

Latina

By Mark Holston



Barbara Martinez-Jitner

As the years go by and our population grows, more and more opportunities become available for Latinas, and many of them are in, YES, the entertainment industry! Most likely when the word “producer” is mentioned, what comes to mind is a dumpy, balding, smoking cigar-chomping man cutting deals in a cluttered office. But a voracious appetite for television programming and innovative films, coupled with an increasing Latino population in the United States, has opened a once closed door to ambitious and talented Latinas with an eye on calling the shots behind the scenes. Meet Barbara Martinez-Jitner, Kathryn Galán, Nely Galán, Shawna Baca, and Corina Bartra, rising stars in the film, television and music field. This Latinas are a perfect example of why a growing number of Latinas are scoring success in Hollywood and elsewhere in the entertainment industry, a demanding profession that not long ago was male domain.



Barbara Martinez-Jitner, executive producer and 2nd unit director of the upcoming Jennifer Lopez thriller *Bordertown*, shoots a scene on location in New Mexico.



Martinez-Jitner shoots a scene with real factory workers in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Producers

"There are a lot of Latinas who are producers today, and the reason is simple," says Barbara Martinez-Jitner, one of the top Latinas in the film industry. "Latinas are producers in the home, we run everything. It wasn't Cortez who conquered the New World, it was Malinche," she emphasizes referring to the native woman who was the conquistador's mistress and confidant. "It's the women who make things happen!" Martinez-Jitner proudly says to have learned her producing techniques from her grandmother, who was a farm worker. "She miraculously raised eight kids," she says. "If she could do that, I think I can produce a movie!"

Martinez-Jitner's career is a clear representation of climbing up the ladder—her resumé includes acting, writing and directing as well as producing. On the 1999 film *Selena*, based on the life story of the slain Tejano pop singer, she worked with famed director and producer Gregory Nava, whose critically acclaimed feature films include *El Norte* and *Mi Familia*. Within a few years, she was establishing herself in the industry as a writer and producer of *American Family*, the first Latino drama with a Latino-theme broadcast nationwide on television. Nominated for the Golden Globe and Emmy awards for her work on *American Family*, Martinez-Jitner is now poised to garner even greater fame.

Her current project is *Bordertown*, a feature film starring Jennifer Lopez, based on the ongoing and tragic story of murdered Mexican women in Ciudad Juárez. To research the story, she risked her own life and went undercover, posing as a worker in a *maquiladora* (factory) to gain firsthand knowledge of the reality that has led to the unsolved murders of over 400 young women in recent years. "In that society," she charges, "the people who are working in those factories, their lives mean nothing. You can murder one of those women, and there are no repercussions." In the film, which debuted at the Berlin Film Festival in February and is scheduled for release

worldwide later this year, Lopez portrays a newspaper reporter who courts danger while investigating the crimes.

Driven by a passion to explore themes that have captured their imagination, Latina producers are an increasingly important presence in the motion picture and television industries. Some have risen to the top by virtue of the fame they've garnered and the power they command as successful actresses. Salma Hayek, for instance, has put her producer's stamp on two recent productions—the 2002 film *Frida*, a portrait of legendary Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and *Ugly Betty*, ABC's hit TV series starring Golden Globe award-winner America Ferrera. Eva Longoria, known as the most beguiling of ABC's *Desperate Housewives*, has also logged producer's credits for the 2004 film *Carlita's Secret* and the 2006 ALMA Awards broadcast.

But for the vast majority of Latina producers, the road to success has come through hard work away from the glare of the spotlight.

Kathryn Galán, an experienced producer whose credits include films such as *French Kiss* and *Becoming Colette*, has a unique perspective on the profession as an executive director of the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP). She speaks from hard-earned experience when she says, "being a producer is very challenging, but when it works, it is the most rewarding."

Galán's organization serves as a focal point for Latinos working in the film and television industry and throughout these years, Galán has seen commendable progress. "Over a dozen Latino and Latina-made or focused documentaries have received national broadcasts in the past couple of years," she says. "Programs like *The George Lopez*



Kathryn Galán, executive director of the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP)



Nely Galán, producer of *The Swan*

Show and Ugly Betty, not to mention *Resurrection Blvd*, *American Family* and *Welcome to Tucson* have had runs that build audiences, make money and advance careers. More Latinas, for instance, are considering film school and attending professional development programs that advance their projects and relationships.”

One executive whose career personifies the success that Latinas are currently enjoying as producers is Nely Galán. For over a decade, her Galan Entertainment firm has been a force in developing new programming in both English and Spanish for networks such as HBO, NBC, *Televisa*, *Telemundo* and Fox, for which she produced the hit series *The Swan*. Galán’s record of success has made her one of the most influential

Latina executives in the entertainment field and a role model for those aspiring to follow in her footsteps as a successful producer. “I think this is a great time to be Latina in this business,” Galán says. “We have a unique voice that represents many millions of people and companies want to reach us.”

In her history-making trek to the top of her profession, Galán learned quickly that the road to success was fraught with both obstacles and opportunities. “Being Latina has been very helpful to me in being a producer in the mainstream; it gave me a differentiating proposition,” she recalls. “I was different than everyone else, but it has been more difficult to be a Latina producer working in the Latin market within the U.S. and Latin America, where they have a harder time

accepting women in this role. However, what has been difficult is just the choice of deciding to be a producer—it is not an easy career for anyone. It is similar to being a real estate developer.”

For Galán, being in the entertainment industry is a high risk but rewarding business. “You spend a lot of time putting projects together on your own time that don’t amount to anything,” she says. “Many of the people in it are rich to begin with, so they have the advantage and the staying power. However, when it all works it’s amazing. I feel like I get to be an investment banker, a real estate developer, a marketing guru and a creative idea person all in one career. It’s never boring.”

Fledgling Latina producers who hope to replicate Galán’s record of success know they face an uphill climb, but, driven by strong personal interests, they forge ahead, paying their dues and waiting for recognition to follow.

Shawna Baca was a stage actress before she became interested in filmmaking and producing. She quickly attracted attention, winning praise for her short film *3:52*, featuring America Ferrera. “It’s important that we tell our stories,” Baca states emphatically. “Part of the reason acting was such a turn off was due to the roles that were out there for women, especially minority women. We seem so behind the times. I felt a strong desire to work on films that showcased Latinos in a positive light. With independent films growing in popularity, it was time to jump into the game.”

Today, Baca is working on a documentary that explores a theme that is close to her heart, especially to her descent. “My mother’s side of the family is Pasqua Yaqui, Apache and Mexican,” she explains. “My father’s side is Spanish. My grandmother, who is full-blooded Indian, half Yaqui (Mexican Indian) and half Apache (American Indian) always took me to Native American Pow-Wows since I was little. I’ve come to know the community well. When a Danish producer friend of mine expressed an interest in me taking her to a Pow-Wow, she was blown away by the beauty of the tradition.” Ever since, Baca explains to partnered up with her producer friend to make a documentary that explores the modern

traditions of Native Americans and show how Pow-Wows honor their tradition and keep them alive.

It's not only in film and television that Latinas are making headway as producers, in the equally competitive music industry, Latina artists who assume the producer's role in managing their careers have to consider every detail, from raising funds to marketing. Composer and singer Corina Bartra, whose latest album is *Bambu Sun* on her own Blue Spiral label, works tirelessly to get her concepts from the studio to the marketplace. "The most challenging thing as a producer is to come up with the money to

do the project and organize it," she explains. "You have to pick the material, musicians, and studio, and you have to organize rehearsals, get art work for the CD cover, and many other things. For me, music goes beyond being just an entertainment form. And, ultimately, the greatest challenge facing independent producers is finding ways of marketing the recording. This requires all of your skills, and some luck."

The good news is that, as NALIP's executive director Galán sees it, "Hollywood is a pretty color-blind business. Good executives with taste, experience



Corina Bartra, producer, composer and singer



Shawna Baca, actress and independent filmmaker

and relationships can become successful producers." What stands out to Galán is that Latinas have only begun to make big inroads as producers. "Latinas are wildly underrepresented in the executive and decision-making ranks of Hollywood," she observes. "And those working in independent film do not yet have wide rolodexes full of equity investors such as doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs who are willing to take a gamble on talented young Latina filmmakers. We are making progress, but these are barriers that impede success."

Baca, for one, is up for the challenge. "This is a great time to be a producer in the entertainment industry," she says. "With the demand for Latino projects and the success rate of independent filmmaking, this is a good time to tell our stories from our perspectives and environments. I have a voice today that my great-grandmother didn't have, nor did my grandmother or my mother. We face the challenges of being a minority and Latina. But I'm not going to stop, and that's what makes it unique." 