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“Being an actor means a life of perpetual motion”

Lausanne-born actor Carlos Leal gives an outstanding performance in Michael Steiner's new film “Sennentuntschi”. Inquisitive and insatiable, the former rapper has moved to Los Angeles to pursue his dreams. A trans-Atlantic telephone interview with a rising star. By Alain Wey

“Approach life and new experiences with the curiosity of a child and try to seek out new things every day” – this is the philosophy that Carlos Leal has put into practice with considerable panache. The Lausanne-born actor is living proof that a career switch can be successful. The former vocalist of hip-hop group Sens Unik entered the acting profession around ten years ago. In 2006, he was awarded the Swiss Film Prize for his performance in “Snow White” and he played the casino manager in the James Bond movie “Casino Royale”. Picking up roles in both international feature films and TV series (in France and Spain), Leal got his career off the ground firstly by spending seven years in Paris and then three in Madrid. His desire to progress in his career logically took him to Los Angeles, where he moved to in October 2010. This imposing character, the son of Spanish immigrants, is currently on the billboard poster for “Sennentuntschi”, the new hard-hitting film from Zurich director Michael Steiner. Leal speaks to us in a telephone interview from his home in Melrose, Los Angeles.

SWISS REVIEW: *What was the crucial factor in your decision to leave for L.A.?*

CARLOS LEAL: As an actor, when you start to take an interest in acting methods, you realise that books on acting are often written by the leading American coaches. It's a little bit like going to New York for hip-hop; for acting you go to Los Angeles. It's a city with no end of workshops, courses, classes and schools. You meet some very good actors who are not necessarily well known. You only have to take an acting course to come across an excellent director and a group of talented actors. It's only natural to want to develop. There came a moment

when I said to myself that I needed to take a bigger step forward. This meant crossing the ocean and continent to find out what was going on here for no other reason than the firm desire to progress career-wise and develop my acting technique. But I move around a lot. If tomorrow I had a project elsewhere, I'd go. The acting profession is like that. You move somewhere but always know that everything is in perpetual motion.

What films have you made this summer?

In Switzerland, I was in “Jasper, le voyage immobile” (Jasper, the Motionless Journey) by Julien Nicaud, the first feature film from this promising young director. In Spain, I had a part in “La Rosa de nadie” (Nobody's Rose) by Ignacio Oliva. I was also in a film in India, “Escape From Tibet”, by Maria Blumencron, which had an international production team and cast, including the talented German actress Hannah Herzsprung.

What role does your wife, the actress Jo Kelly, play in your life?

An extremely important one. With such a busy life and the travelling involved in my movie work, I really need to have a stable home. Being with my wife (who's half Belgian, half Irish) and my son is extremely important for my emotional stability. She has always supported me in my career and has an excellent understanding of the acting process and how to approach a role. She has knowledge of various techniques, studies a lot and gives acting classes. When I prepare for a role, she often helps me to understand the different facets of the character. As an actress, she recently featured in “I Want To Be A Soldier” with Danny Glover.

What inspired you to become an actor?

When I was still singing with Sens Unik, Gianni Schneider, a director from Lausanne, offered me a part in a theatre production, an adaptation of a book by Pedro Almodóvar, “Patty Diphusa, y otros textos” (Patty Diphusa and Other Writings), where I had to play a pimp. It gave me a freedom that I no longer had in rap. I was constantly labelled a rapper. I enjoyed the experience and gradually became interested in the art of acting. I then went to Paris where I did an intensive workshop at the Jack Garfein studio.

And what about theatre?

I think I'd like to work on stage later in life when I'm properly settled somewhere and have stopped moving around. I think I'd really enjoy acting in plays with good actors and being able to perform the same piece over a long period of time in the same place.

Which actors do you admire?

I really admire some of the new generation of actors: Ryan Gosling (“Fracture” with Anthony Hopkins) and James McAvoy (“The Last King of Scotland”, “Wanted”). They are prime examples of freedom in acting. Then, of course, there's the older generation with Dustin Hoffman and Kevin Spacey and, among the women, Meryl Streep, who has surpassed everyone.

What was the response to “Sennentuntschi” like?

It's a box-office success in Switzerland and was number 1 in the movie chart for two weeks ahead of the American blockbusters. It's extraordinary. I take my hat off to Michael Steiner. I'm proud to have been part of this adventure, which was difficult to complete owing to financial problems. After a long struggle, Michael Steiner has succeeded in producing a highly entertaining feature film that has also sparked considerable debate.

Your character is – again – full of contradictions...

These are the most interesting roles. Even if a character has less depth, I try to add a dimension, provided of course it's in keeping with the script. In “Sennentuntschi”, Martin Delacroix is a character with two sides, and to make him as credible as possible you can't give everything away right at the start of the film. Then, when his other



Carlos Leal: a Swiss actor of international stature.

side is revealed, you have to go all out. It's a job I really enjoy. I often play characters who seem inconspicuous and quite unassuming and then all of a sudden they explode into life halfway or three quarters of the way through the movie.

What kind of director is Michael Steiner?

He's very smart and passionate. He likes to use real Swiss stories and turn them into thrillers. He makes them highly entertaining and quite out of the ordinary.

Have you met any other Swiss people in L.A.?

Of course. There's quite a sizeable Swiss community, and the people at the consulate work really hard to promote Swiss film-making and organise theme nights with different Swiss actors. This gives me the opportunity to meet other Swiss people living and working here in various fields.

Your philosophy on life?

There's a song by Jacques Brel called "Rester debout" ("Serait-il impossible de vivre debout?") – Keep your dignity (Is it impossible to live with dignity?). In my life, I'd like to do that for as long as possible. In other words, to always push myself to constantly improve and raise my performance. In that sense, coming from quite a modest background and a small town (Renens) is a real driving force. You feel that you have to do justice to the people there.

Did you get this drive from your parents?

Yes, of course. In the 1960s, they showed great courage. They were a Spanish family who fled from the Franco dictatorship and left everything behind to discover a new world. My parents have a great work ethic and they've passed on to me this drive and determination with regard to work.

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SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- “Love Express”, by Elena Hazanov, 2003
- “Snow White”, by Samir, 2005
- “Casino Royale”, by Martin Campbell, 2006
- “Tarragona”, by Peter Keglevic, 2006
- “Dirty Money – L'infiltré”, by Dominique Othenin-Girard
- “Verso”, by Xavier Ruiz, 2008
- “Carré Blanc”, by Jean Baptiste Leonetti, 2008
- “Los Abrazos rotos”, by Pedro Almodóvar, 2008
- “El Mal Ajeno”, by Oskar Santos, 2008
- “There be dragons”, by Roland Joffé, 2009
- “The Way”, by Emilio Estevez, 2009
- “Sennentuntschi”, by Michael Steiner, 2010