

About New York;  
A Latin Takes Manhattan

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## Body

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BALBUENA has finally arrived!

This is momentous news in Washington Heights, heralded on posters in store windows and on walls, where Orodoto Balbuena dwarfs the city skyline like a sly grinning conqueror with his ever-present black beret and Afro comb. Who is this Caribbean Kilroy whose name pops up almost everywhere on streets packed with Dominican immigrants on their pre-dawn journeys to work or on their daily rounds shopping?

He is they.

Balbuena, a romantic rube played by Luisito Marti, is the star of "Nueba Yol," a movie comedy made by Angel Muniz with a few dollars and a lot of heart. It is every immigrant's story of scheming and dreaming to get a visa to come to New York, where legend has it that money can be plucked from the street like lettuce in a field. Never mind that many newcomers find the pickings slim and the only money to be had comes from chopping lettuce or washing dishes.

His exploits are already legend on Dominican television, where Balbuena's outrageous and unsuccessful plans to come north have made him the Ralph Kramden of the immigrant set. In real life, such attempts sometimes end in tragedy in the shark-infested waters off the Dominican Republic.

New York, as Balbuena says, is a serious matter.

THAT knowledge may be why the audience at a recent screening of the new film erupted in Stallone-worthy cheers when Balbuena, hanging on to his elusive visa and even more elusive English, finally made it past a wary immigration officer at Kennedy International Airport.

"Whoever had a dream to come to New York becomes a Balbuena," said Mr. Muniz, who wrote and directed the movie on a \$280,000 budget. "It's difficult to make a movie about Balbuena without people laughing. It's difficult to make a movie about immigration where people don't cry."

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It's also hard to make a Spanish-language movie and find a home for it in New York, despite ethnic theaters for groups like Indians and Chinese. Decades ago, there were many theaters where Hispanic immigrants saw movies where the men were brave, the women beautiful and everybody spoke Spanish -- often with a Mexican accent.

The creators of "Nueba Yol" -- Dominican slang for New York -- hope to revive that tradition, noting that the movie, which broke records in the Dominican Republic, is showing healthy box-office returns in the 10 local theaters where it is playing.

Video killed the Spanish movie market, said Lawrence Eulojio Martin, one of the movie's associate producers. Mexican producers thought theaters would be obsolete.

Mr. Martin refused to believe such talk. He knew Hispanic immigrants liked the slam-bang Hollywood adventure movies, but they also yearned to see somebody they could identify with. Consider Jimmy Smits's tender yet realistic portrayal of a single father trying hard to buck a lifetime of bad luck in "Mi Familia" and you get a sense of what Mr. Martin means.

Unfortunately, when Hollywood goes Hispanic, the results are Al Pacino chewing his way through scenery and the Spanish language in "Scarface" or Marisa Tomei in "The Perez Family" playing a hooker with more ham than a meaty Cuban sandwich.

"We all love Hollywood pictures, but give us a Latin hero and we'll go to the movies," Mr. Martin said. "You've got to give the Latin people their own heroes. You can't expect Hollywood to give it to them."

Enter Balbuena.

ALTHOUGH he combines the optimism of Candide with the romantic luck of Beauty's Beast -- this is a movie after all -- this immigrant Everyman is someone who knows what it's like to arrive in a strange land with no money, English or job prospects. His audiences certainly do, too. When he is told the dollar bills in New York flutter unnoticed down the street, viewers laugh knowingly.

When his cousin Pedro's Americanized children reject him, viewers empathize with the sting of being treated like a bumpkin. And when Pedro tells his children he'll send them back to Santo Domingo if they don't like his discipline, the audience cheers.

With the movie set in Washington Heights, the drug trade that is the bane of decent families in the community is featured. So too are the dangers that come with easy money and the fear of returning to the homeland empty-handed and defeated.

But Balbuena, like many of his countrymen, would rather scrub toilets than take a shortcut.

"Your dreams become reality when you return to the motherland," he tells his cousin. "The victory is to return with your conscience clean."

When the hero is Everyman, the heroics are in the everyday.

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About New York;A Latin Takes Manhattan

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