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Studios zooming in on Latino moviegoers

By Anthony Breznican, USA TODAY

Mexican actress Kate del Castillo didn't get recognized much by the tony denizens of Beverly Hills during her visit to promote her film *Under the Same Moon*, but she made the maids, doormen and other blue-collar workers breathless with excitement everywhere she went.

Del Castillo has an intense following, but only among those who watch Spanish-language TV and movies.

REVIEW: ['Under the Same Moon' tells a powerful tale](#)

"It is something I really appreciate from people," Del Castillo says. "I've heard their stories thousands of times. Every time I go somewhere, anywhere ... lunch, they're all Latinos. The service people, the valet parking, all these people who work really hard ... they all know me! I'm delighted to hear their stories."

She is now the one telling the story, and she's hoping it resonates with a broader audience.

"It's a very good feeling knowing America is opening its arms to embrace this kind of movie," she says.

Under the Same Moon, opening today in select cities, is a heartwarmer comedy-drama about a Mexican boy (Adrian Alonso) who sets off alone to cross the border into the USA after his grandmother dies. He wants to find his mother (Del Castillo), an undocumented immigrant who works as a maid and seamstress to support the family she longs to return to. *Ugly Betty's* America Ferrera has a small role as an inept American smuggler.

Though *Under the Same Moon* is mainly in Spanish, distributors Fox Searchlight and The Weinstein Co. hope it will become one of the rare foreign-language films that also strikes a nerve with the broader English-language audiences, as did Italy's *Cinema Paradiso*, China's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or France's *Amelie*.

Hispanics are the USA's fastest-rising demographic of ticket buyers, a study by the Motion Picture Association of America shows. On average they saw 11 movies last year, up from eight in 2006. The typical moviegoer saw eight last year.

Much is made in the political debate over the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the USA, but the total Hispanic population, including American citizens, is close to 42 million. That number is projected by the Pew Research Center to triple by 2050.

So studios are eager to appeal to this audience.

"These smaller films like *Under the Same Moon* are tapping into a market that has been really untapped at this point, and I think it's ready to explode," says Jeff Bock, analyst for Exhibitor Relations Co.

But he notes that though the MPA study cited Hispanics as frequent moviegoers, that doesn't mean every Spanish-language film will be a hit. "They're going to see the big films that everybody is going to see," he says.

Kellvin Chavez, chief executive officer of movie site LatinoReview.com, says Hispanic moviegoers want escapism, not realism, and immigration tales don't appeal to people who are second- or third-generation Americans.

"Maybe immigrants can relate to it, but me personally, I can't. I was born and raised in New York City. I'm not Mexican. I'm Ecuadorian, but I don't go to Ecuador," Chavez says. "It might relate to my dad."

But *Under the Same Moon* was picked up at the 2007 Sundance Festival precisely because it has potential broad appeal, says Nancy Utley of Fox Searchlight.

The film is not just a saga of struggling workers, she notes, but also a drama about a family reuniting and, at times, a buddy comedy between the boy and a fellow illegal immigrant (Eugenio Derbez).

"We're trying to make this successful with both the Hispanic audience and the art-house audience," she says. "What I'm hoping is the Hispanic audience turns out in a big way. ... I'm also hopeful we get good reviews, and an audience that may not think they want to see a Spanish-language film will take note."

Under the Same Moon opens on about 200 screens. It'll be seen in Los Angeles, New York and Florida and Texas, where there are large Spanish-speaking populations.

When the immigration drama *Crossing Over* opens Aug. 22, The Weinstein Co. is considering a similar strategy: heavy advertising in Spanish-language newspapers and TV broadcasts. Brazilian actress Alice Braga (*I Am Legend*) will become as important a selling point as co-star Harrison Ford, who plays an Immigrations and Customs agent.

With the "Three Amigo" Mexican directors — Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*), Alfonso Cuarón (*Children of Men*) and Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Babel*) — "at the forefront of cinema," according to Exhibitor Relation's Bock, audiences can expect the Hispanic influence on movies to continue.

"Studios watch these trends very closely," he says. "If they can build on an audience, that's what it's all about. Building, building, building."

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