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## A late start didn't hurt 'Mary' maker

**B**y the time Argentine film director Maria Luisa Bemberg decided to enter the movie business, she had already had her children and grandchildren. She had no formal training, but she was politically as well as socially aware. She was also "about 50 years old." Within a few years, she was directing features. Her third, "Camila," a story of forbidden love between a woman from the upper class and a Jesuit priest set in the 17th century, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film last year.

This year, Bemberg brings out "Miss Mary," which stars Julie Christie as the English governess employed by a rich and eccentric Argentine family around the time Juan Peron was coming into power.

If it comes as a surprise that Bemberg's English is not only flawless, but even British-inflected, it should not. "That's because I had 23 Miss Marys," she says. A child of the upper class, Bemberg was raised to be pretty and virtuous. At a very young age, she noticed that her brothers were being taught different things than she. That's when she rebelled. "But my becoming a feminist did not come easily," she says. "It did not come for quite a long time. My first difficulty was that I did not take myself seriously."

In one of the early documentaries she made, a short called "Toys," the director interviewed young boys and girls. "I asked them, 'What are you going to be when you grow up?' The girls said, 'Like my mother, or a teacher.' The boys said, 'Astronaut, president, football player.' The girls' eyes were dazed. So, you can see the harm is already done at 6! I've given this film to the women's movement."

One of the reasons she made "Miss Mary" was to show how the upper class lived in Argentina 50 years ago.

"Argentina was very much like a prosperous British colony at that time. I wanted to show, through 'Miss Mary,' the imperialism of a language," she says. In the film, there's a scene in which the family butler asks the English governess, in Spanish, how many lumps of sugar she wants in her tea. Miss Mary answers, "Two, please." "By now," says the brother of her employer, "you might have learned 'Dos, por favor!'" "Nonsense," she says. "That's the strength of the British Empire. Even the butler is learning English." It's a line Bemberg lifted from life. Almost everything that happens in "Miss Mary" was something she experienced or heard about. "Nothing is invented," she says, adding that the film is not autobiographical.

Of the governess after whom Christie's character is based, the writer-director says, "I knew them well, those women. I had a sort of love-hate relationship with them. They were snobbish, repressive, but warm-hearted lonely persons."

As a girl, Bemberg remembers learning from them "a little bit of



**Maria Luisa Bemberg**

everything." Even after her political awakening, and the raising of four children (bearing her 10 grandchildren), Bemberg still cannot shake off some of the qualities taught by her English governesses: "Being tidy, punctual, and having, more or less, good manners."

One of the things that surprised most people who saw "Camila" is its torrid sexuality. "I feel it's important for women to fantasize about men. It's something that's healthy." She is proud of that film's non-submissive female characters and says, "As I am a feminist, everything I do and say has a feminist outlook. It's a thought, a way of being, everything I believe in."

With a major star and New World

Pictures backing it, "Miss Mary" cost "double what the last one did (which brings it to about \$1.2 million), with a little extra for dubbing." The film was shot in two versions, and the North American release is in English.

For her next project, Bemberg has a couple of ideas. She is not anxious about coming to America to make movies. "I don't decide things by countries. I believe in stories. It's much cheaper to shoot in Argentina. What I certainly wouldn't do is shoot anything, just to do it here."

She is more than content doing what she is doing. "I see women my age having their faces lifted, and I feel so privileged," she says.

— Samir Hachom