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'Magic City Memoirs' is youthful filmmakers' tribute to Miami

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JOSHUA PREZANT / JOAHUA PREZANT

On the set of the independent feature film.

Things are turning ugly on the set of *Magic City Memoirs*, an independent feature film about growing up in Miami with too much privilege and too much access, made by a crew of insiders who get that there's much more to the city than those clichéd aerials of swaying palms, speeding boats and Art Deco hotels splashing neon toward the sea.

Director Aaron J. Salgado, who has a degree in filmmaking from New York University, and producer Jaydee Freixas, who graduated from the University of Miami's film school, are sweating one of their first Hollywood-style meltdowns.

Gus Penna, the film's director of photography, is throwing a fit because the lighting just isn't right. And as the kegs of beer that lured about 200 college-age extras to this posh waterfront house on Key Biscayne begin to dry up, folks are starting to bail. All that standing around waiting for shots to be set up? Not so glamorous.

“The light was not filtering through the crowd the way the DP wanted it to,” Freixas, 26, says a few days later. “The clock was ticking. I wanted to lock the gates. Aaron and I were having a heated argument. And in the middle of it some guy comes over and says ‘Man, that’s so funny. It’s just like *Entourage*.’”

But the HBO series glorifies Hollywood. *Magic City Memoirs*, currently in post-production, is as Miami as any feature film has ever been. South Florida has long been the darling of Hollywood filmmakers who like the dazzle of our slick, tropical scenery, and many movies exploit the city's vistas: *2 Fast 2 Furious*; *There's Something About Mary*; *Bird Cage*; *Bad Boys*. But those films typically use Miami only as backdrop and rarely tell its stories.

Magic City Memoirs, which recently inspired actor Andy Garcia to sign on as one of two executive producers and is also unofficially backed by another local boy, Miami Beach-raised “Jewban” director Brett Ratner (*Rush Hour*; *X-Men*, *The Last Stand*), is about growing up in Cuban Miami.

It's about kids who go to predominantly Latin private schools, drive fancy cars, live in lavish houses -- and whose parents are powerbrokers or live the high life thanks to *Scarface*-style enterprises.

“My city was founded on vices,” a character says in voiceover as the film opens with a gorgeous shot of downtown Miami at dusk, the camera retreating from the glossy highrises toward the city's guts. “I come from a generation of '80s babies addicted to the lifestyle. Sex, drugs and hip-hop. This is my Miami.”

“They say you should write what you know. This is what we know,” says the Peruvian-American Salgado, 27, who wrote the screenplay. In 2006, Salgado and Freixas, who is Cuban American, produced the acclaimed short film, *Jamaica Motel*, about a seedy by-the-hour joint in Little Havana and the drama that unfolds there over one night.

Magic City centers around three high-school seniors on the brink of bright futures -- or a major crash-and-burn if they continue drugging, brawling and breaking into cars. They wield weapons, drive while wasted, get with girls who clamor for Ruffies -- and in general live the hardcore rap songs that are the soundtrack of their youth.

“My friends all smoked pot, sold drugs, had cute girls, went to wild parties,” says Freixas, who admits he was expelled from Christopher Columbus High, switched to St. Brendan, where he met Salgado, and eventually graduated from Columbus.

“Everything can be so in your face in Miami,” he says. “It's all about the swagger. You had 18-year-olds driving their parents' Bentleys to parties. I was really into graffiti. I thought I was the sh - - . We were bigger than life.”

BIG CONNECTIONS

And sitting here in a Philippe Starck-designed model unit at the posh Icon Brickell for their first big press day, the filmmakers seem still to be living out music-video fantasies. Like the characters in their film, they grew up with powerful connections. Mostly, their parents'. Freixas' mom Rita, a plugged-in Miami publicist, has ties to Icon developer Jorge Perez. Hence the Hollywood-worthy digs for a press interview. In fact, the guys shot here at no charge.

The Mediterranean mansion on Key Biscayne where they also shot for free for two days straight? It belongs to the owners of Estrella Insurance, whose daughter was part of the filmmakers' broader high-school clique. Dominik Garcia-Lorido, Andy Garcia's daughter and one of *Magic City's* stars, is a longtime neighbor of the Estrella family. She grew up between homes in Los Angeles and Key Biscayne.

“*Magic City Memoirs* is kind of like *Alpha Dog*, which was about kids growing up in the Valley. I grew up in the Valley and can tell you they really got it right,” says Garcia-Lorido, 25, who played her real father's daughter in 2009's *City Island*. “But I also grew up in Miami, and no one has ever told this story. What's great is that it's made by people who really get the city. If an outsider would have made it, they would have cast a bunch of kids with cheesy accents pretending to be Latin.”

Maybe L.A.'s bad boys have to cruise around the city in plain old cars. But Miami's teenage players smoke weed while taking their parents' powerboats for after-school spins, *Magic City* tells us. Best not to ask Salgado and Freixas how they got a high-ranking city official to unlock the gates at the long-shuttered, historic Miami Marine Stadium where those luminous, only-in-Miami boating scenes were shot.

“In location fees alone, we would have had to come up with at least \$1 million,” Salgado says. “The house from *Scarface*, which is two houses down from the house where we shot on Key Biscayne, rents for \$30,000-\$40,000 per day.”

They also shot at Mercy Hospital, Hobie Beach, SET nightclub on South Beach and a real *quinces* party complete with birthday girl in hoop dress and tiara rising from a cloud of smoke.

The one location from which the filmmakers were shut out: the University of Miami's baseball stadium. The character played by 17-year-old Mexican-American actor J.R. Villareal (*Akeelah and the Bee*) is a star baseball player trying to decide whether he should go straight to the majors or take the full ride from the "U."

UM president Donna Shalala denied their request to use the stadium, despite lobbying from famed Miami restaurateur Monty Trainer, a UM sports supporter and close friend of Freixas' dad. Guillermo "Billy" Freixas was a high-profile Miami-Dade county lobbyist sentenced in 2005 to two years in prison for various charges, including tax evasion. (Trainer served 133 days for tax evasion in the late 1980s.)

One of the characters in *Magic City* is struggling to stay clean and be the man of the house after his father goes to jail for big-time drug dealing. But Freixas says his father's experience did not inspire that story.

"We had a friend whose father was actually a major drug dealer, and he went to jail when our friend was in high school," Freixas says.

Magic City, still being edited with help from Garcia (and copious notes from Ratner, who invited the filmmakers to his Beverly Hills house to screen its first version), was made for less than \$400,000, most of the money from executive producer Juan Villareal, a businessman and father of J.R. Villareal, who plays the baseball player.

"We knew Juan was on board whether or not we used his son," Freixas says. "And we really didn't want to sell out, using a Mexican kid from Texas to play a Cuban kid. We were worried. But when we met him, we were blown away by the kid's talent."

GOOD RESPONSE

In Hollywood, folks who have seen early versions of *Magic City* have also been blown away, especially given its relatively paltry budget.

"The response has been incredible," Freixas says from the Standard hotel in Hollywood, where he and Salgado lived for several weeks while they edited and shopped the movie. They now rent an apartment in L.A.

"Aaron has had several agencies wanting to represent him as a director," Freixas says. "People here go crazy when they see the production quality. They can't fathom it was done for the price tag."

Garcia, meanwhile, was "very impressed. It is an achievement to make that movie for that price. It has a tremendous authenticity and a great organic nature. I'm going to turn them on to relationships I have in the industry and try to get the movie sold and all that stuff. Now it's just a matter of editing, of finding the most powerful film they have."

Jeff Peel, director of the Miami-Dade Office of Film & Entertainment, has not seen *Magic City* but applauds the effort.

"We have had a long history of films being shot here, but they're not about Miami. There are so

many great stories in this city. It's strange there haven't been more local-content feature films. While we graduate some great talents, they tend to leave for L.A. or New York to find that first job," Peel says. "Making movies that tell Miami stories is an important step in the maturation of Miami as a place where intellectual content gets produced."

Freixas and Salgado knew they didn't have to stray far from their Miami reality to tell a powerful story. And *Magic City* does end with a cautionary tale about the dangers of excess.

Before the credits roll, a list pops up of 11 friends the filmmakers and actors lost as a result of their fast living.

"When we were in high school, friends were dying left and right. Drugs, suicides, high-speed crashes. It was pretty crazy," Freixas says. "There were so many temptations. We're lucky we get to tell the tale."

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