Daughter’s Memories of a Strongman Offer Unique View of Mexican Revolution
And Its Legacy Today in POV’s “El General,” Tuesday, July 20, 2010, on PBS

Filmmaker Natalia Almada Inherits Audio Recordings of Her Grandmother,
Daughter of Plutarco Elias Calles, President of Mexico from 1924 to 1928

“A tour de force of cinematic imagination bristling with beauty, contradiction and the epic scope of Mexico’s last 100 years of history.” – Cara Mertes, Sundance Documentary Institute

The past and the present collide as filmmaker Natalia Almada brings to life audio recordings about her great-grandfather Plutarco Elias Calles, a revolutionary general who became president of Mexico in 1924. In his time, Calles was called El Bolshevique and El Jefe Maximo (the Foremost Chief). Today, he is remembered as El Quema-Curas (the Priest Burner) and as a dictator who ruled through puppet presidents until he was exiled in 1936. Through recordings by Calles' daughter, El General moves between the memories of a daughter grappling with history’s portrait of her father and the weight of that same man’s legacy in Mexico today. Time is blurred in this complex and visually arresting portrait of a family and country living in the shadow of the past.

El General, winner of the 2009 Sundance Film Festival U.S. Directing Award, will have its national broadcast premiere during the centennial of the Mexican Revolution, on Tuesday, July 20, 2010, at 10 p.m. on PBS as part of the 23rd season of the series POV (Point of View). The series’ regular season continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 21 and concludes with a fall special. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a Special Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking and the International Documentary Association’s 2009 IDA Award for Continuing Series.

“The tape recorder makes me very nervous,” says Natalia Almada’s grandmother Alicia at the start of an old crackling audio tape recording. In 1978, Alicia, approaching the last years of her life, began to record her memoirs with the intention of writing a book about her father, Plutarco Elias Calles, one of a celebrated generation of revolutionary leaders — along with Álvaro Obregón, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata — who remade Mexico in the early 20th century and also one of Mexico’s most controversial figures. Though the book was never written, Alicia’s recordings inspired Almada (Al Otro Lado, POV 2006) to make the film. Almada brings to life her grandmother’s voice not only as a unique window into her country and family’s the past but as a lens through which to look at modern day Mexico.

A former primary school teacher and general of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Calles ruled Mexico as president from 1924 to 1928. He left a seemingly contradictory legacy. Though he employed a dictatorial style, he also created the political apparatus that made it possible to resolve differences within an institutional framework rather than through violence; laid the groundwork for Mexico’s modern political system; and created a political party that would hold power for over 70 years.
For their part, Alicia’s audiotapes offer an intimate portrait of the public figure. In El General, Almada plunges into the gap between personal memories and national history and between the promises of the revolution and the realities of the society that resulted from that revolution a century later.

In El General, Almada shares her vision of Mexico as a country of contradictions that resists firm definition. She does not seek answers, but instead relishes the questions that lead her camera unexpectedly from one subject to another, from past to present, from the intimate to the public. One of the delights of El General is observing what occurs when Almada follows the precept of author John Berger that “if we can see the present clearly enough, we shall ask the right questions of the past.” The film begins with, and returns again and again to, the street-level realities of Mexico City, home to 22 million people, including half a million unlicensed street vendors, whose earnings comprise anywhere from 12 to 40 percent of the nation’s gross national product. The voices of these “informal merchants” form a kind of modern Mexican Greek chorus that comments on Mexico’s current social realities and how they reflect the past.

“Politicians are the biggest parasites in the world,” taxi driver José Jesús Domínguez Reyes says. “Ask any Mexican.” A printer who looks uncannily like the picture of comedian Tin Tan on his wall chimes in, “They always make promises, but once their term is over, it’s bye-bye.” Almada notes that in the aftermath of the disputed 2006 presidential election, people protested under banners reading LEGITIMATE ELECTIONS, NO FRAUD — the same slogan used by the revolutionaries and her great-grandfather nearly a century earlier. “It is a crooked government that treats us like children,” a newsstand salesman opines. Taxi driver Reyes expresses his countrymen’s despair and resilience when he notes proudly that he has always voted. “Always!” Yet when asked if he thinks his vote counted, he replies just as fervently, “No! It has never counted. It’s always been authoritarianism in Mexico. Always, always. My poor Mexico, lindo y querido [beautiful and beloved].”

Deftly weaving together family photos and movies, audiotapes, archival newsreels and clips from Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished 1930s epic ¡Que Viva Mexico! and American filmmaker Elia Kazan’s 1952 Viva Zapata! starring Marlon Brando, Almada contrasts the Revolution’s myths and realities and stacks them up against her grandmother’s personal memories of her father, resulting in a lyrical film about time, memory and history that reaches beyond a single family and even a single country.

In the recordings, Alicia struggles to reconstruct her past and to reconcile the contradictions between her memories and history’s portrait and judgment of her father. She recalls a meticulous and methodical man who shielded his family from the public eye. “Everyone thinks my father was an imposing despot,” Alicia states in the opening of the film, “but I want you to see him as I saw him, as a father, as a Mexican and as man.” As one example, she says, “Everyone thinks my father was anti-religious,” referring to the bloody war between the government and the Catholic Church that erupted in 1927 during Calles’ presidency, “but proof that he wasn’t is that he sent all his daughters to Catholic school.” She also recalls that her schoolmates would bring in newspaper clippings of nuns being burned at the stake and priests hanging from the gallows and insist, “Look at what Alicia’s father does in Mexico!” Almada does not attempt to resolve the contradictions of the past but instead connects her grandmother’s conflict to present-day Mexico with images of millions making the pilgrimage to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint.

Calles is buried at the Monument of the Revolution, which casts a heavy and symbolic shadow over Mexico City. His remains lie next to those of Pancho Villa, Lázaro Cárdenas and Venustiano Carranza. In 1932, Anita Brenner wrote in The New York Times, “For seven years General Plutarco Elias Calles has loomed indestructible in the Mexican picture, like a Toltec pyramid — huge, harsh, mysterious. His name adds naturally to the list of dictatorial gladiators that the world watches with

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1 “Una Economia en la Calle” by Ricardo Blanco Velázquez
mixed feelings. . . . He has been called a Mexican Mussolini, an Indian von Hindenburg, a Latin American Lenin. . .” Calles was and remains one of Mexico’s most elusive and polemic figures, a perception that Almada does not try to deny.

Calles predicted that history’s judgment of him would be harsh and unjust because the circumstances of the time would be ignored or forgotten. Almada in turn asks viewers to look at the present to judge history, and she shows a Mexico full of contradictions. The result, *El General*, is a compellingly personal exploration of the borders between personal and public, history and the present, cultural myths and everyday realities. It is also a snapshot of a tumultuous, beloved Mexico still waiting for the promise of its Revolution to manifest itself fully.

“My grandmother wanted to write her father’s biography, but all that remains of that intention are the recordings that were handed to me, presumably so that I might finish what she left incomplete,” says Almada. “To me, film is a tithe for memory, a cost I gratefully pay in order to make sense of the world actively. It is a way to question how we reconcile the contradictions between our personal family memories and our country’s collective memory. How do I reconcile my reality with my family history? How do I, a Mexican, understand Mexico today through a historical lens?

“A woman in the film buying marigolds for the Day of the Dead says, ‘We love the dead but they are expensive,’” Almada continues. “I have come to understand how she speaks for me and for Mexico. *El General* considers the price we pay for our memories and our history, the wounds we close and the ones we ignore.”

*El General* is a co-production of Altamura Films and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) in association with Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and American Documentary | POV. The POV broadcast of *El General* is co-presented by Latino Public Broadcasting.

**About the Filmmaker:**

**Natalia Almada, Director/Co-producer**

Natalia Almada’s directing credits include the experimental short “All Water Has a Perfect Memory” and *Al Otro Lado* (POV 2006), her award-winning debut feature documentary about immigration, drug trafficking and *corrido* music. Her work has screened at the Sundance Film Festival, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Biennial, as well as at international film festivals, universities and conferences and on television networks such as PBS, ARTE and VPRO. Almada is a MacDowell Colony Fellow and a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow. Her awards include U.S. Directing Award at Sundance in 2009 and Best Documentary Feature at Cine Las Americas in 2009. She earned a master of fine arts in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design and divides her time between Mexico City and Brooklyn, N.Y.

**Credits:**

Director: Natalia Almada  
Co-producers: Daniela Alatorre, Natalia Almada  
Editor: Natalia Almada  
Cinematographer: Chuy Chavez  
Original Music: John Zorn, Marc Ribot, Shahzad Ismaily  
Running Time: 86:46

**POV Series Credits:**

Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry  
Executive Vice President: Cynthia López  

**Awards & Festivals:**

- U.S. Directing Award: Documentary, Sundance Film Festival, 2009  
- Best Documentary Feature, Cine Las Americas, 2009
• Coral Award, Havana International Film Festival, 2009
• Special Mention, SANFIC, 2009
• Los Angeles International Film Festival, 2009
• Latin Beat, 2009
• Guadalajara International Film Festival, 2009
• Morelia International Film Festival, 2009
• San Diego Latino Film Festival, 2010
• Göteborg International Film Festival, 2010
• Cinema South Festival, 2010
• Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Creative Capital exhibition, 2010
• Ambulante Documentary Film Festival, 2010
• BAFICI, 2010

(For a complete list of festivals, go to www.altamurafilms.com.)

The Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the Emmy Award-winning weekly series Independent Lens on PBS. ITVS was created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and provide for underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained at www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.

Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) supports the development, production, acquisition and distribution of public media content that is representative of Latino people, or addresses issues of interest to Latino Americans. These programs, including the series ‘VOCES,’ are produced for dissemination to the public broadcasting stations. Edward James Olmos is founder and Chairman of the LPB Board of Directors. For more information please visit www.lpb.org and www.voces.tv.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 23rd season on PBS, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September, with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 275 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, POV’s Borders. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today’s most pressing social issues. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
POV’s award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, POV’s Borders. In addition, the POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

POV Community Engagement and Education
POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. POV’s Youth Views works with youth organizers and students to provide resources and training to use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.