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what I'm doing." Brazil is also free of political repression today, Babenco says, as is Argentina, the country where he and Puig were born and where two of Puig's books, including *Spider Woman*, are banned. While the novelist's story was meant to reflect conditions in Argentina a decade ago, the film is not intended to be specific as to time and place. Portuguese writing in the prison would seem to indicate Brazil, but Babenco insists, "I shoot it in Brazil because I live in Brazil... I could write in Esperanto, okay? and everyone would believe the movie was in a non-country."

The *Kiss of the Spider Woman* project came about almost by accident, the director reveals. Although an avid reader — "It's just part of my life, it's not a job" — he doesn't think of one in terms of the other: "The emotional process of reading a book and being involved in a movie is like oil and vinegar...."

"My first impulse about making the movie was a very irresponsible one," he relates. In 1981 he was in L. A. to receive an award for *Pixote* and happened to pick up a copy of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which he had first read in 1978. "I was reading the novel when I gave an interview and one of the journalists asked me if this is your next movie and I said yes."

Soon after this self-fulfilling prophecy was uttered, Leonard Schrader was engaged to write the screenplay. The process, which took a year and a half, Babenco calls "a very fascinating and enchanted act of life. You don't need more than black coffee and a quiet, silent room, and time — and a good place to sit down."

Babenco asked Burt Lancaster to play Molina, he says, because "I always had a lot of admiration for his work, since I was young... I always had the strong feeling that he was a special man, someone who accept big risk and is not doing the same character all his life and is this kind of old Hollywood great actors, you know, like William Holden. How forget *Picnic on Trapezio* or *Vera Cruz*? films that are in my memory — I'm going to die having these memories of these movies."

After Lancaster's 1983 heart attack the project went through changes. Raul Julia, not wanting to abandon it, came up with the idea of casting fellow New York stage actor William Hurt as Molina. Babenco flew to New York to hear Hurt read in Julia's apartment, and made up his mind after the first page. "It was really incredible," he recalls. "It was such a shock that I received when he started to read... He gave such a tender performance in the first reading that I discover a new dimension of the character that was very important."

Substituting Hurt for Lancaster did not require major script revisions, just what Babenco calls "mechanical changes to adapt the age of... the character. In some way Leonard changes some expressions that a young character would never allow himself to say — like old-fashioned words."

More drastic changes were required a few days before shooting started, when word came that Universal might not give them the rights to remake scenes from *Cat People!*, which was the principal movie Molina narrated in the book and the play. *The Nazi propaganda film was expanded to fill the gap.*

They rehearsed for two weeks, first in New York and then in Sao Paulo, before filming began in the Brazilian city in the fall of 1983. The cell was a studio set, the rest of the prison an actual abandoned prison, and scenes from the films-within-the-film were done at a combination of sets and real locations.

In the director's absence the actors exchanged roles for a rehearsal, and Hurt offered to give Molina to Julia, who had wanted to play him all along. Babenco would hear none of it, but since then there has been intermittent talk of the three of them mounting a stage production with Julia as the queen and Hurt the revolutionary. "Nothing in terms of production is going on," the director says. "It's just talk." He doesn't rule out the possibility, but with so many busy schedules involved, don't hold your breath. Babenco and his actors will be lucky to find time to pick up all their awards for the film, let alone stage it.

What follows reveals some plot points about the ending of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. You may not want to read it until you've seen the film.

The most difficult scene to shoot was the four-minute sequence that ends with the cellmates making love. "We did 37 times for two days," Babenco says. "And I remember that the 36th time Bill came to me and said, 'Listen, an actor is like a lake and I'm dry. I can't give any more for you. I put everything out of me, I don't have more energy.' He said, 'What are you looking for from us?'"

"And I said, 'Listen, I'm looking to feel that you would like to fucked (by) this other man and thus far I don't have this feeling. We're going to try it. (I'm not) in a hurry. It could be one more day, two more days, three more days — here I am.' And they were a little bit shocked about my reaction. 'Sorry, it's a crucial moment of the movie. If I don't feel that Raul really accept to play the male role and if I don't feel that you really are giving yourself in a total way—' And then we did one more time and this is the shot that is in the movie."

On the other hand, the scene in the warden's office where Molina the collaborator extorts groceries from the authorities was shot in one take, actually a filmed rehearsal. "When we ended Bill said, 'We did it. It's done.'" They shot it twice more as a precaution, but only the first was printed.

Perhaps Babenco takes a bit too much credit for using what was already in Puig's novel in the final scene, as Valentin dreams his way to death through the sort of movie fantasy he had learned from Molina:

"We faced three strong problems in this moment. One, how to show that Valentin could escape for the kingdom of dreams and show then, this was something he learned from Molina, that it was Molina who opened (for him) the doors of the perception, the doors of the fantasy, the capacity to relax your rational system and just fly.... On the other hand we were taking the risk (that the audience would) believe the end of the movie (was) just another Molina story...."

"This is why we establish so clear when they are running in the corridor, Raul is stopped

and he says 'What about Molina?' and then Sonia Braga says, 'Don't worry, my love, only he knows if he died sad or happy.' In this moment you establish that Molina was dead already and what comes next is just Raul's imagination. And then we are carried on Raul's imagination — Valentin's imagination — until the end of the movie, in a moment in which I decided then the movie is more important than the two characters; and this is the moment in which I make the transformation (from) black and white to color again... let's end the movie like a real movie used to end... (on) a very corny picture postal card (of) a tropical island... and at least to have the feeling that Raul died happy — he died in the middle of his fantasy."

Although death is the somewhat ambiguous by-product of this dream sequence, Babenco says that is undoubtedly the outcome: "For me he is already dead when he receives the shot of morphine. It's just a question of seconds, of minutes."

Whatever the self-styled censors of the "gay community" may think, Babenco is proud of the men he has put on the screen. He was impressed by their presence in the book, "like two strong icons, the subversive and the gay. They were for me like two cliches, two prototypes.... They are characters that are starting to exist in the last ten years. You never had a gay character like Molina 25 years ago...."

"There was never that I remember a gay of such poetic courage (on) the screen, because always the gays are portrayed as a caricature. Look at this movie with Pacino, *Cruising*, *Cage aux Folles* — plenty of examples. Always you have the transvestites for funny, okay? Always exploring the pathetic side, the grotesque, always exploring this — cheap opera side of the man who would like to be a woman."

The subject has subtly shifted to Molina as Babenco continues, "The man would like to be a woman because he believed that, he was taught that men cannot be sensitive, that men cannot express and show their own feelings. Men must be taught and know everything

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The Front Page

"There is not one member of the gay community who hasn't benefited positively from the changes over the last 30 years. Yet we still hear, 'I don't like the gay community here very much.' To which we must respond, 'But my dear you are the gay community!'"

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