

Screenplay

The Battle of the Fishermen

1- Introduction

I will write a screenplay for a 30-minute film about the struggle of the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico, who mobilized over many years to get the U.S. Navy out of their island. The screenplay will cover events that took place between the 1930s and the 1970s.

For over 60 years, the U.S. Navy used Vieques as a bombing range and a site to practice amphibious landings. This caused enormous suffering to the local population, who lived with the sound of bombs day and night. Additionally, the place is still heavily contaminated with uranium, mercury, and other heavy metals from the ammunition and explosives, and unexploded ordnance can still be found around the island. A great majority of families have at least one member who is sick with cancer or who has died as a result of that illness, and most doctors point to the contamination of the soil, water, and air as the cause.

In order to write the screenplay, I will be using the first-hand testimonies of many social leaders and other residents of Vieques. The anti-Navy movement that developed over the years in Vieques was very broad, encompassing women's organizations, labor unions, religious leaders, and many others, but this script will be focused on the struggle carried out by Vieques's fishermen, who went out into the high seas with their small boats to confront the powerful U.S. and NATO warships in order to stop their military maneuvers.

I have access to these first-hand testimonies because for a year and half I have been transcribing interviews that were conducted in 2004, 2018, and 2019 with many of these social leaders in Vieques. The screenplay will be based on this real life story and will follow the sequence of events. Only the names of the characters will be changed.

Also, I will use as a reference the books that I list below. Two of them talk about how to write a screenplay and the other one is the first-hand testimony of one of the main leaders of the struggle in Vieques, the former head of the Fishermen's Union, Carlos Zenón. In the screenplay, the main character, Carlos Padrón, will be faithfully based on the life of Carlos Zenón.

Aguyé, Ramón. *Cómo se escribe un guion. Doce guiones de cortometraje*. Punto Rojo Libros, 2016.

McKee, Robert. *El guion: Sustancia, estructura, estilo y principios de la escritura de guiones*. Alba Editorial, 2011.

Zenón, Carlos (Taso). *Memorias de un pueblo pobre en lucha*. Editorial El Antillano, 2018.

I will follow the advice of Ramón Aguyé in *Cómo se escribe un guion*. Aguyé argues that the initial effort in writing a screenplay must be focused on creating a basic narrative structure. Once I have that basic narrative structure, I will be better prepared to develop the story. Writing a screenplay is an ongoing process in which each sentence rests on the previous one. The story, thus, grows on a solid foundation as we learn about our own creation (Aguyé, 2016).

As Robert McKee says in his seminal work about screenwriting, words are not the story's raw material. Words are the means, the tools through which we represent what

we have imagined and felt. The substance of a story is the gap that is opened between what a person expects when she or he does something, and what actually happens (McKee, 2011).

The narrative structure is the paradigm, the necessary foundation upon which the script is built. The same can be said about the characters, because it is not possible to create a good story without good characters (Aguyé, 2016).

2- Characters

Carlos Padrón

(Main character, based on the life of Vieques fishermen's leader Carlos Zenón. All situations and dialogues are based on Zenón's first-hand testimony).

Carlos Padrón is the leader of Vieques's Fishermen's Union. He is fearless, and describes himself as "tough," as a result of the difficult life that he has had. He was raised by a single mother, and when he was six years old, they were evicted from the place where they were living because the U.S. Navy wanted to take over that land to use it for military purposes. Padrón grew up watching U.S. sailors abuse the local population, particularly the women, who were often the victims of sexual assault. When he was young, Padrón got into a fight with a group of U.S. sailors who were raping a woman. He succeeded in stopping this crime, but he was badly wounded and ended up with many broken bones (Interview with Carlos Zenón, 2018).

Padrón was only able to finish sixth grade because he had to start working in order to help his mother. He does not have much of a formal education, but he is street smart, and he has educated himself, achieving a high level of social and political

consciousness. He loves Vieques and its people very deeply, and has dedicated his life to the struggle.

As the leader of the Fishermen's Union, Padrón is one of the main political leaders of the struggle to oust the U.S. Navy from Vieques. He leads by example. He lives in a very humble home and is incorruptible. The powers that be have tried to break the union on several occasions by offering bribes and by infiltrating informants. Padrón has outsmarted all of his opponents and has come out victorious, consolidating his leadership and his credibility among the fishermen and, most importantly, among the whole population of Vieques. Other people who participate in the struggle express their disagreements with Padrón's tactics, but nobody can accuse him of having betrayed his people.

Padrón's example shows us that true leaders that arise from the most dispossessed sectors of the population can become role models for future generations. Not all leaders are doomed to become corrupt bureaucrats, and not all struggles are doomed to be derailed. Padrón shows us that being consistent and staying focused can lead to real change for the better.

Nidia Colón

(Based on the life of Aleida Encarnación, Carlos Zenón's wife. All situations and dialogues are based on Encarnación's and Zenón's first-hand testimonies).

Nidia Colón is not only Carlos Padrón's wife. She is involved wholeheartedly in the struggle and Padrón considers that she is his rock. He has said that he would not have lasted "one round in this long and difficult fight" if it had not been for the support of his life companion, Nidia Colón (Zenón, 2018). Both Padrón and Colón came from very humble origins and are very conscious about the fact that the powerful families that rule Puerto Rico support the Navy's presence. Therefore, Colón maintains that the struggle of Vieques is also "a class struggle" (Zenón, 2018). Colón is the pillar of the family and one of the pillars of the movement that seeks to oust the U.S. Navy. She and Padrón have three sons, who are also fishermen and are involved in the struggle.

Tito Monzón

(Based on the life of Vieques fisherman Lino Lanzó, who has passed away. All situations and dialogues are based on Zenón's first-hand testimony).

Tito Monzón is also a fisherman, but he is much older. Other fishermen consider him kind of a loner, because he likes to fish by himself. He is not very talkative, he is very reserved. But he is also very wise and has accumulated lots of knowledge about how things work in Vieques and in Puerto Rico. He knows exactly how the power dynamics favor the presence of the U.S. Navy. In fact, he is the ideologue who designs the fishermen's strategy of direct action geared towards ousting the U.S. military from the island. But he only talks to Padrón and nobody else. Padrón knows that he has to maintain Tito's identity secret in order to guarantee his safety. Otherwise, the powerful would try to eliminate the wise old man (Interview with Carlos Zenón, 2018).

3- Synopsis

Carlos Padrón grows up in abject poverty in Vieques, Puerto Rico, where he sees the U.S. Navy evicting his family and most of his neighbors from their homes, in order to turn most of the island into a bombing range and a place of practice for amphibious landings. Besides living with the sound of bombs day and night, he also sees how U.S. sailors abuse the local population, especially the women. This objective situation of poverty and abuse begins to raise his social and political consciousness and eventually leads him to become the leader of his fellow workers, Vieques's fishermen. His sheer force of will and determination, along with the steadfast support of his wife, family, and co-workers allows him to achieve significant victories against the seemingly all powerful Goliath that he and his people are confronting.

4- Screenplay for 30-minute film "The Battle of the Fishermen"

a. Initial situation: The U.S. Navy arrives in Vieques in 1941

The U.S. Navy landed on Vieques in 1941. For the next six years, it took over two-thirds of this 55-square mile island south of the main island of Puerto Rico, evicted thousands of people from their land, and forced them to consolidate in the central part of Vieques. One of the evicted families was that of Carlos Padrón, who was 6 years old at the time. He saw the military bulldozers razing the precarious shacks in which many of Vieques's residents lived. They were the poorest of the poor in this territory that the United States still runs as a colony in the 21st Century. They were the descendants of enslaved Africans who for centuries had cut sugar cane, so that the wealthy could sweeten their coffee and tea. When he saw the bulldozers, little Carlos remembered what his mother

had told him not long before that: "Fear is a burden, and if you choose to carry that burden, you are a fool." He had learned that lesson when one day they had nothing to eat and his mother took him to catch some crabs. He was in charge of the bag in which they had put the crabs that they had caught, but one of the crabs bit him, he dropped the bag, and all the crabs escaped. Once again, they had nothing to eat. That is when his mother taught him to be fearless, and he has never forgotten that lesson.

This was a time when many families in Vieques had more than one reason to be fearful. After being evicted, some of their children had been sexually abused by drunken U.S. sailors, and the families decided to go into a second exile in towns like Naguabo and Fajardo on the main island of Puerto Rico, to safeguard their children and to try to forget the pain.

Carlos and his young friends were learning their life lessons very quickly, but they were still children; some were already 12 and 13 years old. For them, the firing range where the U.S. Navy conducted military exercises using machine-guns, mortars, and grenades, was like a playground. They would look for empty shells and play around unexploded ordnance. One day the playground turned deadly. The group of children had split up in order to make the search for empty shells more fruitful. All of a sudden, they could not find one of Carlos's dearest childhood friends, Chuíto. A few seconds later, they heard a very loud explosion. They became desperate. They ran looking for Chuíto. They began finding some of the other children, bleeding, hurt by shrapnel.

Carlos reached the tall grass and saw that there was a body. It was Chuíto, but his body was headless. In his desperation, Carlos picked him up as if he could still save him. A Navy patrol reached the place, they called in helicopters, and took the wounded children

to the hospital at the Roosevelt Roads military base on the main island of Puerto Rico. All the wounded children survived, but Chuíto was already gone. Despite the pain, Carlos learned new lessons that day. Not all U.S. sailors were bad, he saw how desperate they were to try to save their lives. Later on in his life, he would reason that many working class families in the U.S. send their children to the military because they don't have many other opportunities. Most sailors came from very decent working families, and the people of Vieques needed to educate them so that they could see the damage that their leadership was doing on the island.

b. The U.S. Navy drops bombs on Vieques and some sailors abuse the local population

The damage that the U.S. Navy was doing was more evident as time went by. For several years, until the 1970s, the U.S. Navy conducted its military exercises in Vieques during part of the year. During the rest of the year, many sailors would go to the local bars, they would get drunk, and then harass and abuse the women. Young men from Vieques would confront the sailors and get into fist fights with them. One of those young men was Carlos Padrón, who almost lost his life one day, after getting into a fight with a group of sailors who were raping a woman. He ended up in the hospital with many broken bones, including both of his arms.

One night, the U.S. soldiers attacked the owner of one of the bars, an older man who was trying to defend one of the women who was being harassed. The Marines beat him so badly that they broke most of the bones in his body, and killed him.

To add insult to injury, news started spreading in Vieques that the U.S. Navy would close all access to the island's surrounding waters for one month in order to conduct military exercises with NATO forces. Only the passengers' ferry would be allowed to operate (Zenón, 2018). The population of Vieques would be trapped on the island, with bombs falling all over the place and U.S. and NATO troops practicing amphibious invasions. The fishermen would not be able to go out into the sea. They would lose their jobs and their livelihood for a month, and could not support their families. When this happened, Padrón was already the leader of the fishermen's union. Padrón learned another lesson, this time from his wife, Nidia Colón. He asked her how could the Governor of Puerto Rico allow this to happen. Her answer: "The powerful families that rule Puerto Rico don't give a damn about us. All they care about is the millions of dollars that the federal government will give them to allow this to happen, which means that our struggle, the struggle of Vieques, is also a class struggle."

c. Trigger: The fishermen organize

One by one, the fishermen began arriving at the Association headed by Padrón and asked: "Padrón, what are we going to do? How are we going to support our families without being able to fish for a month?" One of the fishermen suggested trying to talk directly with U.S. Admiral William Gallagher, head of the Roosevelt Roads U.S. Naval Station on the main island of Puerto Rico. Padrón went to see the mayor of Vieques to ask if he could help arrange a meeting. The mayor said yes, and the two men then departed for the U.S. Naval base. Admiral Gallagher was not ready for a conversation: "What is it you want? There's nothing to talk about. These are very costly exercises.

The Atlantic NATO fleet is going to participate in Operation Springboard, and I don't want any of you people around for the duration" (Zenón, 2018). Padrón tried to explain that he and his colleagues depended on fishing for their livelihood. Gallagher cut him short: "There's a Food Stamps office in Vieques. Go stand in line" (Zenón, 2018).

d. Turning point: The fishermen stop U.S.-NATO military exercises

When Padrón arrived back in Vieques, word had spread about how the U.S. Admiral had treated him. The fishermen had gathered at the Association, and all Padrón had to say was: "We need to fight." Different plans and proposals were presented. When Padrón was about to go home to have some dinner, Tito Monzón, the oldest of the group, asked him if they could talk in private. Padrón told him that he was very tired and that he better had something important to say. Monzón then proposed going to his house. Padrón agreed. When they arrived at Monzón's house, the older fisherman asked his wife to prepare some fried fish, *arepas* (corn cakes), and coffee, and both he and Padrón went to the balcony. Padrón grew impatient because Monzón was not getting to the point. Finally, Monzón began to explain in detail how they could stop the U.S. and NATO ships. "Damn, Monzón, this plan is brilliant!", exclaimed Padrón.

In the very early hours of February 6, 1978, before dawn, the fishermen departed with their boats towards the bay where the U.S. Navy and its NATO allies would practice an amphibious landing. The decision had been made that they could not stop the other component of the military exercises at the same time, the aerial bombing that would take place elsewhere in Vieques. As the U.S. and NATO ships approached the bay, they encountered a familiar sight, the fishermen's buoys, which signaled the location of

their nets. Since for many years the U.S. Navy had assumed almost as a sport the destruction of the fishermen's nets, the ships continued on their path. Little did the naval commanders know that this time the nets were tied with chains and their depth was no more than ten feet. As the first warship approached, the chains got entangled in the propellers and the engine's turbines were out of commission almost immediately. A second warship tried it, with the same result. Finally, a U.S. Coast Guard cutter headed towards a single boat that was in the middle of the action. It was Tito Monzón's boat, and the Coast Guard cutter was racing towards him. The other fishermen went into a panic, thinking that Tito would be killed. They started sailing toward Tito as well, and some took out their slingshots in order to throw rocks at the Navy ship, when they saw the U.S. Coast Guard cutter going into reverse and creating huge waves. Tito could not be bothered. He just kept trying to fix some of the traps they had set for the warships. The fishermen's operation was a total success. They had stopped the powerful U.S. Navy and its NATO allies from carrying out an amphibious landing in Vieques, and had made them lose millions of dollars, because the U.S. rented Vieques to its allies so they could conduct their military exercises. In this battle, David had defeated Goliath.

Conclusion

Clearly, the history of the Vieques struggle spans decades, and could be represented both in a feature-length film lasting more than two hours, and in a series composed of several episodes. I have chosen to write this screenplay for a 30-minute film that can stand alone or as part of what might become a feature-length film or a series composed of a number of episodes that go into the details of what happened in Vieques for over

60 years and beyond. I believe that this initial screenplay will be of interest to film studios and production companies that could provide funding for an expanded version of the story.