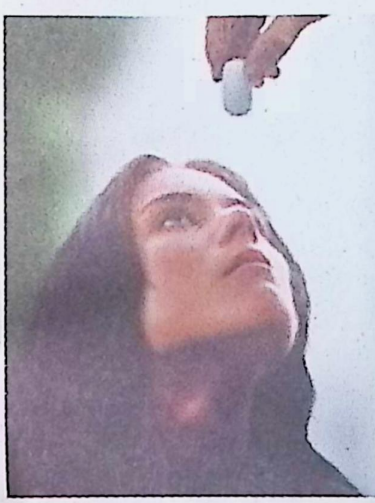
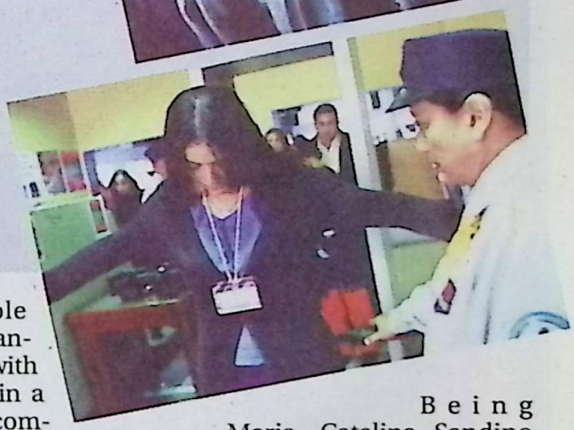
Maria Full of Grace

Based on 1,000 true stories.

Shahriar Shahid







'MARIA FULL OF GRACE' is not a movie on sermon or prayers that got answered. Rather it's a movie to get stunned by the story of a 17 year old teenage girl who took the risk and consequences of her life and freedom to become a drug mule. Director Joshua Marston made his feature debut with '**Maria Full of Grace**' that takes a simple story of Maria, the central character, who was actually looking for a decent job and later reveals how she was exploited by the drug business and eventually found herself next to New York with several kilos of cocaine inside her stomach.

Maria (Catalina Sandina Moreno) was picked from an improvised village of Colombia, where the only way of descent earning is working in the Flower Plants, a place with existing reality of becoming drug mules from an assembly line worker. The film starts in a beautiful dawn with soothing Spanish music, the camera scanning on the village roads, smoky mountains and a shaky bus where Maria, and Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega), Maria's best friend, seen traveling to their work. But soon the film run into the daily hopelessly circumscribe life of Maria, as like looking for pay checks, paying for her nephew's medicine and finally quitting the job for being humiliated by her employer.

With her family depending on her paychecks and becoming unemployed, Maria's mounting desperation intensifies when she discover she is pregnant, the father of whom is an unreliable boyfriend, Juan. Juan reluctantly offered her to get married, but Maria knew she doesn't love him, she put him down. While on a trip to Bogotá for a job hunt, Maria got tempted by mule recruiter, Franklin, who promised her a job which will get her enough money for her family and the unborn child. The story of drug trade begins; Maria meets Javier, the drug don and agrees to become a mule to carry cocaine to New York.

What is most remarkable about this movie is how it managed be beautifully directed with enormous emotional impact in a stale ordinary manner. It's completely free from sentimentality and imposed crisis. By following every step of Maria from without allowing any easily predictable choice, Marston tells a story where Maria is not a victim, but her choices are severely limited. The storyline flow's smoothly with a complete experience of drug trade, not about a girl who was so poor that she had to swallow drugs.

Although shot in a docu-drama style, Maria Full of Grace is like a cold-fever shock full of artistic twists and thrills. There are helplessly painful scenes where Maria falls in an eye contact with her boyfriend Juan, at the point of no return on her way to New York. Again, the flight scene might be considered the most unnerving one ever filmed, four girls struggling to swallow the pain, discomfort, and the drug pellets again and again. There are intense moments when we see Maria being interrogated at the airport, fleeing away from the hotel and looking for a shelter in New York where she knows nobody. The only time Maria is seen smiling, when she was watching her unborn baby on an ultrasonographic screen and also hearing the heartbeat. A very emotionally endorsed moment captured in that shot.

Being Maria, Catalina Sandino Morano was so convincing that her performance hardly seemed like acting at all.

All through the film, Joshua Marston hooks us tightly with the central character Maria, a one of many young girls who got hired from the Latin Americas to smuggle drugs in the US but through horrible experiences. And the end was crafted beautifully with a touch of compassion. Staring at the ultra-sono photo of her unborn child, Maria changes her mind. At the edge of the immigration line to Colombia, Maria turns back and starts stepping towards the camera. Another story begins through this end ... of an illegal US immigrant, a single mother, and the city called New York.