



SHUNNED:

A DOCUMENTARY

The one with just me in the red carpet is taken at Cannes Film Festival (I was just attending). Photographer: Anastasia Lyubomudrova (but I own the pic. I just asked her to take the pic on my iPhone)

The other one with the cast is taken at Cebu International Film Festival (photo taken by Mickey Macachor but owned by Silent Voices Productions)

It is 2016 and the transgender community has come a long way since Myra Breckinridge, the book and the film starring cisgendered actress Raquel Welch and especially so since Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner have flung the doors open in the entertainment industry and in society. Whether you like it or not. So much so that now we have non-LGBT allies ready to go in the front lines for us. One brave and talented woman is director and producer Janice Villarosa. With her latest documentary *Shunned*, about the lives and struggles of transgender women in the Philippines, she hopes to bring more visibility to this community. It is a project she started before it was cool to be trans back in 2010 and met with some challenges. Thank God for her and her determination to get this project out. Now the film has become a favorite at film festivals and has gone on to win several awards. Woo hoo. Viva la vida!

Samara: Of all subjects how did you get into directing a documentary about Trans Women?

Janice: I love to observe people and their behaviors. While I was in film school in the Philippines, I saw a lot of transgender women. I was drawn to them but at the same time, I did not know what to think or how to react to them. I also saw how other people reacted. Many would make faces and also snicker. I realized I was reacting in a similar way. I was judging them as well. I saw the pain in the transgender women's eyes and how they would mask that pain. Because of all of these, I decided to change my perception and how I felt. The only way I knew how to do this was to immerse myself in their culture and try to understand them.

I was plunging to a whole new territory that I knew nothing about. At the same time, my work was

cut out for me since I had to convince members of the transgender community to trust me. This was difficult especially at that time, when transgender women are shown in TV or films, mostly they were the butt of the jokes. Most of my cast also had people mocking them their entire lives so they had their reservations when I approached them about this project. Some were a bit skeptical as to my intentions and it took a while for me to gain their trust. I made a short film about what I wanted to show in the full-length film and showed it to them. I think that helped with their accepting me and with their willingness to do the project. I also told them to use this film as their voice.

The film has definitely changed not only me but I believe, also my crew who are also non-LGBT. We were dealing with other people's perception of us doing this film, which at that time, dealt with a very controversial topic. I worked on this film for a long time. I started it in 2010. From the moment I woke up to the moment I went to bed, I breathed it. Because of what I went through in making this film, it also made me so much closer to the community and I really took to heart their struggle and what they go through. I admire not only my cast but also the rest of the transgender community. To be able to go through life being discriminated everyday of your life, I cannot imagine having to go through that. I admire their resilience.

Samara: What were your impressions of the girls when you started vs. when you finished the film?

Janice: They have always fascinated me. When I was a kid, there was a transgender fashion designer working for a fashion house that was renting a part of our house. I remembered at four years old being drawn to her. She was very colorful and lively. But in spite of her being around me when I was a kid, I had a lot of misconceptions. In the Philippines, there is no word to distinguish a gay from a transgender person. As opposed to the US, a lot of the gays in the Philippines tend to be effeminate. So some people thought being transgender was just taking being gay to another level. Sort of like a gay guy with boobs and long hair. For me, I did



not really know. It was not until I did the film that I truly understood. I also thought being a transgender was a choice. Boy was I wrong. With all the discrimination against transgender individuals I do not think most would choose that life. Of course there are always exceptions. One person told me that being transgender was her choice. I also met another who came from a very poor background and transformed to be able to get a job in entertainment and be able to help her family. And I am sure there are a few others. But for most in the transgender community, being transgender man or woman is not a choice. It is who they are. I also thought that everyone wanted to eventually have a sex change. But I found that not to be true. Also being a transsexual or transgender has nothing to do with sex. It is what they are inside. I think because there have been so many misconceptions about that term—that some now prefer the term transgender. The terminologies

are constantly evolving.

Samara: What kind of discrimination did you face because of the making of this film? And as a non-member of the LGBT community what have you learned about this community since the finishing of this project?

Janice: It was very difficult when I first started. TV shows like *Orange is the New Black* or *Transparent* did not exist and it was way before Caitlyn Jenner emerged. The topic was very much taboo. In addition, most of my family did not even know I was doing this film until last year. I came from a conservative family so I was not sure how they would take it. A part of me was afraid I was going to be disowned. But I had to do the film. I just had to. I not only had to deal with family but also society. I faced a lot of resistance in making this film. People questioned why I was making it. People constantly asked me if I was transgender



woman. Some people would be smiling at me when they met me, but as soon as I handed out postcards of the film, would frown, make faces, look me up and down, and even turn their backs. One stranger even demanded that I drop my underwear to prove whether or not I am a transgender! That experience sent chills up and down my spine. I immediately called one of my trans friends and told her what happened. She told me, "Janice, we face that everyday of our lives. Guys especially would think it's ok to talk to us that way." Jarring as that experience was, I am glad it happened to me because I went through some of what my cast was going through and this made me more determined to get the film out. It makes me mad that people talk to a transgender man or woman or anyone who is different in that way. The bullying has to stop. I also faced resistance not just from non-LGBT groups but also from some folks within the LGBT community. Since a lot of the LGBT films are made by LGBT filmmakers and I am not from the community, there was skepticism. However, after seeing my film, I find that their attitude changes. I believe I may be able to reach people who are not accepting of the transgender community, since I came from that background. People who discriminate do not think they are discriminating. I was there. The only thing that I did differently was I jumped in. I believe that if people just walk in the other person's shoes and get to know them; it will help lessen the discrimination. A lot of discrimination comes from ignorance. I still continue to work on myself. I am definitely empathetic to their plight. I am a member of a number of transgender groups and I constantly see posts of people either wanting to commit suicide, harm being done to them, or worse being murdered. Through SHUNNED, I am determined to get their voice out. I am protective of them. I do hope soon, there will not be even one name added to the list of transgender victims of hate-crime. I do hope that they will

no longer feel that they are unwanted, that they will be loved and feel loved. Isn't that what we all want?

Samara: Did you find any girls that actually had happy life stories to tell?

Janice: Having the love and support of the family is very important. Most of the cast have the love and support of the family now. One of the cast members, Berry, had the love and support of the family from the very start. They were fine with her being a transgender. The entire family is so supportive and would also support her when she is a candidate in the Pageant. The film does show the struggle of the women, but it also shows hope.

Samara: It screened worldwide. What kind of responses have you gotten in the different parts of the world?

Janice: The responses have been amazing. It has shown in cities where you think would be conservative like Kansas City. It actually was nominated for the Jury Award there. It says a lot about the festival being more progressive. It definitely opened up dialogue. There are a lot of memorable experiences. In Florida, an audience member brought her friends with her to the screening. It was the first time she came out in public and revealed to her friends who she really was. It was very special. In another film festival, a man, with tears in his eyes, approached me and said he was so thankful for the film. He said that his best friend is a transgender woman but he never knew what she goes through. The next day he told me he and his best friend had a talk and cried the entire night. An audience member who was once a bully came to me and was full of regrets for the remarks he used to give transgender women. These kinds of audience response have made the whole journey and challenge of doing the film worthwhile.

Samara: And now it's an award winning film

right?

Janice: The film has received numerous awards. It won "Best Documentary" in Long Island International Film Expo (NY) and at Laughlin International Film Festival (Nevada). It was awarded the "Award of Excellence" at the Canada International Film Festival. It was nominated for the prestigious "Golden Orchid" award at Hawaii International Film Festival. It won the "Van Gogh Award: World Cinema Documentary Feature" at Amsterdam International Film Festival. It won the "Spirit of Independent Award" in Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival. It was nominated for the "Jury Award" at Kansas International Film Festival. It was nominated for "Best Documentary" in Beloit International Film Festival. It was the opening film in Cebu International Film Festival (Philippines). It has screened in Torino, Italy and Paris, France.

Samara: Any updates on the girls lives now?

Janice: I see most of them when I go back to the Philippines. Some of the cast members are now living in other countries. Erika is in Germany right now living with her boyfriend. Fiona is in Thailand modeling. Dimple is in Japan dancing at a cultural dance show. There was a casting that went out for an independent film with a role for a transgender lead. I told my cast in Manila to audition. Mimi and Katrina both got the part. Mimi was the lead and ever since then she has been acting not only in other films but also in TV, in the Philippines. The rest are either still involved in pageants or being active in fighting for transgender rights in the Philippines.

Samara: And what's next for you?

Janice: I have about 5 feature film projects in the works. Two of them I am producing. They are going to be filmed in New York. One of them is The Next Page, about a boy with cancer who struggles for survival and his single father's struggle to deal with his son's only wish. Colombian-American brothers, David and Francisco Salazar, will direct it. I am also directing a World War II documentary as well as a narrative historical film on a Philippine National Hero. I do plan to do another LGBT film soon.

Samara: Any last words?

Janice: Yes it was a difficult journey making and being involved in this film, but given a choice will I do it again? Most definitely! If I can just change the perception of one person in the audience, help make this a world with no discrimination and with no hate crimes, a world where the members of the transgender community are safe, then that is my true reward. I would not hesitate to do this sacrifice all over. But please help me give voice by helping spreading SHUNNED. This film is self-funded. And I am relying heavily on word-of-mouth. You can follow updates on where to see the film at www.shunned.info and also at Facebook: SHUNNED.