Biography/Interview: Joshua Marston

Joshua Marston directing Catalina Sandino Moreno on the set of "Maria Full of Grace." Supporting actress Yenny Paola Vega is in the background.

First-time director Joshua Marston talks about the work and the spirit that went into his award-winning debut "Maria Full of Grace."

By JOSHUA TANZER
Offoffoff.com

Joshua Marston admits he's "living the dream." How many other filmmakers can claim to have walked home with some of the top awards from the Sundance, Berlin and Los Angeles film festivals with their first feature? The California-raised, NYU-educated first-time filmmaker has done just that with "Maria Full of Grace," an unblinking look at women smuggling drugs from Colombia to the United States in their stomachs. The film had its New York premiere last month at the Human Rights Watch film festival and opens Friday (July 16, 2004) at the Lincoln Plaza and Sunshine Cinemas, as well as in Jackson Heights, Queens, where parts of it were shot.

Actress Catalina Sandino Moreno has also won raves for her debut in the film, playing a young Colombian who leaves her job in a flower plantation to carry latex-wrapped drug pellets in her stomach on a tense, potentially deadly flight to New York. And some of the side characters are almost as fascinating as the lead — notably Orlando Tobón, a real-life neighborhood institution in Jackson Heights, who both helped the film get made and got to play a character based on himself.

Marston talked with Offoffoff this week from the offices of Fine Line studios in Manhattan. This is an edited transcript of that interview.

Q: *How did you get involved in film?*

JOSHUA MARSTON: Well, I was a photographer since being in high school, and loved taking photographs — particularly abroad, when I traveled — meeting people, using it as a way to sort of be a fly on the wall. But I often felt like the photographs were somehow

too thin, that I would always want to tell a five-minute story about what was behind each image, and so I wanted something that was thicker, that was more narrative. But I didn't go right into film. I ended up going into academia and political science [as a graduate student at University of Chicago] and did this whole circuitous route, because I was also interested in public policy and politics, and it was only when I realized that that was way too esoteric — at least academia was too esoteric for me — that I ended up finding film was a way to bring my visual and my political together.

Q: *Esoteric in what way?*

JM: *By definition* esoteric! I mean, I think academia is esoteric partly because it's like anything else, you know, when you get to the upper levels of it, it becomes very technical. But the problem is ... there's a certain egotism that comes with the esoteric quality, which is that people stake out their claim on one remote element of their field, and try to assert their creativity, and then sort of piss around them and make sure that no one takes their territory, and get very competitive about it.

Q: *So you had something else you wanted to do in life.*

JM: Yeah, I wanted to change the world, you know? I wanted to go into politics and do something useful. But at the same time I didn't want to be in a 9-to-5 job that was going to be boring and sit in an office all day.

Q: *So far do you find this is the kind of thing you wanted to do?*

JM: I'm pretty happy. I don't think I'm in a position to complain! [*Laughs*]

Q: *How did you get interested in this subject? You didn't start with this story — you were interested in the big subject.*

JM: I had been interested in the drug war, yeah. I'd written another screenplay about a completely different facet of it, and I shelved the screenplay because it didn't work. And I think that was probably why I was that much more attuned when I came upon a story of someone who had traveled as a drug mule, which was something that I'd only ever considered really from the headlines and never really imagined from the experience, moment to moment.

Q: *What do you mean, when you "came upon" that story?*

JM: Twofold — one was that I met someone who did it, just sort of coincidentally [as] I struck up conversations with people, immigrants. And subsequently reading more about it. I read an article that referred to something called "shot gunning," which is this idea that if you put not just one but a group of people on the same plane, if one of them gets caught it will create enough distraction for the others to get through. So reading that gave me a sort of a way in, narratively, to construct a plot line that allowed me to also think more about the story academically.

Q: *Were you researching for academic purposes or to prepare to write the film?*

JM: I wrote the [first draft of the] script very quickly and then started to do a whole bunch of research, talking to all sorts of people. I talked to people who had done it, people who worked in it. ...

Q: *How different is today's film from what you wrote originally?*

JM: There's not a single sentence that made it from the first draft to the last.

Q: *Why? What did you learn in-between?*

JM: Everything! I mean, I hadn't ever traveled to Colombia when I wrote the first draft of the script. I had only talked to Colombians who lived here. And I had only had that one interaction with someone very briefly who told me in broad strokes what it was like, and then I went and talked to more people both here and in South America who told me in much more detail what it was like. And I went to flower plantations and got to see what flower plantations were like. So it was just a constant evolution.

Q: *About the flower plantations, it's interesting — this is a film that comes from two motivations. One is to show a kind of working world in the Third World, and then the other is the whole process of drug smuggling and the people involved.*

JM: Yeah, the intention is to show one working world and then to show another working world — drugs and flowers.

Q: *Did you observe the flower plantations?*

JM: Yes. I went to both Ecuador and Colombia, and went to the regions where there are flower plantations, and sometimes went in with permission through the front door, and talked to managers and got tours; sometimes smuggled myself on the bus with the workers at five in the morning, talked to the guards who worked at the plantations as well, when I couldn't get in, about what life was like for them. All sorts of aspects, just listening to people's stories, and just being in those towns [to see] when people were getting out of work and going out and hanging out, standing in line to put their paychecks in the bank.

Q: *What struck you or surprised you about what you saw?*

JM: Two things. One is that from a managerial point of view, I was struck by the incredible strides that have been made in improving the quality of work and the care of the workers. And from the point of view of the workers, what struck me was how awful the work is and continues to be, and how poorly the workers continue to be treated. So both things [were] going on — that it is a lot better than it was 15 or 20 years ago, but it still remains not very nice work, and it still remains work that you do on your feet for

long periods of time. It's very supervised and controlled, and it's not work that you can have little side conversations as you work, and, you know [*gesturing down office corridor*], can't get up from your cubicle and walk down and kind of hang out for five or ten minutes and take a little break.

And the chemicals, though they have made improvements in regulating so that theoretically people don't get exposed to the fumigants, inevitably they wear off on your hands from processing the flowers, and it begins to irritate your skin and your eyes, and there are still a dramatic number of birth defects associated with plantation workers in Ecuador and Colombia.

Q: *Is there a person you met in this process who stands out in your mind?*

JM: Well, the first person that I met, and then another man that I met in prison in Pennsylvania, who spent several days with me explaining in detail what it was like for him. A woman in an Ecuadorian prison. There are so many stories, just stories that prove that fact is more interesting than fiction. From a screenwriting point of view, it was often frustrating because I would get these incredibly detailed and fascinating stories that I couldn't then work into the script because I had to be true to Maria's point of view and experience. So for example, one guy told me the story of how, after he'd gone through all the travail of swallowing the drugs and bringing them to the United States, he was then presented with such a large wad — a bale — of cash, that he had to swallow the cash in pellets and smuggle the cash back to Colombia. So the stories that you hear are just phenomenal.

Q: *How did you cast Catalina Sandino Moreno as Maria?*

JM: We saw 800 girls over three months in the U.S. and in Colombia. We had two teams in Colombia looking at professionals and non-professionals. The team for non-professionals was going to town around Bogotá — looking in schools, flower plantations, driving around with a megaphone on the car — all in an effort to encourage girls to open calls. After three months of this, without finding the right girl, we had to push the shoot.

The very next morning another tape arrived in New York with another 12 auditions on it and Catalina was the first on the tape. She simply was Maria — the character I had had in my head for three years in the writing. And as an actress she was creative, smart and the camera loved her. Working with her I was constantly amazed by her ability to step up to the plate and deliver. On numerous occasions I turned to the producer, Paul Mezey, and marveled that she wasn't a seasoned professional.

Q: *How did you find Orlando Tobón?*

JM: I met Orlando because someone fairly late in the game who had read the script and I was meeting with for financing said, "Well, have you met the mayor of Little Colombia?" Little Colombia meaning Jackson Heights in Queens. So I found out about the man and I called him up and told him I wanted to come out and meet him. And I went out to his

office, which is half the size of this room, and it's full of people, and it's people who were there to get help with something in one form or another. He's a fixer.

I remember we met for lunch — we walked out of the office, we walked across the street, and in walking the block to the restaurant he was stopped four or five times in the street by people who knew him or recognized him or had something to tell him. He is this community figure, and among the many, many things he's done he has become known for sending the bodies of drug dealers back, who've died. And so he was very, not only open to the project but very passionate about the idea of the project. And so he became very supportive and allowed me to sit in his office and watch the way it worked. And that then became the inspiration for me for rewriting the script and fashioning a character inspired by him.

Q: *He's listed as associate producer.*

JM: Yeah, because he became the person in the community that we would turn to whenever we needed help with something, whether it was how fast did we get in touch with 17-year-old girls in the neighborhood to try and get them to turn out for casting, or we needed a restaurant for lunch for holding while we're shooting, or he would help us get this location, or we needed Colombians to do voiceover for background sound in the crowd scenes. He was our point man in the community.

Q: *He seemed like he could be a whole other story in himself.*

JM: Absolutely.

Q: *I thought, watching the film, that the events in the film are never over hyped, never over dramatized. It's presented in a sort of matter-of-fact way.*

JM: Right.

Q: *Was that something that you tried to achieve?*

JM: Yeah, because to a certain extent it's matter-of-fact in Colombia. I mean, what I was interested in doing was not telling a story that we've seen already from the top down, from the point of the view of the DEA agent or the drug trafficker, but telling it from the bottom up, from the point of view of someone fairly low on the totem pole who is suffering through this experience. And in that way, I wanted to make it not so much "matter-of-fact" but *everyday*. To give it a sort of everyday quality, a very mundane sense, in the literal sense of the word "mundane." It was, "What is it like to do this," rather than, "What's the most dramatic, glitzy, hyped-up way that we could do it with the flash of 'Miami Vice.'" So that you're really put into the shoes of the character that's doing it. Yeah, that was the goal.

Q: *Tell me what it took to get the film made.*

JM: Well, HBO is the main thing. There were a lot of people who said no to the script because it was in Spanish, and HBO said yes. So that was a huge crossroads, because they were willing to take that risk and then allowed us to make the film the way we wanted to make it. And then the next huge crossroad was making it in Ecuador because Colombia became too unsafe. And that was just about collaboration, you know, with bringing all the Colombians from Ecuador.

Q: *Tell me what kind of work you're hoping to do in the future.*

JM: I'm writing a new screenplay. It takes place in Tennessee. It's about a family in a small town. I'm interested in [making] films that have a powerful emotional story, really interesting characters, and that take place within a social and political context — they're not told in a vacuum simply for entertainment reasons but they're films that resonate and that stay with you for more than the time that it takes to eat dinner afterwards.

Q: *How has your experience been with festivals and all the response you've gotten so far?*

JM: It's great. I mean, to a certain extent I'm living the dream, you know, so I have no complaints. I think the most satisfying thing is the audience reactions to the film — sitting in the back of the theater and watching people shift in their seats and exhale, and having them come up afterwards to me and to the actresses and say that they've been moved, you know? And as far as the awards go, I think that the audience awards are the most significant, because it's the audience saying this film really moved us. The notion that so many people within a given festival could all vote for this film is like that Sally Field moment — they like me! They really like me! They like the film, you know — it stays with them. It resonates. And that's ultimately what you hope to do most as a filmmaker — to move the audience.

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Interview with Joshua Marston, the Writer/Director of "Maria Full of Grace"

From Rebecca Murray

Joshua Marston makes his feature film directorial debut with the hard-hitting drama, "Maria Full of Grace." The film follows Maria (Catalina Sandino), a bright young Colombian woman who takes the drastic step of becoming a 'drug mule' in order to improve her lot in life. Assured the job is an easy one and that the rewards will be well-worth her efforts, Maria finds herself immersed in the dangerous and deadly world of narcotics and smuggling, where the life of a mule isn't worth much and the cost of getting caught could mean imprisonment or death.

INTERVIEW WITH WRITER/DIRECTOR JOSHUA MARSTON:
Have you screened this movie in Colombia?
Yeah, we premiered the movie in Colombia at the Cartagena Film Festival. And then about a month afterwards, we opened it theatrically on 30 screens. It still continues to play theatrically and it has been there going on three months now.

How does it play in front of that audience?
It plays very well. The interesting thing is that obviously Columbians know a little bit more going in about drug smuggling. You assume that they do. You come in with assumptions and yet, time and time again I've been waylaid by Colombians afterwards saying, "Oh my God, that was interesting," because it's something that was very eye-opening for them. All they ever get are headlines about this person or that person who was caught traveling at the border with drugs. But they never get the actual details of what it's like to travel as a drug mule. We are very gratified on our part that we are able to bring something new to this, even to Colombians.

It's been very warmly embraced by the First Lady of Colombia who has had two screenings at the Presidential Palace. The United Nations office there has requested to purchase a print for educational purposes. We even heard the story of someone who was 17 years-old who was supposed to go as a drug mule and saw the film two days before he was supposed to leave, and pulled out. He told us this whole story about how he considered the film to have changed his life.

When you hear a story like the kid who decided against smuggling drugs, that's got to make you feel incredibly proud of your film.
For all of us who worked on the film, it makes us feel really proud and just sort of grateful that the film was able to do that. It's very gratifying to know that film has this kind of power and is able to reach people on an emotional level and sort of open their eyes.

Did you encounter any resentment in Colombia since you are an America telling a very Colombian story?

No. It's really funny. When I was preparing the film I lived in fear of that moment, of being accused of being a gringo coming in. And yet, by the time I was done with the film and brought it down to Colombia, it had sort of receded to the back of my mind. I was in Colombia doing all this press for the release of the film there and it wasn't until we had been there for a couple of days that someone pointed out that the only question I was getting was how did an American come to be interested in Colombia. The subtext was that they were flattered that I would take an interest. No one has ever said anything about me being a foreigner, an outsider, commenting on Colombian society. It's a sign that the collaboration worked in order to make the representation of Colombia feel authentic, even to Colombians.

Your film has won awards at film festivals and audiences really react positively to this story. As a first-time film director, doesn't that set the bar high for your next feature? How do you live up to that?
This film was four-going-on-five years in the making. And what it says to me is that in order to do a really good film and have it really feel right and authentic and true, there is a certain amount of time you need to take in order to allow it to gestate and to grow. My hope is to not get caught up in rushing to the next project.

Was there a time during the four or five year process when you weren't sure it was going to get made?
Oh yeah, all the time. I mean, when we were looking for financing, people would regularly read the script and respond positively and say they thought it was a really gripping and page-turning script. And then they would follow up with, "Gee, it's a shame it's in Spanish. Don't you think you could do it in English?" To the point where someone actually said, "Well, what if Maria had a governess who had taught the family English?" They all wanted the project to be in English. But it was absurd. There were definitely a lot of moments where we just thought we weren't going to be able to do it the way we wanted. And fortunately HBO stepped up to the plate.

During your research for this movie, what fact or statistic surprised you the most?
I heard so many stories that proved that truth is stranger than fiction. And there's so many stories that didn't make it into the film because, ultimately, I had to stay true to what Maria's experience was. I talked to one guy who was in prison in Pennsylvania who told me in detail his whole story and part of it was that when he got to the United States, beyond getting paid his sort of salary, he was handed a bale of cash, 5s, 10s, 50s, and 100s that he was expected to take back. He had to stuff the cash into little rubber pellets and swallow the cash and carry it back in his stomach in order to smuggle the cash back to Colombia. It's phenomenal the number of bizarre details that didn't get into the film.

Did you ever become so immersed in the research you needed to take time off and walk away for a while?
No, because those were the moments that were actually the most inspiring to me.

There was so much story there and it was so compelling. I think the thing that might have caused me to have doubt was whether or not I would actually ever get fully into the head

of a 17 year-old Colombian girl. It was all a process of going to small towns and meeting them. I don't think I was ever confident I was going to get Maria right until I actually met Catalina Sandino and that was when I felt like, "Okay, she's going to be able to bring everything else to it that I wouldn't be able to fully understand myself, personally."

After doing all the research, you wound up allowing your actors to have a lot of say regarding their characters. Why did you give them so much freedom?
Because I'm not a Colombian and because I'm not a native Spanish-speaker. And because they, all the actors, have a whole set of knowledge and experience that is relevant to their characters that I could never have. It would be presumptuous of me to dictate and close off what the script was.

I think the script benefited from all the nuances and details they were able to bring to it as actors. So it was really important to me to open it back up and have a series of improvisations, see what they discovered as far as moments in each scenes, and also change the dialogue in subtle ways so that it really was not just Colombian Spanish, but a Spanish specific to the region within Colombia where the characters were supposedly from. We were rewriting together and it became a much more collaborative process. They all walked away with a real sense of ownership of their own characters, which not only benefited the script, but benefited the performances.

Your leading actress had not done a film before, and you hadn't directed a feature before. Were there any special challenges?
The biggest challenge was just finding her. It was this long, long search. There was this whole long period of looking at actors. You're looking for this sort of subtle find that allows you to convince yourself that this is the right person. But in the end, you are just hoping an actress is going to walk through the door and inhabit the character. It's hard to say to the producer and the financier, "No, we have to keep looking. No, we can't shoot yet." And when you are pushing the shoot and a lot of people are already on the payroll, you're spending money by the day just to be on hold in a holding pattern. It's really hard. But fortunately I had people who understood the importance of getting Maria right. After seeing 800 girls, Catalina Sandino walked in the door and she was it.

Are you basically a writer who directs or a director who writes?
Hmm, I've never really broken it up that way. I just consider myself to be a filmmaker who writes and directs and creates film.

You modeled one of your characters after a real person, and that man, Orlando Tobon, actually ended up playing the role in the film. Can you talk about that aspect of "Maria Full of Grace?"
I had already been working on the script for about two years. I was trying to get financing and I was sitting across the table from someone who said, "Well, have you talked to the Mayor of Little Colombia?" And I hadn't even heard of this person. The Little Colombia they are referring to is a section of Jackson Heights, Queens, where the Colombian community is the strongest. They said, "Well, you know, he's also known as the

undertaker for the mules." So I tracked this guy down. I called him up and told him I wanted to meet him about this project.

The interesting thing from his point of view is that he's repatriated hundreds of bodies of people who have died coming to the USA as drug mules.

What he does in the movie, he's done hundreds of times in real life. When I told him about the project, he was very supportive. He allowed me to sit in his office; he has a tiny travel agency in Queens that is constantly full of people out the door. When I say tiny, I'm talking like 10' by 14'. It's really small. He's like the fixer in the community; whether it's papers for work or to help people get an apartment. I just sort of watched him working in the community and realized that if I wanted to represent the community, he was an important component of it. So I went back and rewrote the script and developed a character inspired by him. And then when it came time to do the casting, it was such a specific character because it was an actual human being that I met, he was the best person for the role. He just played himself.

Has the film made it more difficult or less difficult for him to do what he does?
He just a couple of days ago got a call from someone who said her sister died in a hotel room. He's, as we speak, trying to raise some money to have the body buried. So he's still doing it and people are still turning to him. I think it's helped him because it's raised his profile maybe a little bit outside of the community. Not that he needed it, but it's further established him as doing good work within the community.

Is he ever hassled by law enforcement?
He was hassled by law enforcement years ago. I think the DEA and the FBI were very suspicious of him as to why he was having these interactions. Now, after many years, it's come to a point where they call him after the find a body.

He had a story he told me once where there was this guy who heard about what he was doing and came to his office and gave him money to have a body sent back to Colombia. And then on a regular basis, would stop out of nowhere and give him money. It just seemed he was this kind-hearted man who wanted to help Orlando with these situations. Then all of a sudden, an FBI agent showed up at his office and said, "Can we talk to you?" They led him out to a car where they showed him a photograph and said, "Do you know this man?" And it was the guy. It turned out he was a drug trafficker and was sort of cleaning his conscious by sort of closing the circle by giving Orlando the money to take care of the mules who weren't surviving.