

“La muerte es una trampa, es una traición, que le sueltan a uno sin ponerle condición. La única manera de burlar a la muerte es escribir, escribir mucho” (Gabriel García Márquez). Roberta Alviti interviews Justin Webster.

*Mister Webster, you lead the Catalan Films & Tv, the production house for which you wrote and directed the documentaries José María Aznar, una batalla inacabada (2010) and Seré asesinado (2012). How did your interest for the Spanish and Hispanic americans begin?*

I came to Spain aged 27, as a freelance journalist - I'd been working at The Independent newspaper in London - with Sumpta Ayuso my partner in life, and in our company JWP (actually not Catalan Films - that's a public organisation which promotes films made in Catalonia, where we are based). Sumpta produces, and I direct. So I have worked in Spanish for many years, first writing, then radio and tv and - for the last 20 years or so, in documentaries. I love the Hispanic world for all the things it has which British culture doesn't. At the same time (like Márquez who stole from writers in English) I think it's great to know at least two cultures well.

*The docufilm presents the extraordinary ascension of Gabriel García Márquez, intertwining to the biographic storytelling that of his literary and journalistic works, following an itinerary which is not only chronological but also geographical: Aracataca, Sucre, Bogotá, Paris, Cuba, New York, Mexico City and Barcellona. When was the project conceived? How long did it take for its realization?*

The project started with Kate Horne, a British producer who works with a friend and well-known director, Angus Macqueen. She had contacts and some interest from broadcasters. After I came on board to direct, and JWP took over the production, it took about a year to complete the film - just in time to have it premiere in the fabulous film festival in Cartagena de Indias, which Márquez was so involved with.

*The film has not only an external focus, a single narrating voice, but builds its narrative on Gabo starting from testimonies of parents, his brothers Jaime e Aída, his friends Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Enrique Santos Calderón, the literary agent Carmen Balcells, experts like the writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez, and professor Gerald, his biographer, counting also on the presence of the former US President Bill Clinton and Colombian President César Gaviria. On which criteria did you select the participants in the film? And above all was it difficult to convince them to give their testimony?*

They all had to have had a real relationship with him, I didn't want any experts - his biographer, Gerald Martin spent 17 years writing his life, and became a friend, so even he was not JUST an expert. Juan Gabriel also met Márquez, though he is the most distant from him, but more than an expert for me he is a fellow novelist, someone who sees into the psychological experience of what writing is about, rather than being just a critic of the work. I was hit by the love for Gabo that came through the interviews, not a hagiographic type of admiration, they were often critical of him, but I could feel the love

- all the way through to Clinton, who I interviewed just before finishing the edit of the film. Once he got into his stride, with that beautiful Southern Baptist eloquence, he expressed perfectly (it's at the end of the film).

*Choosing a "polyphonic" structure answers a stylistic need, that of attenuating the chronological structure of the classic biographical kind, that would have been possibly too limiting and constrictive to encompass the exceptional human and artistic adventure of Márquez?*

Yes, I wanted this to be more than a standard biography, something more urgent and meaningful: Márquez is in many ways miraculous, and so - paradoxically - I wanted to treat it as an investigation, to discover the essence of meaning behind the miracle. I think there is a revelation at the end, for those who want it, about Márquez's special attitude to life and death.

*Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza recounts that when he met García Márquez, the friend that presented them said he was a terrible student, with a weak spot for alcohol and women, concluding: "Lástima. Tiene talento, pero es un caso perdido". How did this "lost case", the boy grown up in the poverty of the deepest Colombia, manage to reach the greatest novelist of South America and a Nobel prize for Literature?*

He had a tremendous drive and was extremely disciplined as a writer, always - though the rest of his life may have been chaotic at times. Though - in retrospect - there were many times when he might have failed, given up, had worse luck or even broken down. He took big risks. Nothing happened automatically. He's a monument to faith, and insight. His gift for friendship, and above all - his immensely strong wife and happy family - helped too.

*Also his uninterrupted and intense militant history, inextricably linked to his activity as novelist and journalist, above all. The risk of falling into the myth was very real, but the narration, even if passionate, is rigorous and faces also controversial issues, such as the relationship with Cuba and his friendship with Fidel Castro, the was a reason for attrition, especially during the '70s, with a large part of the southamerican intelligentsia. What do you think of this?*

I'm glad you think it was critical - I did not want this to be a hagiography. Márquez's relationship with Fidel is worthy of criticism. Though I found the picture that emerges is largely positive. Márquez went against trends. He fell out with the communist hard-liners in the 60s, and went back to Cuba when Castro was being denounced by the intelligentsia. Seen from today, it looks like he was broadly on the right side of history. Though of course not everyone would agree. He was involved, but more as a journalist and mediator than as a political activist. I think he tried to use his fame well.

*1967 was the transformation year: Gabo publishes Cien años de soledad, which becomes an immediate success of both critic and public, a literary case of extraordinary measure. García Márquez, that had already completed avantgard works, evidently influenced by the so-called 'magic realism', recounts the story of a village, Macondo, through the plight of the Buendía family, in one of both reality and supernatural nature; the supernatural is an integrale part of the daily life, according Márquez; but at the same time, the daily life is recounted as if they were supernatural: in this aspect resides, without doubt, the style of the novel. Márquez, when he announced that he was about to write Cien años de soledad, simply said he would "tell the story the way my grandmother would". In which measure, according to you, the literary works of Marquez are traceable to his personal life, to the mythical vision of his own childhood?*

I think that Márquez's huge discovery was a sort of rebellion against a limited and rather poor way of perceiving reality. He knew from experience that there were other ways of perceiving which were truer - truer than say a purely realistic account, and more real than pure fantasy - but the problem was how to express this. The tone of his grandmother, and of course the love that he felt for her and that extraordinary world of his childhood - showed him how to do it, and connect with people everywhere.

What would Gabo have thought of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Colombian president who guided the country to making peace with the Farc guerrilla?

I'd guess he'd be extremely supportive of Santos, and at the same time sceptical and pragmatic (as he was with his own Nobel). He'd be thinking about how best to use the prize to get the peace, which is still in doubt unfortunately...

*For which kind of public did you think of and create this film?*

I think you try to imagine someone like yourself in the most basic terms, a curious human, who wonders what life is about, and how best to live, and likes to be drawn in to stories which show the world through other peoples' eyes.

*How has the reaction been of his family and closest friends?*

I'm glad to say his sons Gonzalo and Rodrigo like it. Rodrigo García is a very fine film director, and he was complimentary, which was a relief. I know that Márquez's widow Mercedes appreciated it, though for anyone that close to Márquez, a 90 minute documentary is a drop in the ocean. In general, it has been very well-received.

*A last question. What is your favorite novel by Gabo?*

Chronicle of a Death Foretold - which is so small, and so big at the same time.

