

German Gutierrez's

La Familia latina

La Familia Latina is not about the Latin family as a socio-economic unit, nor particularly about how Latins as members of a community interrelate with each other either. The title is intended as a metaphor for Latin Americans living in Montreal. *La Familia Latina* tries to show us who they are, what problems they face and what their culture is like.

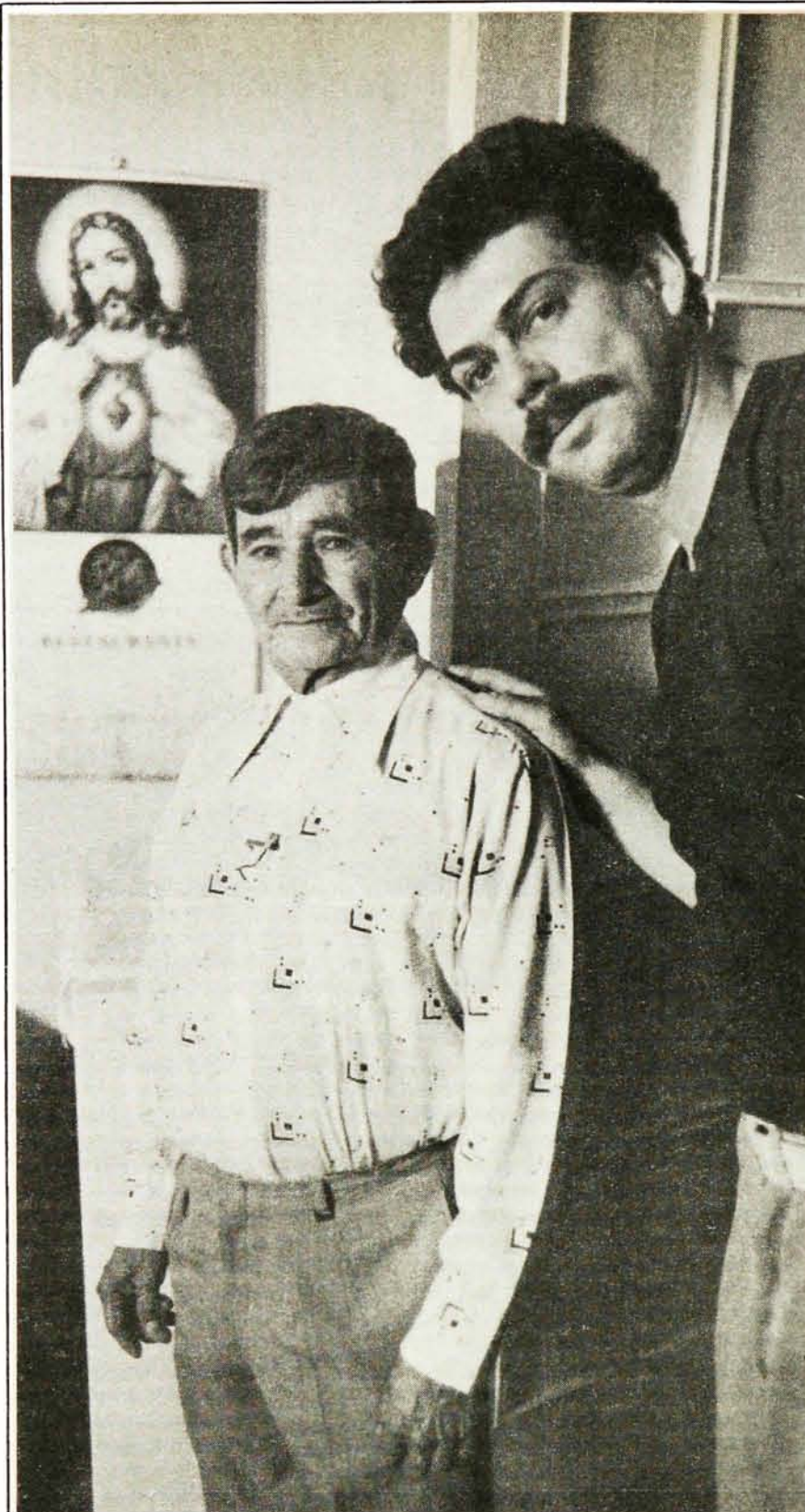
The film is structured as a series of interviews: a Salvadorean teacher who is now a janitor, a single mother, an Argentinian painter, a Chilean poet and various members of their respective families. They all talk of the changes in situation and attitudes that they have undergone since their arrival in Montreal.

One episode which focuses on Ines Aracena, divorced mother of three, will have special significance for Latin women. Aracena came to Canada with her husband, found that women had more options here, exercised them, and broke up with him as a result. "In Canada you don't have to live with an man you don't love only to support your children," she says. That all women in Canada can afford a room of their own may be too readily assumed. However, financial independence does often accompany the Latin woman's sometimes hesitant entry into the Canadian job-market. Aracena's testimony is an eloquent expression of the changes different economic situations bring to traditional relationships.

Though other episodes aren't as well articulated as this one, they all have a residual truth that will be immediately recognized by other immigrants and exiles. The experiences depicted are so common that identification is made easy. In one scene, a poet says that exile is leaving everything that is dear (the weather, indigenous music), and his wife, Mariana Taulis, adds that is is also rage, sadness, powerlessness, and rootlessness. Both are giving cathartic expression to what many exiles think and feel.

The last scene where Taulis resorts to song to recount her experience is particularly moving. In her "Simple Things," she says that sadness is the slow death of little things that are dear. We realise that exile is a state of perpetual sadness because one leaves all the simple things one loved behind and it is the simple things that are most easily destroyed.

Gutierrez's broad approach allows him to cover many issues. That his subjects sometimes appear stereotypic is one of the liabilities of the film: there's the young man who's confused by the sexual freedom women enjoy in North America; the teenage girl who, at least in front of the camera, is appreciative of the restrictions her parents place on her; the mother who says she'd throw her daughter out of the house if she had sexual relations before marriage. The director seems to have limited these people to speaking of themselves within



• La Familia latina director Gutierrez, right, Hernandez

the boundaries of how they are already perceived by others. In doing so, she has also limited the audience's ability to understand them.

These figures are stereotypes because Gutierrez does not succeed in contextualizing their experiences. Though one senses that they are supposed to be representative of the 30,000 Latins now living in Montreal, why they are so and, more importantly, how they are so, is never articulated. Whether they are immigrants or exiles, the class they originate from, the length of their stay in Montreal and other such factors that would greatly influence their experience and their ability to adapt and/or assimilate into Canadian society are not examined systematically. Too often, one has to rely on accent, manner, the books on their shelves and the food they eat to find clues to this essential information.

Gutierrez speaks of a Latin experience in Montreal and he uses different people as if to illustrate different aspects of the experience. Yet, the only common denominator among those interviewed is that they are Spanish-speaking people who left their homeland. It is a common peeve among Latins that outsiders often amorphously lump Chileans, Argentinians, Peruvians and others together without taking into consideration their different cultures and values. Gutierrez, as a Colombian, should have been more sensitive to this.

In spite of the director's knowledge of the Latin American milieu in Montreal, his depiction of people he can obviously understand rarely goes beyond the exotic. He seems to have chosen his subjects on the basis of how interesting they would be as colourful characters rather than on how they rep-

resent and articulate their experience as exiles or immigrants in Montreal. We thus get the patriarch surrounded by the 50-plus members of his family at a photo-session in church; the artist who thought that art was universal and is surprised at cultural specificity; a youth carrying a gigantic "ghetto-blasters"; a family singing *Una Sonrisa* in their kitchen, and others. But needing help to find a job, sending the children to speak to bureaucrats or to buy groceries because one doesn't speak the language, and other common humiliations that go hand in hand with cultural displacement, are not depicted.

Yet Gutierrez does treat the people he interviews with love and respect. I was nevertheless disturbed at how, through lack of proper exposition, he unwittingly exposes some of them. One of the false charges often brought against immigrants is that they come here, live off the fat of the land, and then go back home. In *La Familia Latina*, Gutierrez shows a woman supporting her family on welfare and a Salvadorean buying a house with his family allowance payments. In the meantime others complain about how they have nothing to say to the Québécois, how much they hate the weather, and how they miss their country. The only time a family who has integrated into Québécois society is depicted, Gutierrez shows us two unattended children left in the care of their computers.

Technically, the film suffers from a voice-over narration in French that starts two beats after the subjects on screen begin to talk. The device is irritating because the voice-over is often no more than a translation of what is being said in Spanish. Subtitles would not have diminished French-speaking people's understanding of the film and would have been a great help to those who only speak Spanish. Since it is so seldom that minorities get to see themselves reflected in the dominant culture, it would have been an added treat if they could also have heard themselves in their own language.

However, in spite of the film's many problems, many Latins will probably like *La Familia Latina*. Their cultural history and a shared psychological experience of exile will enable them to bring their own multiple dimensions to the film's one, thus ignoring the clichés because their personal experience will have replaced the clichés with something real.

Others are likely to think *La Familia Latina* is giving them an intimate portrait that won't make them uncomfortable by destroying their stereotypes. They'll probably even like this film. I don't.

José Arroyo •

LA FAMILIA LATINA d./sc./narr. German Gutierrez co-sc. Pierre Marier. Leopoldo Gutierrez ed. Annie Boudin asst. ed. Christian Marcotte d.o.p. René Pothier cam. Martin Leclerc asst.cam. Michel Motard add cam. André Luc Dupont, Claude de Maisonneuve, Richard Nichol sd. Pierre Blain sd.ed. Alain Sauvé mixer Hans Peter Strobl orig.mus. Jimmy Tanaka texts & trans. Nicole Duchêne dubbing Rina Cyr, Mario Desmarais key grip François Warot grips Walter Klymkiw, Mark Sherman loc. man. Louis-Philippe Rochon, Michel Dandavino titles Valentino Teodori unit admin. Monique Létourneau asst. unit admin. Louise Cousineau mus.rights res. Evelyn Régimbald p.sec. Johanne Pelletier tech.coord. Edouard Davidovici post p.d. Suzanne Dussault p. Michel Gauthier exec.p. Roger Frappier p.c. l'Office National du film du Canada. Col., running time: 58 minutes.