

Double Dipping

Catherine Ryan and Gary Weimberg Have Landed PBS and Network Slots This Summer

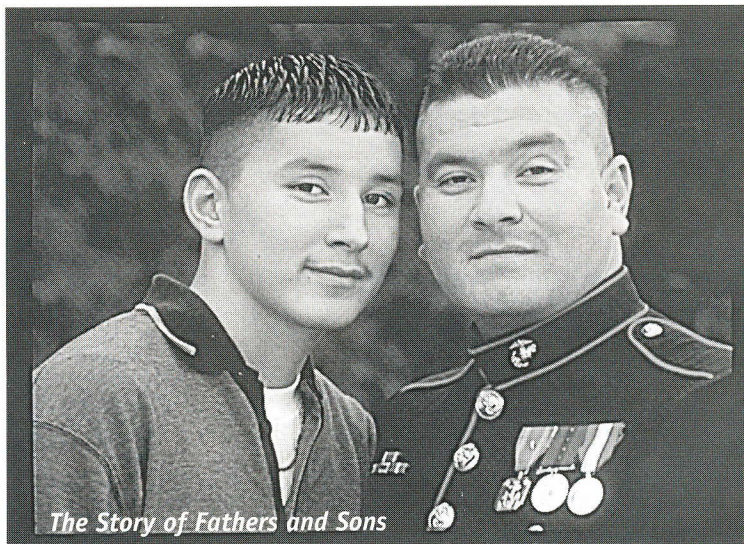
by Sura Wood

Catherine Ryan and Gary Weimberg will pull off a rare double play this summer. The filmmaking duo has secured national airdates on both PBS and ABC for their two new documentaries. The network deal is an accomplishment in itself, given the corporate giants' reluctance to broadcast out-of-house documentaries, while the PBS broadcast is a tribute to Ryan and Weimberg's longstanding commitment to activist filmmaking.

The Story of Fathers and Sons will air June 17 in prime time on ABC. The film is a companion piece to Ryan and Weimberg's *The Story of Mothers and Daughters*, which ABC broadcast in the spring of 1997 (see *Release Print*, December '97/January '98), and which ABC will re-run immediately following the *Fathers and Sons* broadcast. On the public airwaves, PBS will show Ryan and Weimberg's low-budget documentary *The Double Life of Ernesto Gomez Gomez* on July 27 as part of this summer's *P.O.V.* series. The film is the story of a young man who learned at age 10, while growing up in Mexico, that he was adopted and that his biological mother is a "Puerto Rican revolutionary hero who is being held as a political prisoner in the U.S." (The film was sneak-previewed last month in FAF's True Stories series at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.)

"*Fathers and Sons* is very much the parallel film to *Mothers and Daughters* in structure, but it's surprisingly different," says Ryan, taking a break after locking the picture on April 2. "It's surprising, in that the emotional lives of men are every bit as complicated as those of women." Adds Weimberg, "Men know as much about their inner lives as women do; but the difference is that they are not used to expressing it. It's not that men were reticent to tell us the truth, as much as they were reluctant to view this theme as important." Ryan noted that the new film, like its predecessor, is organized around five chapters—cradle to grave—of the human life cycle. Sixty-eight fathers and sons were interviewed in depth, and 58 of them appear in the 43-minute film.

In a unique deal hammered out with the help of their partner, Judith Leonard, an attor-



ney turned filmmaker, Ryan and Weimberg assembled a group of corporate sponsors, then closed a deal with the network and began work on *Fathers and Sons* in September 1998. "With *Mothers and Daughters*, our agreement with ABC was

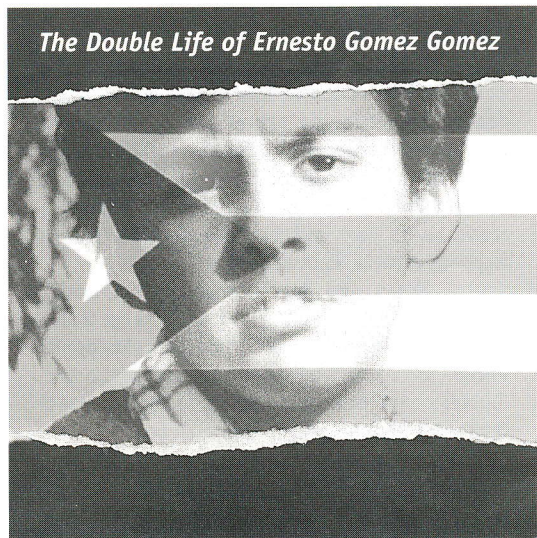
The filmmakers were inspired to make *The Double Life of Ernesto Gomez Gomez* when they met a young man whose mother is serving a 55-year prison sentence.

a barter situation," explains Weimberg. "We got permission to sell half of the commercial spots on the show, and that's how we got the money to make the film. Then we provided the show itself to ABC for free. No money traded hands between ABC and us. *Fathers and Sons* is a very different situation. We had to buy an hour of network

prime time. In return, we get to sell all of the advertisements. The other thing that is different about the deal is that to make it work, we had to buy two years in a row from ABC, so that we will have another run for the film at the same time next year."

Producing a prime-time special on network television was something of a departure for Ryan and Weimberg, whose films usually have a decidedly political slant. Ryan is cautiously optimistic about their prospects for working with the formula-driven networks in the future. "We're making progress here," she says. "This kind of real documentary showing up on prime-time TV can work. They need programming and they always need innovation, and the documentary is something that they haven't paid attention to for a long time. But how far we can go down this path of documentary filmmakers and corporations working together is a good question. There are a lot of ideas I'd like to work on, but I know they would not be corporate-friendly."

Although Ryan and Weimberg may have tangoed with the behemoth, they have not strayed from their first love, the social-issue documentary. The filmmakers were provoked to make *The Double Life of Ernesto Gomez Gomez* when a friend introduced them to the young man who had come to the Bay Area to visit his mother, Dylcia Pagan, who is serving a 55-year sentence for seditious conspiracy at the Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin. (Pagan is profiled in Karina Epperlein's film *Voices from Inside*; see *Release Print*, February '97.) According to Weimberg, Ernesto had seen the couple's film *Maria's Story*, a first-person documentary about a Salvadoran wife, mother and guerrilla leader, and he wanted to know if he could collaborate with the filmmakers on a film about his mother. "The last thing Cathy and I wanted to do was spend four years working on something that was the whim of a teenager, if he wasn't going to be serious about it," says Weimberg. "But it proved to be a very real collaboration. There's that amazing moment when you say, 'Oh my God, there are political prisoners in the U.S., and one of them is 60 miles from my home, and here I am with a member of her family.' I thought, 'This is a story that has to be told.'"



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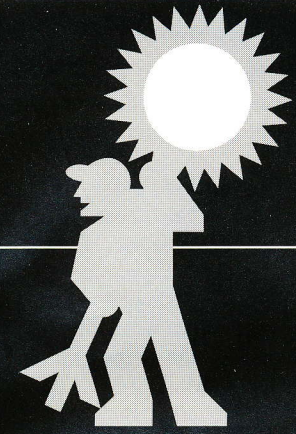
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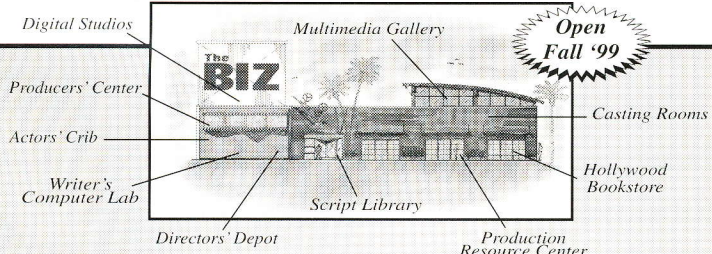
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The film includes an interview with Ernesto's foster parents, who suggest that the boy was thrown into an identity crisis when he learned that his real mother was forced to abandon him because of her commitment to a political movement, the FALN (the Puerto Rican Armed Forces for National Liberation). At the crux of the film is a stirring reunion between Ernesto and his mother in the Dublin penitentiary. "Ernesto's real-life story is a direct parallel to Luke Skywalker's story in *Star Wars*," says Weimberg. "Luke is a farm boy and someone comes up to him and says, 'You have a mythic past, you are the son of a Jedi knight with an enormous tradition whose people are fighting against this huge empire.' And then he goes on a multi-film voyage of self-discovery. It's mythic when George Lucas handles it, but for Ernesto it's real."

Earlier this year, Ryan and Weimberg were worried that they wouldn't be able to raise the money to complete *Double Life*, and in fact, says Weimberg, "We never did." Ryan and Weimberg had been counting on finishing funds from the National Latino Communications Center, but the Corporation for Public Broadcasting pulled the plug on that organization in 1998 (see *Release Print*, April '99). "We finished anyway, damn it!" says Ryan. "Gary shot it on Hi8, with a couple of days of Betacam pickups, and edited nights and weekends around other projects for three years. With the broadcast on *P.O.V.*, we may come close to reimbursing our cash outlay, if not our time."

The filmmakers financed about 70 percent of the film out of their own pockets and received significant support from the Paul Robeson Fund for post-production. They spent four and a half years completing what developed into a very personal project. "I don't believe there is such a thing as a neutral film," says Weimberg. "Whenever people make neutral films, what they ending up doing is defending the status quo. The only way to talk about anything of importance in the world is to acknowledge that we all have a point of view and move from there. To pretend that there is something such as neutrality is a lie and the enemy of documentary films. The reason why so many PBS films are actually reactionary is because they pretend to be neutral."

The Double Life of Ernesto Gomez Gomez has been shown at the Berlin, Tahoe and Taos Talking Pictures film festivals and won Best Documentary at the Big Muddy festival in Carbondale, Illinois. Jane Balfour Films in London is handling its international distribution. "We never had to put plan B into effect," says Weimberg, reflecting on the film's precarious genesis. "Nine months ago I was in the desperate position of asking, 'Oh, my God, what will I do to pay the rent?' Now here we are with three hours of programming on network TV—a little more of a dramatic lifestyle swing than I would have asked for, but I am grateful it swung this way." □

Sura Wood is the film critic for the Marin Independent Journal. Her article on Michael J. Moore's The Legacy appeared in last month's Release Print.