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A Secret World

Pic marks a confident new director who grasps cinematic storytelling and achieves a solid connection with his young, difficult central character.

By ROBERT KOEHLER

A sexually adventurous girl's road trip across northern Mexico provides writer-director Gabriel Marino with plenty of grist for the mill in his narrative debut, "A Secret World." Stumbling only in certain logistical and geographic details, as well as a curious ending, the pic marks a confident new director who grasps cinematic storytelling and achieves a solid connection with his young, difficult central character. Berlin launch in Europe and combined Cartagena and Guadalajara fest unspoolings in Latin America, plus excellent word of mouth, set the film up for buyers on various platforms.

Although much of "A Secret World" takes place on the road, particularly in the states of Sinaloa and Baja California Sur, it opens with a sense of majesty and poetry combined with urban grit in crowded Mexico City. Before the contradictory character of Maria (Lucia Uribe, in an impressive screen debut) is established, Marino allows time and space for the viewer to take in her point of view of the city, which includes tiny details (chipped paint on metal rails, the anticipatory mood at a bus stop) as well as an underlying suggestion of unease that's part of why she wants to get the hell out of town.

First, though, Maria must get through her final day of high school, where she's an emotional loner. Her apparent coping mechanism is radical: having sex with any boy open to the proposition, albeit of a loveless kind that means no more to her than having breakfast. Marino's scenario denies the viewer the usual surrogate character the teen drama subgenre typically provides -- some sort of sounding board as a way to tap into the young, conflicted character's mind, instead relegating that task to Maria's running diary of notes to herself, whose words are heard on the soundtrack.

Still, for long stretches of the film, Maria is alone with her thoughts, saying only a few words to her mom (Claudia Rios), who is notably filmed in such a way that she remains out of focus. Sharp viewers may notice a detail in Maria's bedroom -- a wall bedecked with images of whales -- that foreshadow future events, and suggest where she may be headed.

Once on the road, this adventure becomes a series of encounters with similarly lonely people, whose contrast with Maria is striking. In an effectively sustained scene that displays the director's command of space and character, struggling mom Rosita (Olivia Lagunas) is suspiciously chatty with Maria in a cafe, inviting the girl to her cramped apartment. Giving auds enough time to consider the reckless courage and nerve of a recently graduated schoolgirl forging her way in the dangerously unknown territory of drug-cartel-infested Sinaloa, hints of menace prove to be as

present as they are unfounded.

The film's only real hiccup is Maria's time with friendly Juan (Roberto Mares), who shares a bus ride -- and then a room and bed -- with Maria en route to crossing the border by foot into the U.S. in hopes of finding work. His character becomes too obviously a mechanism by which the alienated Maria may get in touch with her deeper emotions: For the first time when having sex with a guy, she actually feels some connection.

In her debut role, Uribe owns the film completely, aided by supporting thespians such as the effective Lagunas, who allow the young actress to gradually uncover her character's buried emotional core.

Tech package is world-class, topped by Ivan Hernandez's cinematography, which captures urban and rural Mexico with great depth and detail, and depends on natural light for a warm look in digital vid.

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