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Motherland (Bayang Ina Mo)

Ramona S. Diaz

Producer Ramona S. Diaz, Rey Cuervo, Leah Marino. **Production company** CineDiaz (Baltimore, USA). **Written and directed by** Ramona S. Diaz. **Director of photography** Nadia Hallgren, Clarissa De Los Reyes. **Editor** Leah Marino. **Sound design** Wayne Bell. **Sound** Mark Laccay.

Colour. 94 min. Filipino.

Premiere January 21, 2017, Sundance Film Festival

World sales Dogwoof

One of Manila's public hospitals houses the largest maternity ward in the world. It's a lifeline for expectant mothers just managing to scrape by on the fringes of society, with as many as 100 babies being born here every day. *Motherland* follows three protagonists over the course of their stay amidst hundreds of other women.

Following the cinéma vérité tradition, director Ramona S. Diaz eschews interviews of any kind, observing instead what goes on in this place: overfilled hallways and shared beds to deal with the flood of births, information conveyed through loudspeakers, visiting times as a huge logistical challenge. A baby is lost and then reappears, deliveries are captured almost incidentally and in between social workers tout the advantages of family planning. *Motherland* is more than a portrait of an institution though, delivering equally multi-layered insights into Philippine society, which is marked by a deep-rooted Catholicism, the powerlessness of the poor and an explosion in the birth rate. And yet all these issues are swathed in humour and human warmth. Mothers give birth to life, and life gives birth to stories. One has seldom been so close to both at once.

Ansgar Vogt

100 babies within 24 hours

I started developing a film about reproductive rights and reproductive justice back in 2011. Initially I had wanted to follow the social and political drama swirling around the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill. As originally conceived, the film was going to follow the bill as it went through the legislative process. While researching the film, I visited the Dr. Jose Fabella Memorial Hospital, the busiest maternity ward on the planet; it averages 60 births a day – and at its peak, as many as 100 babies within a 24-hour period. Fabella is the final safety net for very poor pregnant women, most of whom cannot afford either contraception or the \$60 delivery fee. The images I saw at the hospital – the nurses who did their best to tame the noisy chaos of emergency room arrivals, the crowded corridors, the premature births and cramped recovery rooms with double occupancy of single beds – gripped me and wouldn't let go. It was soon evident that the story I was looking for, a story about reproductive justice and maternal and women's rights, unfolded within the hospital walls.

As I shifted the gaze of my camera, I also decided on an exclusively cinéma-vérité approach to capture the daily rhythms of the hospital. Day in, day out, the routines at Fabella repeat themselves. Pregnant women arrive, mothers with babies leave. Outside on the street, visitors line up. Inside the ward, pregnant women, fanning themselves because there is no air-conditioning, await the signs of labour that will advance them to the delivery room and eventually the delivery staff's cry: 'Baby out!'

No false shame

As in most immersive experiences, once the routine washes over you, the real story emerges. And the story I found was one of community and humour. The women talk unabashedly with each other about sex. A nurse counsels them on hygiene, speaking into a microphone like a stand-up comic, teasingly instructing them to bathe hidden body parts so their husbands and boyfriends will still want to have sex with them – and not chase after other women. They share not only stories but also their bodies, literally – breastfeeding other women's babies is not an uncommon sight. The narrative that emerges is a tableau of not only poverty, but also of warmth, generosity and fortitude. The fleeting yet profound relationships forged on those cramped beds are the emotional bedrock of the film.

The story that unfolds in *Motherland*, while taking place in the Philippines, is universal. The wondrous mystery of motherhood is apparent in every frame of the film, in the sweat and screams of a first-time mother in labour, in the peace of her newborn being placed at her swollen breast, in the awkward laughter as she flounders to diaper her squirming baby. The joy in Fabella is no different from the joys experienced by mothers worldwide. However, because this takes place in the Philippines, this film invites audiences to witness analogous situations from the starkly different perspective of a poor, densely populated, Catholic country.

Ramona S. Diaz



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Ramona S. Diaz was born in Manila. She earned a BA in Communications from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts in 1983, and an MA in Communications from Stanford University in California in 1995. Alongside her work as a director, screenwriter, producer and editor, Ramona S. Diaz conducts production and post-production workshops in the United States and numerous African countries. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Films

1992: *Exits* (10 min.), *In Residence* (10 min.). 1995: *Spirits Rising* (60 min.). 2003: *Imelda* (103 min.). 2010: *The Learning* (98 min.). 2012: *Don't Stop Believin': Everyman's Journey* (105 min.). 2017: *Motherland (Bayang Ina Mo)*.