to return to Buenos Aires to find out all he could about Dixon and, in turn, learn about similar situations from families and friends of others who were rounded up by the government and never returned.

The resulting documentary, "Our Disappeared," is being screened at the Museum of Fine Arts between Oct. 16 and Nov. 1.

Mandelbaum, who has lived in Brookline with his wife, the opera singer Clara Sandler, since 1982, recently spoke about the film and his purpose for making it.

You left Argentina 30 years ago. Were you concerned that the government was going to come after you?

Mostly I was afraid. In a sense, there was the fear that you didn't know if you were in danger or not. I was involved in a number of social activities, all of which were suspect. Basically, anybody who had any kind of progressive values was suspect.

Was there any danger in you going back now to make the film?

No. The government now is actually very consistent and dedicated to human rights. Unfortunately, it's going slowly, and there is still a dark side there. Most of the people who did these horrible things are still in the streets. There's still a high level of violence in the society, caused by the enormous economic inequality. Buenos Aires is a beautiful city, and the tourist parts are lovely, but the whole interior of the country has been devastated.

Did you do this film to find out what happened to Patricia, or to expose those who did the kidnappings and killings?

I don't think I could have made the film 10 years ago. I wasn't in a place where I could do that at that point. It's a very personal film, so it's sort of me coming to grips with this issue, and deciding to go into the belly of the beast. It's been a very painful journey, but a very necessary one, for me, and to give voice to their stories. I feel that the whole country has to embrace what happened, and take responsibility for it.

What are the thoughts of people in Argentina today about the disappeared?

There are still people committed to finding the truth about what happened; that's the big hole that's still there. We don't know what happened. The military never came clean, saying, "Here are the archives, here's what happened." Because they know that they would be implicated and then accused. There are still the mothers and grandmothers who are looking for disappeared children. But there are still a number of people in the country who feel that what the military did was right — to free the country from communism. And there's a large number of people who weren't

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affected directly, and say, "Yeah, that was terrible, but I've got other problems now."

It's interesting that in the film, you don't pull any punches concerning the actions of some members on the left.

Yes, I also tackled the subject of the violence of the left — the Montoneros and the People's Revolutionary Army — without in any way justifying what happened afterward. When the military took over, they were the state, and the state has a different level of responsibility. The state cannot just disappear and kill people. But they did, on a massive scale. So I hope that the film will continue the dialogue and open people's minds.

Was it a tough film to put together?

I didn't do it alone. I had so much support from technical people, friends and family. And my editor, David Carnochan, is very responsible for the way the film came out. He edited for 22 months.

What are your plans for getting the film seen beyond Boston?

We showed it last month at the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival, and it's going to air on PBS next year on "Independent Lens."

"Our Disappeared" is scheduled for screenings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on Oct. 16 (7:30 p.m.), 18 (2 p.m.), 19 (3:45 p.m.), 26 (6:30 p.m.) and Nov. 1 (10:30 a.m.). For ticket information, call 617-369-3306.

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