

TENDER BUT TOUGH

DIRECTORA

The unstoppable
Patricia Rikken

Story by: Judi Jordan Photos: Ejen Chuang

SHE'S A LOVER AND A FIGHTER.

Guadalajaran director Patricia Riggen comes out swinging with her extraordinary 5th film, *The 33*. The highly anticipated action/drama movie tells the true story of the 33 miners who were trapped in August 2010 for 69 days in the San José Mine in the Atacama Desert, 28 miles north of Copiapo, Chile.

Veteran producer Mike Medavoy had secured the story rights for his *Phoenix Pictures* and was looking for a director who could tell the layered, emotional story. After a long meeting where Patricia presented her take on the story, and how she would shoot it, the miners' version was entrusted to Riggen.

For the next three years, she guarded the project with her customary passion, integrity and will of iron, shepherding the script through numerous drafts and several sets of hands, including Patricia's own. It was by no means a smooth path for the award-winning director.

She met "resistance at every step of the way" and credits much of the pushback as a result of her being a woman in the overwhelmingly male-dominant career as a director. She's no 'newbie.'

Riggen, 45, has been working at her craft since 1997. Her five feature films include *Under the Same Moon* (2007, independent film) *Revolución* (2010, feature film a collaboration with 9 directors) *Lemonade Mouth* (2011, TV film) *Girl in Progress* (2012, feature film) *The 33* (2015, feature film) and *Miracles from Heaven* (2016, feature film).

Certainly, at 25 million, this was the largest budget she's worked with, but for the size of the project and the caliber of the cast, it was a challenge.

The 33 chronicles dual struggles; the one above ground of the men's families hoping to see them rescued, and the grueling miracle of the 33 Chilean miners' survival 2,100 feet below the earth. The collapse of the San José Mine kept the world in suspense for 69 days, but Riggen's quest lasted three years.

A highly challenging ordeal that tested her endurance at every step of the way, Riggen's massive commitment took her to hell and back. This straight shooter speaks her mind and sticks to her artistic principles with conviction, and she doesn't take the easy road when the hard road makes a better film.

Riggen is a grateful realist. She has accomplished a feat of filmmaking that few directors, female or male, can lay claim to.

Her movie opens 'wide' across America, on 2,500 screens November 13th, and she is energized but calm. Her sweet face is alight with accomplishment, but wary of what lies around the corner.

"I'm always prepared."

Representing part of the 1% of all directors working in Hollywood as a Latin female, she's no novice. Her previous films like

NOT SPEAK OUT! I ALWAYS
WILL TAKE IT AWAY."



A SCENE FROM THE 33 THE UPCOMING FILM BY PATRICIA RIGGEN.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHOENIX PICTURES

Luna have garnered awards, and Riggen's natural modesty and gentle humor are tempered with pride in her achievement and a hyper-awareness of expectations. Riggen is a realist who would love to be free to dream again, and to create, but the hard-ball politics and rough business of being a female director robs her of the spontaneity and the freedom she thrives on.

It's a trade off.

"I'M ONLY 5-FOOT-3 AND BROWN, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE ME
TRY TO ASSERT MY AUTHORITY BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T THEY

Every step of the process has been challenging, but Riggen is both grateful for her situation, full of humor, *and* outspoken about the obstacles she faces as a woman in an obstinately, overwhelmingly male profession.

Frustrated by a lack of fairness in industry hiring practices, which leads to a lack of opportunities for all Latinas behind the camera, Riggen hopes to be an agent of change as her work is seen, and her words are heard. She's encouraged by the recent activity in Hollywood among women directors to hold the studios accountable for fair hiring practices, but until things change, she keeps her eyes open for projects that are worth fighting for.

With the star-packed cast of *The 33* and her next film, *Miracles from Heaven*, which stars Jennifer Garner, Riggen has suddenly become an A-List director without the inflated ego.

The winding path of destiny [and the 405 freeway] led *Latino Leaders* to Patricia Riggen's Los Angeles Hills home to talk as she gears up for the final stretch of her long journey with *The 33*.

Mining for movie gold

When Mike Medavoy, the iconic former studio head and producer of Oscar-garnering films—with over 300 screen credits—brought his pet project, "The 33," to award-winning director Patricia Riggen, it was with conviction that she would bring the complex story to life, with the heartfelt attention it deserved [Please see adjacent story].

He was not wrong. But it was by no means easy.

When Medavoy and Riggen describe the film as 'difficult' to make, there is no question of the veracity of their claim. It is, in fact, a polite understatement.

Watching the film is a staggering experience, made more daunting by the details of the shoot itself. They could not shoot in Chilean mines, and had to scout mines in Colombia.

Always hands-on, Patricia did not delegate, going along on the scouting missions. And when it came to shooting, knowing that she would not be able to go back for re-shoots, she took precautions with ample takes.

"I gave myself plenty of options for editing."

No prisoners, no risks

Riggen wore a white miner's hat every day in the 100-degree heat and when the rock *did* fall on her head, it bounced off the plastic, not the director's skull. This brought Patricia closer than she ever dreamed - or desired - possible to the experience of the Chilean miners, whose arduous 69-day entrapment 2,100 feet below ground and miraculous rescue captivated the world. She was committed to faithfully recreate the story for movie audiences.

The complex human and environmental logistics, and demanding emotional tenor of the story, combined with the public's general familiarity with the account, added pressure to the already high expectations for the 5-foot-3 Riggen.

This was not her first rodeo, but it was her biggest. She brought her customary good cheer and signature tenacity to the project.

With 10 big-name stars 'above ground' and 10 stars below, plus hundreds of extras and cameo guest stars, it was a non-stop circus, a juggling act, a true test of - *and testament to* - her skill as a director. The film, with its diverse, high-wattage international star power, including Antonio Banderas, Juliette Binoche, Rodrigo Santoro, Kate de Castillo, Adriana Barraza, Naomi Scott, Bob Gunton, Lou Diamond Phillips, Jacob Vargas, Oscar Nunez, Cote de Pablo, Mario Casas, Gabriel Byrne, James Brolin, Federico Luppi, Anderson Cooper, Don Francisco, Leonardo Farkas, Tenoch Huerta and others, was shot in Chile and Colombia on 80 sets over 60 days.

By Hollywood studio standards, the film was modestly budgeted at \$25 million. Still, even with all of the free publicity from the true event, and the intense interest in the 33 miners' colorful personalities and family details, it was challenging to get distribution.



PATRICIA RIGGEN, ONE OF THE FEW LATINA MOVIE DIRECTORS IN HOLLYWOOD.

5-foot-3 and Latina in a man's world

On-set directors' chairs are high. You have to climb up to sit down.

Whether deliberate or just 'made that way,' they place the 'top dog' on set in an elevated position. With the name stenciled on the back, even on the lowest-budget set, the director has her designated chair *and nobody, but nobody except the director sits there*.

On the first day of shooting *The 33*, a rock promptly dropped on her head. Riggen was inside the mine in Colombia, sitting on her 'jefe' seat.

Wearing the obligatory miner's hat, Riggen escaped injury, but she speculated briefly if it might be a sign. It would be indeed ironic if all 33 miners escaped unscratched after 69 days, only to have the film crew injured within minutes of the first day on set.

She's laughing about it now, but the thought of accidents on set is very real, and with long days in hellishly hot mines, safety is an unquestionable and ever-present priority.

An unexpected fire blew though the mine during their preparation, the 'disaster within the disaster movie' was handled with professional speed and supervision. Always one to look on the bright side while keeping her perspective, Riggen creatively repurposed the lack of comfort.

"It made me stronger. I feel like I can do anything now. I am what some people might call tough; I never back down, I'm always prepared," Riggen laughs. "I'm only 5-foot-3 and brown, but that doesn't make me not speak out! I always try to assert my authority because if you don't, they will take it away."

She is not afraid to assert her power. “I call the shots—literally. I’m always fighting to get my ideas through. It’s *tiring* to always be defending something, but directors must make a million decisions every day, small and large, based on experience or your gut. People have to trust that.”

Patricia is warm, funny and relaxed between films, and it’s hard to imagine her as a tyrant, but she is a ‘burnt child’. Power plays with individuals trying to undermine her [no pun intended] have forced Riggen into a warrior’s stance, a sustained state of preparedness.



ON A SPECIAL OCCASION POPE FRANCIS INVITED THE MINERS AND THE DIRECTOR TO ROME.

portant thing is to protect the movie. If anyone tries jeopardizing the quality of the movie, I won’t let it happen. I’m very protective of the movie, like a child.”

Protecting her baby was one of the myriad things Riggen had on her mind as she sat in that tall chair every day. Other things weighed heavily as well — distribution, for one thing.

“Everyone kept talking about how difficult this movie was.”

Despite the incredible global knowledge and enormous interest in the 33 miner’s stories, it was tough for even the seasoned producers to get the financing and the guarantee of the wide release the film — and the budget — warranted. The distribution was ultimately split between Fox for Mexico and Latin America, and Warner Bros., which took on distribution for the rest of the world.

The production budget of \$25 million, low for a studio picture, but high for an ‘indie’ movie, drove up the pressure. The producers got their money’s worth; the 60-day shoot encompassed 80 different sets and involved building a village in the desert, 15 minutes away from the actual San José Mine, a half-mile wide by three miles long, replicating the actual ‘camp’ that grew over the weeks beside the mine as the spectacle grew.

Nobody said life was fair

Compare this with \$22 million budget of recent Oscar winner “Birdman” — by fellow *Mexicano*, Alejandro G. Iñárritu who shot in a theater, and with Steadicam on the streets of New York City — and you begin to get a sense of the ‘ginormous’ risk taken on by Riggen, and the producer’s confidence in her to deliver a film that tells the above- and below-ground story of the miners and their loved ones.

Riggen: “We were shooting in an alien environment. All kinds of things could and did happen.”

The *unseen* pressure was, of course, gender-driven. Riggen can’t afford to screw up.

With so few women hired to direct feature films, Hollywood

is looking for any excuse not to hire women, especially to helm bigger budgeted films. While TV offers more opportunities for women directors, the numbers are still infinitesimal compared to the men.

Being a female director, complaining, showing any weakness or doubt is out of the question.

“I suffer as a woman director; everyone questions my decisions,” she says. “I still feel like a young director, even though I have made five movies in eight years.”

Riggen looks younger than her 45 years; her wide-eyed gaze and huge smile steal 10 years from her age, even after the constant ordeals of production.

“Women have to be twice as tough and willing to stand their ground; it’s not fun, but it is necessary. I hope it will get easier with time,” Riggen says, admitting, “I don’t think of myself as successful yet.”

Women directors have been known to bring a protective maternal element to projects and to the set. Riggen is no exception.

She’s a mom to 8-year old Francesca and compares movie making to motherhood.

“I protect my movies, and I fight for them. My movies are like my children.”

She’s the Boss, he’s the man

Riggen is married to her work, literally. Her soft-spoken, deferential Peruvian-born husband, Checco Varese, is a gifted, in-demand cinematographer.

In addition to his own successful career, Varese has shot all of Riggen’s films. He has Patricia’s back, literally, and they have mastered the fine art of respectful, professional collaboration.

Checco: “If we’re on set and someone asks me to do something, or make a change in a shot, I always tell them, ‘I have to ask the director’ . . . and sometimes they’ll look at me and say ‘But?’ It’s painfully obvious that some people will assume that the silver-haired Varese is in charge. He shakes his head at this blatant misconception.

“I look at them and say, on set, she is not my wife, *she is the director*. The chain of command is very clear.”

For Riggen the knowledge that she has the full support of the entire production crew on set, and off, is imperative. If not, she does not hesitate to hand out walking papers.

Riggen: “*On The 33*, I had to replace production designers twice . . . and ADs [assistant directors].”

A physically grueling shoot like *The 33*, working 14-hour days, in a dark mine nearly a mile underground, in temperatures reaching 100 degrees tests everyone’s stamina. There is no room for politics, drama or disrespect. The physical danger alone requires everyone to be on the same page. The technical part was predictably challenging, but even the basic things were challenging. Generators that lacked enough juice . . . you name it, there was a problem. Things you take for granted in the U.S. But shooting in deep salt mines required two and a half miles of cable. Varese shakes his head at the memory.

“There wasn’t enough cable in the country, and it had to be imported. We had generators supplying 15,000 kilowatts, it was like lighting a small village.”

The audience is king

The age-old tussle over ‘final cut’ is alive and well. For the uninitiated, this is a contractual perk, giving the director the last word on the version of the movie to be released.



For studio movies this is generally reserved for a chosen few directors mostly whose last names are unnecessary — Marty, Steven, Ridley . . . you get the picture. Even without this formality, Riggen hangs on to her movies, “Staying all the way through to the end.”

She uses the best tool of conviction, to attain and retain her cut of the film: audience reaction. She tests and tests and tests. While many directors disdain the testing process, she embraces it.

“I believe in the audience. I will screen a movie for people I can trust, friends who will be tough with me, even before it goes to the producers.”

This gives Riggen the confidence to fight for her cut.

“The producers were very skeptical, but I told them, trust me, it’s working. The director’s version tested 93%.”

The hallmark of a Riggen film is the Kleenex factor. Patricia Riggen makes emotionally satisfying tear-jerkers.

Her movies touch audiences at the core, although she likes her films to

have upbeat endings.

“I like tears of joy, not tears of sadness.”

A pope’s blessing

Patricia asked Warner Bros. to get Pope Francis a copy of the film. They did, and as tends to transpire in the presence of his Holiness, something wonderful happened.

Papa Francis enjoyed *The 33* and invited the miners and their director to Rome. Riggen smiles with contentment.

“He shook the hands of every miner and thanked them for bringing hope to the world.”

Riggen, on her stars

Riggen depended on her movie stars to work under rough conditions; they did not let her down.

Her quick comments: “Antonio Banderas was ideal for this role; his own personality is very much like the lead miner, Mario Sepulveda. He *became* the leader of the miners.”

“Juliette Binoche was fabulous, strong, but respectful, a great collaborator.”

“Rodrigo Santoro is such a sweetheart, such a hard worker and a total perfectionist.”

Lastly, what’s with the name?

In case you were wondering, Riggen’s great grandfather, William Henry Riggen was American. “My ancestors were American on my father’s side; I learned that he was a doctor who migrated to Mexico during the Civil War, I grew up in Mexico, and now, I’m back here! We were ‘found’, by American cousins that were looking for their ancestor, and now, I have this whole American family. It’s funny.” ●

“WOMEN HAVE TO BE TWICE AS TOUGH AND WILLING TO STAND THEIR GROUND. IT’S NOT FUN, BUT IT IS NECESSARY. I HOPE IT WILL GET EASIER WITH TIME.”

The man behind the movie

“Magic Mike” Medavoy pays it forward with *The 33*

Story by: Judi Jordan Photos: Courtesy photos



MAGIC MIKE ENJOYING THE SUN IN PLAZA ESPANA, ROME.

Mega producer Mike Medavoy's bronze star is appropriately located on Hollywood Boulevard's busiest spot, the coveted patch of pavement on the 6800 block where the costumed superheroes and 'legend look-alikes' congregate.

An integral and enduring part of Hollywood industry, Medavoy started at the bottom in 1964 and would go on to co-found Orion Pictures, Phoenix Pictures and lead TriStar Pictures as Chairman, overseeing or producing seven Oscar-winning films and seventeen Oscar nominations. Recipient of 22 professional awards, a half century later Medavoy indeed has something to show for all his years in the biz; his role in some 300 films as producer, studio head and agent helped create some of the most iconic films of the 20th century.

Some of the films he took part in are *Amadeus*, *Raging Bull*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Network*, *Philadelphia*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Annie Hall*, *Silence of the Lambs*. . . *Apocalypse Now*. Recent films in his producing portfolio include *Black Swan*, *Shutter Island*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, *Zodiac*, and *The 33*.

Born in Shanghai to a Russian mother and Ukrainian father, Medavoy experienced global life from an early age. He lived in Chile from age 6 to 16 and evidently harbors fond memories.

"I always wanted to make a movie in Chile."

His inner call to 'pay it forward' was answered when he heard the story of the 33 men trapped underground. He went to Chile, conversing with the miners directly with the assistance of author Héctor Tóbar who was writing the 'official' book.

Back in Hollywood, Medavoy hired a Latina —Patricia Rigen— to tell the story. Rigen admires Medavoy, who stuck by her when things got rough.

Medavoy made numerous trips to Chile in the years of development, writing and shooting of the epic story. According to Tóbar, Medavoy was "very generous, and respectful of the miners." Medavoy kept in touch with them, and recently accompanied them to Rome where they met Pope Francis, who had seen the film, commending the men for "Giving the world hope."

LATINO LEADERS: It appears that Mike Medavoy has respect for Latino storytellers and their abilities.

MIKE MEDAVOY: Héctor and Patricia are both really accomplished in what they do. I'm really happy that Patricia is taking off in her career—I think she is deserving. This was, like all independent films, a very difficult film to put together. But nevertheless both of us shared a vision on what to do with this picture. Somebody needed to execute it. . . and she did.

LL: Héctor Tóbar said that you were extremely supportive, generous, and patient with the miners.

MM: [laughing] I don't like talking about myself, especially not to say nice things about myself! What I like saying is, 'hey I want to be constructive about both of these people!' I also wanted to reflect. Héctor is an amazing writer. He did a lot of research before we even started the movie and brought a lot of his material from his book, details which helped in the script. This movie [*THE 33*] will play in every country in the world so that alone speaks to the fact that it's more than a Latino movie—it's a worldwide movie, and you know with my background, I lived in Chile for 10 years, it was important for me to make a film in Chile. I've been blessed with an enormous amount of success with films and the thought that I can do this nowadays is a bonus. The whole idea of the movie is the universal story. Whether we talk Latino or comedians or French—in the final analysis movies are the visuals of a common language.

LL: You're the last of the old school producers; you really care about making a good movie.

MM: I'm going to be talking at the AFM [the upcoming American Film Market] about faith-based films and things I'm interested in, and I am just looking around at my office and going, O.K. . . *Raging Bull*, *Cuckoo's Nest*, *Network*, *Philadelphia*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Annie Hall*, *Philadelphia*, *Silence of the Lambs*. . . *Apocalypse*. None of these are the 'same' movie.

LL: Patricia [Rigen] mentioned that Pope Francis liked the movie, and invited the miners to Rome.

MM: I was just in Rome with them, for their meeting with the Pope. I have wonderful pictures with the miners. I'm delighted that we could bring their story to the world, and the screen. ●