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LA SIERRA JOURNAL

Where Violence Reigned, Camera Has Compassion

By **JUAN FORERO**

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LA SIERRA, Colombia - To many in this class-conscious country, this hillside slum high over Medellín is known only as a violent outpost in Colombia's war, a place populated by gangsterlike paramilitary gunmen, soulless prostitutes and poor people with no hopes or dreams.

But on a recent sunny afternoon, amid the simple cinder-block homes and impossibly steep alleyways, the people of La Sierra could look in a mirror held up by two outsiders and see something different - tragic, to be sure, but a bit more human.

On that day two filmmakers, an American and a Colombian who spent a year documenting the lives of La Sierra's paramilitaries, returned to show their film to a packed church. The two, Scott Dalton, a Texas-born photographer, and Margarita Martínez, a Colombian writer, had no idea how it would be received. The film contained raw scenes of combat and featured paramilitary fighters openly admitting to homicides.

But when the emotional 95



Scott Dalton

A still from "La Sierra" showing Edison Flórez, a paramilitary who was later killed, and a girlfriend, Yasmín, caring for their child.

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minutes ended, mothers and teenage girls wept, applause filled Santa María de La Sierra Church, and the young gunmen who were the protagonists nodded their heads in quiet approval.

"This shows our reality, not like most people think," said Byron Ríos, 22, a former paramilitary member who appears in the film. "It is like a soap opera of poor people. All the ones people ever see are of rich people."

One young former gunman, Jesús Martínez, 22, said, "I think even our dead comrades would have liked seeing it."

The film, "La Sierra," has won prizes at the Angelika Film Center in Manhattan and the Miami International Film Festival. It is to be shown this week at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto, and next month at the Seattle International Film Festival. An 84-minute version is also scheduled for three screenings in June at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center.

With no narration, the story is told by the film's subjects, who include a baby-faced commander named Edison Flórez and a 17-year-old girl, Cielo Muñoz. The scenes of young men preparing for combat and dodging gunfire are unflinching.

It was shot two years ago, at the height of combat in Medellín's slums between right-wing paramilitary gunmen and leftist guerrillas. The fighting here has since subsided, under a truce arranged while the film was being made. But the poverty and a fear of renewed violence remain.

During the war, the gunmen here worked for a right-wing group and were determined to kill off leftists entrenched in a neighboring barrio. But the film avoids dwelling on the political stakes, focusing rather on the intimate and ordinary lives of paramilitary fighters, their girlfriends and families. Those lives are shown to be mundane, bittersweet, even comic at times.

"We've covered massacres and so much crime committed by the paramilitaries that you see them as monsters," said Ms. Martínez, 35, a journalist. "But you're in their homes, seeing their lifestyle, the lack of opportunities, then you don't judge anymore."

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Paul Smith for The New York Times
Edison Flórez sisters, center, consoled each other at the film's showing in the slum.

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In Colombia, of course, the right-wing paramilitary leaders for whom these young people fight are considered cocaine kingpins responsible for thousands of deaths. Top commanders live free from interference on sprawling ranches; since late last year, they too have been disarming - in a deal with the government that human rights groups say will grant them virtual impunity.

The foot soldiers, in contrast, lead lives surrounded by poverty and come across more like Los Angeles street hoods, fighting for no ideological reason but simply because it is what young men in their barrio do.

In the film, Cielo Muñoz, a widow at 15, visits her new boyfriend in prison and sells candy from a bus. Jesús Martínez, who lost a hand when a homemade grenade exploded, says violence is "my destiny."

Viewers also meet Pirulu, a pint-sized boy who lugs ammunition for the fighters, and the hard-working, religious father of a leading paramilitary commander. A shopkeeper sums up the fighting, "The guys from there kill the guys from here because they're from here, and the guys from here kill the guys from there because they're from there."

The main character, Edison Flórez, 22, in one poignant scene, says he would have liked to be a civil engineer, winning the respect of neighbors who would refer to him as "doctor."

"The movie shows that people here can dream, that they can love, that they can feel, that they are like any other person," said Yasmín García, 18, who had a son with Mr. Flórez. "Just because they have guns doesn't mean they are just evil."

But tragedy is never far away.

In the midst of filming, government troops on patrol shot Mr. Flórez dead. Mr. Dalton's camera shows his lifeless body lying on the street.

Because of the painful footage, the filmmakers screened the film for Mr. Flórez's family first, showing it on a banged-up television in their home. The family, clutching each other, wailed in grief from the moment Mr. Flórez spoke to the camera.

His parents and siblings insisted on remembering him as a loving father who went by the nickname "the doll."

"I thought it would hit me hard, make me sick, but I was so happy to see him talking," said his mother, Lisidia Flórez, 46, wiping tears. "For us, he is still alive."

Hours later, the family joined 200 residents who crowded into La Sierra's airy church, watching the film on a big-screen

television.

There were, to be sure, complaints. One former paramilitary fighter, Edwin Andrews Velásquez, 25, said the film "needed more action," explaining that the barrio was more violent than it had been portrayed.

But La Sierra is far different today from what it used to be. After the truce in 2003, the violence began to wane. But there is still widespread concern that former fighters, with little to do and few economic prospects, will descend into banditry.

That prompted the Rev. Jaime Bravo, the Catholic priest here, to say that he hoped the film would "show how this society is and hopefully touch the hearts of those in power so they do something about this."

"Our problem," he said, "is that poverty does not have a voice."

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