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At S.F. DocFest, ‘Keeper of the Fire’ celebrates a writer and his vision of the Mission

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Alejandro Murguía recites an anti-gentrification poem at a rally in the rotunda of San Francisco City Hall in “Keeper of the Fire,” showing at the San Francisco Documentary Festival.

Photo: “Keeper of the Fire”

The recently reopened Roxie Theater plays host to a Mission District legend, former San Francisco Poet Laureate Alejandro Murguía, when “Keeper of the Fire” screens Saturday, June 5, as part of the 20th San Francisco Documentary Festival — the city’s annual showcase of documentary cinema running June 3-20.

Still a work in progress, the cut of the film that is slated to screen at the Mission District theater is only 33 minutes long. But that sparse run time is packed with details of the writer and activist’s life, while also depicting the Mission District as a cultural flash point, delving into current pressures on the neighborhood, and touching on recent Latin American history and the Chicano movement.

Murguía’s life ties these elements together. He is a co-founder of San Francisco’s Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts and served as its first director. He is a political force, involved with the movement against gentrification in the Mission. In the 1970s, he was a soldier fighting alongside the Sandinistas in Nicaragua against the forces of dictator Anastasio Somoza. Murguía is a professor of Latino/Latina studies at San Francisco State University. He is a writer of fiction and nonfiction prose as well as a poet, and he mentors younger writers.

“It’s a film about Alejandro, but it’s also a film about poetry, about activism, about identity,” said Raymond Telles, who produced “Keeper of the Fire” with David L. Brown and Louis Dematteis. “It’s not a straightforward documentary in terms of the story line,” Dematteis added. “What we tried to do is develop montages to go with Alejandro’s poetry and his prose, and not be literal about what we are seeing.”

It was Murguía’s appointment as San Francisco’s sixth poet laureate in 2012, the first Latino to hold the post, that planted the seed for “Keeper of the Fire.”



“Keeper of the Fire” came about with the energies of director of photography Vicente Franco (left), producer/director David Brown, producer Ray Telles and producer/director Lou Dematteis.

Photo: Erik Phillip / “Keeper of the Fire”

Brown, an Emmy-winning documentarian, and Dematteis, a photojournalist turned filmmaker who was then co-producing “The Other Barrio,” a 2015 neo-noir adaptation of a Murguía short story, attended the poet laureate’s inauguration at the time. It was Brown who approached Dematteis with the idea of co-directing a documentary.

“I knew Alejandro socially; we’d had some great times together, but I didn’t really appreciate his skill and artistry as a poet, writer and activist,” Brown said. “I was just really impressed by his community, and the power and passion of that community.”

Telles, a documentary filmmaker and adjunct professor at UC Berkeley, was the last to join the project, but the first to know Murguía. They met in 1973, shortly after Murguía decamped from Los Angeles to the Mission.

“I had stayed in touch, so I was thrilled to be asked to join the team. I knew the work and admired it,” Telles said.

For the subject of “Keeper of the Fire,” being part of the film meant taking a deep dive into his past, not just his writing or activism but going all the way back to his childhood. Murguía was born in the United States and raised in Mexico until he was 6 before the family settled in Southern California. One striking image in the documentary shows Murguía, now 71, as a toddler dressed in an ornate cowboy outfit atop a stuffed horse. The writer’s work is personal and some of it is nonfiction, but this film explores corners that he had kept to himself.

“It’s interesting, because I tend to be kind of a private person,” Murguía told *The Chronicle*. “A lot of what is revealed in the documentary, for example, the death of my mom, are things that really just my immediate family knows about me.”

It was Murguía’s writing that framed the filmmakers’ approach to their subject during interviews. At first, they concentrated on his poetry, but they soon moved on to his short stories and other writings, discovering a mix of fiction and factual nuggets that suggested their way forward.

“Alejandro didn’t really tell us a lot of things,” Dematteis said. “It was the fact that we did the research that allowed us to come up with questions to ask him, and by asking him the questions he gave us fantastic insights into his work and into his view of society and his view of identity as a Chicano Latino writer.”

For Murguía, what delights him about “Keeper of the Fire,” more than his own story, is the way the film celebrates the Latino culture of the Mission District, from the 1970s until now, as he and others push back against displacement and gentrification.

“We made it that vibrant neighborhood that it is now,” he said. “And by extension spread that vibrant art around San Francisco. That’s why you see murals now all over the city. That’s why you have cultural centers all over the city, a lot of the impetus coming from the Mission District.”



Alejandro Murguía (left) stands with Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal (center) and San Francisco poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco in 2015.

Photo: Lou Dematteis / “Keeper of the Fire”