

DIVERSITY... MORE THAN A BUZZWORD

Marilyn R. Atlas



Image: Alex Nabaum / For The L.A. Times

As a child, I was drawn to books and films that were situated in faraway places. The exotic locales, customs and characters left indelible impressions that have lasted a lifetime. I recall reading the Billy Brewster series. Billy travelled all over the world with his Dad. Similarly, I loved the *White Nile Diaries* and *On the Road*. But much as I enjoyed experiencing, along with the characters, the sense of adventure and excitement, I remember thinking, “Why do the young women who solve mysteries, or are nurses, stay stateside, while young men get to travel all over the world?” That longing for foreign intrigue, adventure, and exotic cultures has remained with me my whole life.

How fortunate then that I grew up in a college town that had a theatre that only showed foreign films. I regularly saw movies directed by directors such as Bunuel, Ray, Kurosawa, and Fellini that opened up the world to me in a way I scarcely believed was possible. What resonated most were the complex and interesting characters from all walks of life, each with their own wants, interests, conflicts and unique interactions with other characters. Dialogue,

even when translated or superimposed on the screen, had punch and depicted a vast variety of emotions.

No wonder then, many years later when I decided I wanted to be a producer, I was often disheartened to read scripts where the characters still tended to fall into certain jobs and social status with predictable traits and characteristics. Where there was diversity, too often characters fit into common perceptions of their particular ethnicity. There was little that reflected my worldview, as experienced through the movies I saw as a young woman or in the books from my childhood.

I was particularly taken aback by the limited ways women were portrayed. Almost without exception, they were defined by the traditional roles of motherhood, helpmate, wife, their looks, and most of all their neediness. The women I knew and was most interested in were independent and had bigger life goals than marriage and family.

When I first read the script for *Real Women Have Curves* in the early 1990s, I was transfixed by the richness and fullness of these Latinas. The writer evoked such strong emotions in me: I laughed. I cried.

The friendship and camaraderie that so closely bound the four women of all different ages captured some of my own friendships and relationships. In the movie, we meet an independent-thinking, young woman, Ana, who chooses to defy her family's expectations that she work in her sister's garment factory. Instead, Ana wants to be a writer. She wants to move out of her small world, live in New York and embrace the world.

Here was a heroine after my own heart: the child of immigrants who chose to go out and embrace the world and make her own choices – far beyond those that could be imagined by her parents and community.

I recall sitting in the audience when the movie played at Sundance and seeing the audience response. Rousing applause from a culturally diverse group of people. It seems we all have longing and desires beyond those imprinted on us by our parents, our community, and society.

When a writer can explore that which is universal in the specific, one experiences basic humanity. In Ana, I had finally found the sense of daring, adventure, and confidence that so intrigued me in my youth.