

THE MEXICAN SUITECASE



A film by Trisha Ziff

Running Time: 86 Minutes

Language: English, Spanish and Catalane dialogue
with English and Spanish subtitles.

Official website: www.TheMexicanSuitcase.com

ABOUT THE FILM:

THE MEXICAN SUITECASE tells the story of three lost boxes that were recovered by the film's director, Trisha Ziff, from a closet in Mexico City in 2007. The boxes, misplaced in the chaos at the start of WWII, contained many of the

Spanish Civil War negatives by the legendary photographer, Robert Capa. These boxes have become known as the Mexican Suitcase.

Rumors had circulated for years of the survival of the negatives, which had disappeared from Capa's Paris studio at the start of the war. They held 126 rolls of film, not only by Capa, but also by Gerda Taro and David "Chim" Seymour, fellow photographers who were also acclaimed for their coverage Spanish Civil War.

Capa, Taro and Seymour were Jewish immigrants from Hungary, Germany and Poland respectively, and they had found a home in the culturally open Paris of the early 1930s. They often traveled together in Spain. Their combined work constitutes some of the most important visual documentation of that war. It's particularly poignant to note that Gerda Taro would die before her 27th birthday at the Battle of Brunette in Spain, killed when a Republican tank veered out of control. Her funeral brought thousands on to the streets of Paris.

Exactly how the negatives reached Mexico City is not definitively known. However, given Mexico's unique role in the war, and how it opened its doors unreservedly to the Republican exiles, it makes sense that the suitcase would find its way there.

Capa had left all his negatives in Paris to be safe-guarded by his friend and fellow photographer Imre "Csiki" Weiss (1911–2006), who was also a Hungarian, Jewish émigré. Before he was interned in a Moroccan prison camp, Weiss, managed to pass the boxes to someone who promised to get them to a Mexican consulate. Weiss survived and managed to make his way to Mexico, where he remained for the rest of his life. In an ironic twist of fate, Weiss lived just streets away from the home of General Aguilar, the former Mexican ambassador to Vichy, where the Mexican Suitcase was kept in safekeeping for almost seventy years. Cziki Weiss died without ever knowing what ever happened to the photographs.

THE MEXICAN SUITCASE looks at the Spanish Civil War images captured by these three extraordinary photographers and tells the narrative of the journey of these negatives. We learn how Mexico opened its doors to thousands of Spanish refugees, when the rest of the world turned its back. We see Spain today, where despite 70 years of silence and repression, people are beginning to ask their own questions, about the fate of their own family members. We meet generations of Spanish exiles in Mexico and discover their relationship today with Spain.

The Mexican Suitcase and its contents fit within a larger narrative of exile, loss memory and identity. The haunting music, by accomplished British composer Michael Nyman, takes us from Spain in the past to New York today with a complex score, with additional music from Mexico and Spain, enhancing the images. As Spain grapples with its own past today, our film asks: Who owns our

memories? Where do our memories live? Who has power over our narratives and how do we claim our stories back and make peace with our history?

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

In January 2007, I was visiting the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. Whenever I'm in New York I visit the curators there. I come from a curatorial background, and we've done several shows together and over the years they've become not just colleagues but friends. Brian Wallis, the chief curator, told me about the possible whereabouts of missing Spanish Civil War images by Robert Capa that were thought to exist in Mexico. Since I live in Mexico City he hoped I would be able to help retrieve them.

In 1995, Ben Tarver, a relative of General Aguilar, the Mexican Ambassador who had been given the negatives for safe keeping, and became the recipient of the "suitcase" after the death of the General and his wife, told the ICP about the photos. Yet, despite several attempts at contacting Ben Tarver, they had never managed to gain his confidence and secure their return. When I returned to Mexico City, after my trip to New York, I contacted Ben. I found him to be a quiet man, an American who had been living in Mexico City for many years. We met in the Spring of 2007 in a café and then later his home, where I saw the boxes for the first time. I knew immediately that this was an important discovery and that these were photographs taken by Robert Capa. It was an amazing moment when I unwound one of the rolls in the box and held the strip of negatives to the light. As Brian Wallis says in the film, "It doesn't get much better than that for a curator of twentieth century photography!" and he was right...

Later that year, I was able to return the 4,500 negatives to the ICP. By then we had learned that the photographs were taken by three photojournalists: Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and David "Chim" Seymour and we returned them to their respective estates in the United States. One third of the work was by Robert Capa, one of the most important photographers of the 20th century. The negatives were still in great condition. It was a major find and was reported on the front pages of newspapers around the world. As a result of my role in their retrieval, I was able to secure the rights to make THE MEXICAN SUITCASE.

The first time I saw the negatives I understood the story needed to be told. It is close to my own heart as well. My son is a first generation Mexican born to a Spanish exile. His father had been a baby when he left Spain at the beginning of the war. I realized the story was more complex than making a biopic about the lives of three photographers. What interested me was how we see and understand these images of the past. I was aware that in Spain, there has never been closure on this period of history. I was conscious on both a personal and broader level that, outside of Mexico, few people are aware of the role Mexico played in opening its doors to Republican refugees fleeing Franco. I knew I

wanted to make a film which intertwined these stories: that while telling the journey of the Mexican Suitcase, the film would go beyond the photographs and provide the audience with both a historical context and an insight into the more intimate human stories. These themes of identity, exile, loss and closure are universal and go far beyond the Spanish and Mexican experience.

I was impacted by how even today 70 years after the war how these haunting memories of repression, dictatorship impact life in contemporary Spain. How this exile to Mexico still defines the identity of young people – three generations later, and what 30 years of fascism has meant for Spanish people.

I find going to an exhibition, and looking at images for their aesthetic value or from a photographic perspective is only part of the narrative. I wanted to make a film which took these images out of their cultural domain and back into a place where they demanded answers from their audience. I wanted to make a film which was grounded in a real past, not only an aesthetic one, and addressed what I consider to be crucial questions... Who owns our histories? How do we look and understand our pasts? And why does it matter to us today?

The making of this film has coincided with turbulent times in Spain. We began working on it at a moment when, thirty years after the democratic transition, a progressive Spanish government finally felt secure enough to make “looking back” possible and legal. But this security proved false: when Judge Baltasar Garzón started a legal investigation of the Franco dictatorship, he was forced from office into political exile. As the film emerges into the light of day a year later, Spain has shifted to the right and the past is pushed aside as the day to day economic issues dominate. Truth is always the first casualty.

In the midst of all this, the film THE MEXICAN SUITCASE navigates these turbulent waters as it did 70 years ago; made by an outsider (I was born in England but am a naturalized Mexican citizen), about three consummate outsiders— Capa, Gerda and Chim, who were refugees and exiles. It is a film about a passionate commitment to a cause and a people that makes no pretense of neutrality.

-- Trisha Ziff, Mexico City

BIOGRAPHIES:

Director, Trisha Ziff is a curator of contemporary photography, filmmaker and Guggenheim scholar. Director of *Chevolution* (2008) Ziff produced documentary *Oaxacalifornia* (US/UK), co-producer of *My Mexican Shiva* (Mexico), and Executive Producer of *9months 9days* (Mexico). She has also worked in the North of Ireland, where she founded Camerawork Derry, a photography and film workshop in the 1980's. Trisha Ziff is currently in development on her next project, *Pirate Copy* a documentary about intellectual rights and global pirating.

As an author and curator, Trisha Ziff's work on the image of Che Guevara, *Che: Revolution and Commerce* has been published in Spanish, Italian, Turkish and English; the exhibition traveled in the US, Mexico, Spain, Holland, and the UK. Other major international exhibitions include: Mary Kelly's *Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, *Hidden Truths Bloody Sunday and Distant Relations*, a dialogue between Irish, Mexican and Chicano artists (1996). Her most recent exhibition, *101 Tragedies of Enrique Metinides* will open at the *Rencontres D'Arles* and then tour internationally with an APERTURE publication. Trisha Ziff lives in Mexico City with her 16 year old son Julio.

Michael Nyman, composes for opera, string quartet, concertos and on occasion sound tracks. He is also a performer, conductor, bandleader and pianist, author and musicologist. More recently he has focused his energies as a photographer and film-maker, completing a major work based on the Vertov silent film, "Nyman with a movie camera." Nyman lives between London and more recently Mexico City, which is increasingly "home" for him.

Nyman's most notable scores number a dozen Peter Greenaway films, including such classics as *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*; Neil Jordan's *The End Of The Affair*; several Michael Winterbottom features including *Wonderland* and *A Cock And Bull Story*; the Hollywood blockbuster *Gattaca* - and, of course, his unforgettable music for Jane Campion's 1993 film, *The Piano*, the soundtrack album of which has sold more than three million copies. He also co-wrote the score for the 1999 film *Ravenous* with his friend and sometime protégé, Damon Albarn. More recently his music was used in the 2009 BAFTA award winning and Oscar nominated film, *Man on Wire*.

This is Nyman's second collaboration with director Trisha Ziff, having worked together in Mexico City in 2004 on the exhibition *The Ballard of Kastriot Rexhepi*, where Nyman collaborated with artist Mary Kelly and Trisha Ziff curated the show. Since completing the score for the *Mexican Suitcase*, Trisha Ziff is working with Nyman once again, as curator of an exhibition of his work, *CINE OPERA* which opens in August 2011 in Mexico City which include film and photographs and will then tour in the US and Europe.

PRODUCTION COMPANIES:

THE MEXICAN SUITCASE is made by 212BERLIN in co-production with Mallerich Films, Barcelona Spain. 212 BERLIN in Mexico City, founded by Trisha Ziff in is dedicated to Mexico City film production and exhibition production company residency and exhibition and project space. Dedicated to producing projects related to image. 212 BERLIN is run by Trisha Ziff and Lucia Durano.

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CREDITS:

Director	Trisha Ziff
Producers	Eamon O’Farrill Trisha Ziff Paco Poch
Co-Producers	Victor Cavaller Andrés Luque Michael Nyman
Associate Producers	Benjamin Traver Marco Polo Constandse Avelino Rodríguez
Writer	Trisha Ziff
Editors	Luis Lopez Paloma Carillo Bernat Aragones
Composers	Michael Nyman Gerard Pastor
Director of Photography	Claudio Rocha
Graphics	Eramos Tantos
Sound Recordist	Yuri Lguna (Americas)