

New Gender-bending Mexican Film Challenges Stereotypes

Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico, April 8, 2019

“We don’t know why men began dressing up as women,” says Gerardo Madrigal, as he looks out over the river running through his hometown in Mexico. He is one of thousands of men who undergo stunning transformations during a traditional festival held every year, known simply as the Fiesta Grande. Later, his wife puts the finishing touches on his makeup before he steps out into a cheering crowd.

Those gender-bending dancers call themselves the Chunta, and they’re the subject of a new documentary film, *The Chunta*, which has screened at festivals around Latin America, Europe, and the U.S. When filmmaker Genevieve Roudané moved from Oregon to Mexico, she searched for fellow members of the GLBT community, and was invited to the Fiesta Grande. What at first appeared to be an oasis of acceptance later revealed itself to be a complex story of conflict, and even violence.

Surprisingly, despite the central role that gender-bending plays in the Fiesta Grande, gay and transgender dancers are often met with rejection. Most Chunta dancers are straight men who take their tradition seriously. “I get a lot of criticism because I allow gays in my gang,” says Esther Noriega, the leader of a rival group of dancers, known locally as “gangs.”

Through the eyes of dancers in both groups, we begin to see just how much is at stake. Anger flares as men race to create exquisite hand-embroidered dresses and delicate paper crowns. *The Chunta* film is a funny, joyous celebration of outcasts finding their chosen family and daring to be themselves, even in the face of bigotry.

“I made this film as part of my dream of breaking down the wall between queer communities in the U.S. and Mexico,” says Roudané. “We need stories about LGBT people from around the world— their hopes and dreams, everyday lives and everyday struggles. We need to challenge stereotypes about Latinx identity and sexuality. I hope that this story can part of the fight for LGBT visibility, rights, and happiness.”

One of the dancers in the film, Mexican gay rights activist José Eliezer Esponda Cáceres, is featured in the film as he recounts the violence faced by trans women organizing for their rights and their lives in the 1990s: “Homosexuality has always existed. In Chiapas, like many parts of the world, people kept it secret. In 1989, under Governor Patrocinio González Garrido, the fear began. We started to see violent killings against the trans community: even two or three murders per night. We’re still searching for our identity as a community, because of all the secrecy that used to exist, and that still exists.” For many LGBT dancers, the Fiesta Grande can be an important space to find that community and identity, despite enduring homophobia.

Fellow Chunta dancer Isauro Vidal has also faced homophobia and exclusion when he don’s the women’s gowns, but he keeps coming back: “I like dressing as a Chunta because to me it represents the god of fertility, the duality between man and woman. That duality creates a moment in the Fiesta, when we’re all together, and you see the ideal world you wish existed. It’s about accepting ourselves just as we are. Respecting each other, and dancing with joy. For me it’s a very emotional thing to do a fertility dance. It means belonging to the earth, belonging in this world.”

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