

MIAMI INT'L FILM FESTIVAL MARCH 5, 2016 5:04 PM

# Documentary "Queen of Thursdays" is story of famed Cuban ballerina Rosario "Charin" Suárez

## HIGHLIGHTS

Film will make its world premiere at Miami International Film Festival on Thursday March 10

Cuban director Orlando Rojas and Miami producer Dennis Scholl bring exile story to light



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Rosario "Charin" Suárez, the titular subject of *Queen of Thursdays*, got her nickname during her glory days as a ballerina at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, whose famous director Alicia Alonso was so jealous of Suarez's talent that she didn't let her perform on weekends. After years of struggle in Cuba, Suárez fled to Miami in 1995, seeking, like so many exile artists before and since, artistic fulfillment and a better life.

"We worked to be artists, and when I realized even that could be taken from me, I said what's left?" she says in the movie of her decision to leave.

But as *Queen of Thursdays* shows us, in many ways Miami was no more forgiving to Suárez than Cuba was. Now 63, the woman once regarded as the great hope of Cuban ballet teaches at two local dance studios. She has been frustrated in multiple attempts to maintain a company or find a position that would make good use of her singular talent and knowledge.

"She came here searching for freedom and opportunity, and this did not turn out to be Nirvana, either," says Dennis Scholl, a co-producer of the film, which premieres Thursday March 10 at the Miami International Film Festival. "It breaks your heart to see a story like this."

That dilemma is a familiar one to *Thursdays* director Orlando Rojas, 68, who was a prominent filmmaker in Cuba before coming to Miami in 2003. He has known Suárez since they were teenagers in Cuba and was a close friend of her second husband, actor Jorge Álvarez, who supplied much of the footage of Suárez in Cuba and in her early years in Miami and is credited as cinematographer and editor.

Rojas, who programs Miami Dade College's Tower Theater, says that while politics in Cuba can thwart careers and ideas, the demands of fundraising and selling your artistic product can be just as difficult for artists used to state support.

"Everyone told me you have no limits here, the sky is the limit," Rojas says. "This is very cliché. Maybe sometimes this is true, but I also think there's a problem this society hasn't resolved. Sometimes very talented artists are strong in their art but weak in promoting it. What is the problem with this society that it doesn't protect its artists?"

Suárez was among the first generation of native talent fostered by Alonso, a brilliant Cuban-born ballerina whom Fidel Castro lured from an international career to launch a ballet company in Cuba. The indomitable Alonso, who has been partially blind for most of her career, created a successful school and company; but she also held back younger dancers as she kept performing into her 70s.

Suárez's talent, combining spectacular technique and profound expressiveness, became apparent in her teens. Cuban audiences adored her, Cuban and international critics praised her. But tensions with Alonso grew. Suárez left the Ballet Nacional to form an independent, experimental troupe, returned, voiced doubts about the Cuban system as the hardships of the Special Period overwhelmed the island and finally defected while on tour in Spain.

Yet her idealism, coupled with a life spent almost entirely in the studio, left her ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of fundraising and boards of directors. The film shows her several attempts to start a company, but the Miami exiles who applaud her, and to whom Suárez turns to for financial support, either do not or cannot maintain a ballet troupe.

"Charin was always that unique artist for whom there is no room for anything but creation," Rojas says. "She doesn't have the weapons to fight, and she doesn't know how."

Rojas, who was a great fan of Suárez in Cuba, spent a decade making *Thursdays*.

"Charin was extraordinary — there are very few like her," he says. "I love Miami and the Cuban exiles, but they have no idea of the significance of culture and art, and how to protect the future of artists. Not nostalgia, not exalting the past. But to create an artistic future here and in Cuba."

Scholl got involved in the project several years ago, when he was vice president/arts at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. He became co-producer and screenwriter, enabling Rojas to finish. The film is part of a trilogy of documentaries Scholl is producing on unsung or forgotten artists in Miami; the first was *Deep City*, on the Liberty City record label, and the next will be on pin-up photographer Bunny Yeager.

With Suárez, he saw someone whose enormous talent and dedication could not overcome the difficulties in Cuba or the United States. "The only thing she knew how to do was make art and keep dancing, and yet the system let her down," Scholl says. "It's the kind of story you don't expect, because it's not a story with a happy ending."

"As Miami begins to mature, we're beginning to tell our stories. This is very much one of the stories that is reflective of who lives in our community and what they mean to our community."

Rojas and Scholl say Suárez was reluctant to make the film. Divorced from Álvarez, she lives alone. Her daughter, who had also been a dancer, now produces commercials. Yet *Queen of Thursdays* shows a woman who, though deeply disillusioned, is incapable of abandoning her art.

"If you could save your life by telling a lie, what would it be?" an interviewer asks Suárez toward the end of the film. "That I want to go on," she replies, tears in her eyes. "If you could save your life by telling the truth, what would it be?" he asks. "That I will go on," she answers.

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## IF YOU GO

What: "Queen of Thursdays."

When: 7 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Olympia Theater, 174 E. Flagler St., Miami.

Tickets: \$16 available at <http://2016.miamifilmfestival.com/films/queen-of-thursdays/>

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