

Film

The Cat Purrs

A new documentary tells the tale of a tango queen

BY FRANK HOUSTON

Near the end of *La Gata*, a documentary about Argentine tango goddess María Angelica Milán, director Julienne Gage and her cameraman, Gustavo Acosta, almost off-handedly capture the perfect image of their subject. Milán, who is 79 years old, is seated next to another woman maybe five or ten years her senior. While the elder woman clutches a Styrofoam cup and gazes around benevolently, Milán is busy peering into a compact and applying lipstick.

She hardly needs it. The ageless Milán's long blond hair cascades over her shoulders, and her makeup and false eyelashes are meticulously applied. But what really makes the octogenarian singer so damn sexy is her attitude, her poise, her perspective — her soul.

As the hour-long Spanish-language doc's subtitle (*The Nine Lives of a Singer Called "The Cat"*) somewhat laboriously puts it, Miami resident Milán, The Cat, really has had multiple lives. (Not nine, but seven by her count.) At age 22, she was kicked out

La Gata, few ultimately register. An exception is Graciela "Chela" Nordenflycht, a Chilean *empresaria* who perfectly summarizes The Cat's enduring magnetism: "She's a crazy young thing when it's convenient for her, and when it's convenient to her, she has the authority of being 78 years old [sic], and she tells everyone to shut up, or she taunts, she touches them, and — yeah, that too. She seduces them."

Some great period photography is woven into the mix, but the movie suffers — through no fault of its own — from a lack of corresponding period footage. To see this amazing woman perform today makes one hunger for a glimpse of her stage presence in her heyday.

When Gage asks Milán about how, after a singing career spanning four dec-



ades and almost as many continents, she came to be a cleaning lady, her face contorts and mascara-trailing tears stream down her cheeks. "You're sticking a knife in my heart," she answers. "I don't want to talk about ugly things.... Our beloved America is paved with tears." She has been humbled by the experience, and

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of the Buenos Aires convent where she'd been raised. Armed with little more than her charm, looks, and a third-grade education, she went on to sing professionally in Chile, Spain, Paris (to a rarefied audience that included Brigitte Bardot), Mexico, New Orleans, and New York before coming to Miami in 1987.

Here, in the Magic City, La Gata's life turned less than magical. Enticed by a gig at a club that never opened, Milán ended up cleaning homes for seventeen years. In 2004 she was offered a regular slot at Café One Ninety, but the place closed a year later. "My life is like a tango," Milán says in the film. "Sometimes tragic, always passionate."

Gage's primary strength as a filmmaker seems to be her interviewing skills — she is a journalist and occasional *New Times* contributor making her first foray into film. She unobtrusively (only one or two of her questions are heard in *La Gata*) has teased out enough of Milán's life story that much of the documentary is narrated by its subject.

Of the many commentators on the life of

rightly notes that there are many who would be better — kinder — if they experienced such a fall themselves.

But the somber mood doesn't last long before the star's irrepressible mettle re-emerges and she observes, "They still check me out on the streets. That means I am still in good shape."

Contemporary scenes of Milán flirting with audiences from the makeshift stage of the tiny Café One Ninety convey an intimacy, an informal warmth, that has almost vanished from modern performance. Her buoyant spirit and booming voice are infec-

tious, especially when she sprawls on a chaise lounge to belt out a tune — lit cigarette in one hand, glass of wine in the other. Theatrics are obviously important to her act, with its lusty vibrato and dramatic gestures, but you never once doubt The Cat's sincerity. She has lived every one of those seven lives — and then some.

La Gata: The Nine Lives of a Singer Called "The Cat"
Produced and directed by Julienne Gage. Starring María Angelica Milán. Playing at 8:00 p.m. Friday, December 15, at Miami Beach Cinematheque, 512 Española Way, Miami Beach. Admission is free. Call 305-673-4567 or click www.lagatadocumentary.com for more information.

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