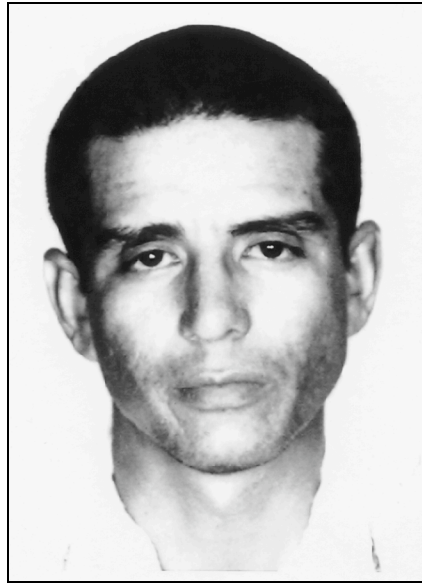


WRIT WRITER

a film by Susanne Mason

National PBS television broadcast on Independent Lens: Tuesday, June 3, 2008



Produced and Directed by Susanne Mason

Running Time: 54 Minutes

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WRIT WRITER is a co-production of Passage Productions and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with Latino Public Broadcasting, with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)

www.writwritermovie.com

WRIT WRITER

Synopsis

The year is 1960. A young man in San Antonio, Texas is arrested for robbery. He pleads not-guilty, but is convicted and sent to a racially-segregated state prison farm to pick cotton in 1961. He wants to appeal his conviction, but can't afford a lawyer. With his eighth grade education he reads every law book he can in prison and files his appeal *pro se*. Prison life is brutal—corporal punishments frequently cruel—and he believes it's wrong. So he writes a lawsuit against the prison director, and the walls of solitary confinement close in on him.

WRIT WRITER tells the story of jailhouse lawyer Fred Arispe Cruz (b.1939—d.1986) and the legal battle he waged to secure what he believed to be the constitutional rights of Texas prisoners. Told by wardens, prisoners, and ex-convicts who knew Cruz, the film evokes from contemporary and archival film and documentation the fascinating transformation of a prisoner and a prison system haunted by their pasts.

About the film

WRIT WRITER tells the story of a self-taught jailhouse lawyer named Fred Arispe Cruz who challenged the constitutionality of prison conditions in Texas in the 1960s, and launched the state's prisoners' rights movement. By most measures Cruz was an ordinary criminal. But his extraordinary battle to expose in court the officially sanctioned brutality that led to inmate deaths, and the unconstitutional rules that blocked Texas prisoners from legal representation in the 1950s and 60s effectively paved the legal path to state prison reform.

His story finds special relevance today as the United States faces criticism for the incarceration of foreign "enemy combatants" without access to attorneys or legal proceedings at prisons such as Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. As "extraordinary rendition" is used to interrogate prisoners and the Geneva Conventions are skirted, WRIT WRITER recalls the prisoners' rights movement of the Civil Rights era, and the conditions that inspired prisoners like Fred Cruz to speak out.

Cruz, a Mexican American from the racially segregated San Antonio, Texas of the 1940s and 50s, grew up surrounded by a growing drug trade operated by some of his own relatives. His parents divorced when he was a boy and he and his brother had frequent run-ins with the law as teenagers. Cruz developed a heroin habit. He was convicted of "robbery by assault" when he was 21, and sent to prison in 1961.

In prison he studied law in order to file an appeal of his conviction and 50-year prison sentence. Before long the harsh field labor, brutal corporal punishments, and arbitrary disciplinary hearings experienced by prisoners prompted Cruz to file lawsuits against the prison system. As a consequence of his "legal activities," he was classified as an agitator and transferred to the Ellis Unit—"the Alcatraz of Texas"—in 1963. This state-of-the-art maximum-security prison was

reserved for the state's worst criminals, and overseen by C.L. McAdams, the most feared warden in Texas and known as "Beartrack" by inmates.

Under pressure from McAdams and his guards to drop his lawsuits, Cruz refused to be broken. In retaliation he was subjected to long periods in solitary confinement on a bread and water diet with a vegetable repast every 3rd day. Despite the isolation, and frequent confiscation of his legal papers, he managed to help other prisoners with lawsuits. In 1968, when an inmate was caught with legal papers prepared by Cruz for Muslim prisoners who alleged that their civil rights were being violated by prison authorities, tensions mounted.

Warden McAdams punished two inmates for the incident, and kept Muslim prisoners at work in the fields six days a week instead of the 5 days assigned to other inmates. Within days, a riot broke out in the Muslim cellblock (the first riot at the Ellis unit) and warden McAdams and his men met it blow for blow.

The 1968 uprising served to strengthen solidarity among prisoners and it raised the awareness of outsiders. The first was an attorney named Frances Jalet, who Cruz had contacted after reading about her in the newspaper in 1967. When Jalet learned from inmates about the conditions in prison, she agreed to help Cruz with his litigation. And she recruited NAACP attorney William Bennett Turner, who appears in the documentary, to assist with what would become Cruz's watershed case—*Cruz v. Beto*.

To tell the story, WRIT WRITER combines narration adapted from the original writings of Fred Cruz with the recollections of his friends and contemporaries, including ex-convicts, prisoners, and former wardens. The role of Fred Cruz is performed in voice-over by actor Jesse Borrego

(24, *The New World, Blood In, Blood Out*). Writer Dagoberto Gilb (*The Flowers, The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuna, The Magic of Blood, and Gritos*) adapted the narration from prison diaries, letters, legal pleadings, and courtroom testimony dating from 1961-1977. These texts were first edited by director Susanne Mason and editors Karen Skloss and Kristen Nutile to form the film's narrative spine, and reveal the transformation of Cruz. Gilb's adaptation unifies the speaking style between the texts—some very personal in nature (letters to his attorney, diary entries), and others more formal public presentations (courtroom testimony and legal pleadings)—to create an honest, unsentimental portrayal of Cruz.

Archival film footage is drawn from documentary films about Texas prisons dating as far back as 1947, educational and training films, network news films, and strike surveillance video from 1978. Several large collections of still photography complement the motion picture, including photos taken between 1967-1969 by photographer Danny Lyon at the Ellis Unit, and photos by TDC and freelance photographers taken on various prison units between 1945-1985.

The music in the film was written and performed by Gabe Rhodes (Austin-based musician and producer), with additional compositions by composer and musician Joel Guzman using the traditional accordion sounds of Central and South Texas.

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Crew bios (selected)

Susanne Mason – Producer and Director

Susanne Mason's feature debut, *WRIT WRITER*, is the product of several years of research into the history of the Texas Department of Corrections, and a lot of fundraising. Prior to and during that time she served as associate producer of a variety of public television documentaries, including *Are The Kids Alright?* (2004 Regional PBS); *Struggle In The Fields* (1996 National PBS); *Songs Of The Homeland* (1994, National PBS); and *Go Back To Mexico!* (1994, Frontline, National PBS). More recently, Mason wrote, produced and directed short documentaries about the history of Austin, Texas, for the Save Our Springs Alliance and Watershed Productions, including *Town In Transition*, a short doc about growth in the Texas capitol between 1950-1975. Mason's first film, *Stories From The Riverside* (1993), a 28-minute documentary that explores domestic homicide through the stories of three women incarcerated for murdering their abusive husbands, received a Silver Apple from the National Educational Film & Video Festival and a Director's Choice Award from the Black Maria Film & Video Festival, among other honors.

Dagoberto Gilb - Writer

Dagoberto Gilb spent 16 years making his living as a construction worker before winning wide acclaim for his stories. His first book, *Gritos*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. *The Magic of Blood* (1994), a collection of short stories, received the PEN/Hemingway Award and was a PEN/Faulkner finalist. He is also author of *The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuña* (1995), a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, the collection of short fiction *Woodcuts of Women* (Grove, 2001), and edited the recent *Hecho en Tejas* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007), an historic anthology that establishes the canon of Mexican American literature in Texas.

Gilb's essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *The Best American Essays*, and as commentaries on NPR's *Fresh Air*. He has been a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Whiting Writers' Award. He lives in Austin, Texas.

His most recent novel, *The Flowers*, was released in January 2008.

Jesse Borrego - Narrator

Borrego's career began with an open audition for the TV Series *Fame*, where he won the role of Jesse Velasquez in 1984. He has appeared in numerous films and television programs, including *24* (U.S. television), *The New World* (Dir. Terrence Mallick, 2005), *Con Air* (Dir. Simon West, 1997), *Lone Star* (Dir. John Sayles, 1996), *Bound by Honor* (aka *Blood In, Blood Out*, Dir. Taylor Hackford, 1993), and *Mi Vida Loca* (Dir. Allison Anders, 1993), among others. Born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, Borrego studied theatre and dance at The University of Incarnate Word and acting at The California Institute of the Arts.

(Continued)

Deborah Eve Lewis - Cinematographer

Lewis' feature work includes *Last Man Standing* (Dir. Paul Stekler, P.O.V.), *With God On Our Side: George Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America* (Dirs. David Van Taylor & Calvin Scaggs), *Making of Dazed* (Dir. Kahane Corn) and ITVS-funded projects *Writ Writer* (Dir. Susanne Mason), *The Calling* (Dir. Danny Alpert), *Nuclear Family* (Dir. Don Howard), and *Troop 1500* (Dirs. Ellen Spiro and Karen Bernstein). Lewis entered the filmmaking world as the Still Photographer for Robert Altman's *Secret Honor*, and soon was working in the camera departments of *Swimming To Cambodia*, *Married To The Mob*, and *New York Stories*, while also experimenting with Super-8 film.

Karen Skloss - Editor

Skloss's editing work has been shown on PBS, HBO, and in the MoMA. *Be Here To Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt*, which she edited, was released theatrically through Palm Pictures in 2005. Other feature documentaries that she has edited include: *Atomic Ed & The Black Hole* (Dir. Ellen Spiro), and *DIRT* (Dir. Jeff Bowden). She is currently producing and directing her first feature-length documentary.

Manuel Tsingaris - Editor

Tsingaris was senior editor of the documentary *Dream In Doubt*, chronicling the first hate crime following the 9/11 attacks, and slated for broadcast in May 2008 on PBS. He also edited *China Blue*, a film that explores the experience of young Chinese women in China's blue jean apparel industry, which aired on P.O.V. in 2007. He served as senior editor of *Long Gone* (2003), and has edited a variety of other award-winning programs.

Kristen Nutile - Editor

Kristen Nutile recently edited Gillian Aldrich's hour-long documentary "Speak Out: I Had an Abortion." In addition, she has edited films for *Maysles Films Inc.* and *Human Rights Watch*. She has also worked on numerous documentary films including *Miss America* and *Seabiscuit* for *The American Experience* (PBS). In addition, Kristen has produced and directed six documentary shorts, which have played both nationally and internationally, including the Sundance Film Festival in 2001. She holds Master's degrees in both Documentary Film and Video from Stanford University, and Biology from San Francisco State University.

Sandra Guardado - Editor

Guardado has worked on several PBS productions, including as coordinating producer on the three-part documentary *George Wallace: Setting' the Woods on Fire* (The American Experience, 2000) and as co-producer of *Last Man Standing* (POV). She is the producer and director of the award-winning documentary *The Reunion*, broadcast on WGBH's *La Plaza* series and on *The Territory* (PBS) in Texas. She received her M.F.A. in Film and Video Production from the University of Texas. She was the first editor to work with Mason on WRIT WRITER.

(Continued)

Gabe Rhodes - Composer

Rhodes is an accomplished instrumentalist, composer and producer. Known for his guitar artistry, he has recorded with Jimmy LaFave, Audrey Auld Mezera, Houston Marchman, Calvin Russell, Billy Joe Shaver, Kimmie Rhodes, and Willie Nelson among others. He produced Audrey Auld Mezera's *Texas*, and engineered and associate produced Billy Joe Shaver's *The Real Deal* in 2005. He is currently performing and recording in Austin, his hometown.

Joel Guzman - Composer

Guzman is a Grammy Award-winning performer and composer who began dazzling audiences and fellow musicians with his unique accordion artistry as a child prodigy, bringing established accordion players to christen him, at an early age, "El Pequeno Gigante". The Little Giant. In 1998, his band Aztex formed the nucleus and inspiration for RCA's release of *Los Super Seven*, featuring Joe Ely, Freddy Fender, Flaco Jimenez, Ruben Ramos, Rick Trevino and David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas. With his roots firmly planted in the full range of traditional Mexican music, he has incorporated and experimented with jazz, tejano, country, salsa, R&B and rock. His passionate exploration of all these genres, continues to place him in a category all his own.

Angie Alvarez – Associate Producer

Alvarez had her industry start working with academy award documentarian R.J. Cutler on the Showtime Series *Freshman Diaries*. She served as associate producer of the critically acclaimed documentary *Be Here To Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt* (Dir. Margaret Brown). She produced *Charlie* (a short film for NBC and the Mr. Sinus Show), *Another Chance* (a reality tv pilot aimed to help the homeless), and the award winning indie favorite *CHALK*. She is currently producing *The Farkles*, a 'serious' family comedy for television.

Film Credits

Produced and Directed by Susanne Mason

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Narration adapted from original texts of Fred Cruz by Dagoberto Gilb

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Voice of Fred Cruz performed by Jesse Borrego

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Cinematography by Deborah Eve Lewis

--

Edited by

Karen Skloss Manuel Tsingaris

Kristen Nutile Sandra Guardado

--

Original Music written and performed by Gabe Rhodes

Original Accordion Themes written & performed by Joel Guzman

--

Motion Graphics & Design by Brandon Thomas

Additional Motion Graphics & Design by Eric Pham

--

Assistant Camera - David Layton

Associate Producer

Angie Alvarez Robin Carter
Deborah Norris Diane Weidenkopf

Additional Camera Operator

David Layton David DeWitt
John Lacy Scott Sinkler
Alex Rappoport Wilson M. Waggoner

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Michael Swanner Ethan Andrus
Alex Herrera A. Dale Lynn
Doug Dunderdale Dennis Meehan
Luke Deikis Brett Lofthus
Diane Weidenkopf Tina Hardin

Graphic Artist

Tillie Policastro David Shields

Consulting Writer - Michelle Ferrari

Assistant Editor

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Heather Courtney Mark O'Brien
Rian Casey Lee

Art Director - Heyd Fontenot

Gaffer

David Layton Harrison Witt

Additional AC

Kat Gibson Dina Parkinson

Featuring interviews with

Carlos M. Alva Carl Luther McAdams
Benny Wade Clewis Billy Wayne McCarter
Robert M. Cousins Erasmo Mercado
Jacqueline Gordon Floyd Patterson
Vanessa Jalet-Stanescu Rudy Portillo
Paul Lucko Carl Robins
Steve J. Martin Alvin D. Slaton
John V. Martinez William Bennett Turner

Musicians

Bajo Sexto Cello
Jose "Trino" Sanchez Brian Standefer

Extras

Jeremy L. Castillo Jorge Mata Otero
Jesus M. Garcia Eric Pham
Josh Jimenez Monica Torres

Historic Cars provided by

Janell Neal Gabriel Torres
Walter Neal Gene Watson
Charles R. Price

Consultant - John V. Martinez

Research by

Susanne Mason

Robin Carter

Additional Research

Monica Walters

Jessica Louchheim

Alan Bushnell

Shawna Castellano

Production Assistants

Jesus Garcia Barna Kantor Ryan Mihm Heather Mitchell

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Erin Howley

Lodging courtesy of David Hefner

Post-production facilities - MATCH FRAME / 1080, Inc.

Voice-over Artists

Rodney Garza

David Garcia

Raul Castillo

Post-production sound recording

Murray Music

New Age Recording

Sound Editing & Design - Greg Armstrong

Sound Mix - Tom Hammond

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Steve J. Martin, Esq.

Michele Deitch, J.D.

Paul Stekler, PhD

Hector Galan

Donald R. Walker, PhD

Seldon B. Hale

David A. Williams, PhD

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Larry W. Yackle, J.D.

Paul M. Lucko, PhD

Howard Zinn, PhD

James W. Marquart, PhD

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