By Pat Aufderheide

They’re prime-time thrillers, packed with cops-and-robbers action. They’re based on actual police files, too. And the audience is awesome, even on the reruns.

It may sound like Dragnet, but it’s actually Nicaraguan TV programs produced by the Ministry of Interior (MINT)—the cops, fire brigades and coast guards of the Sandinista government. The programs are produced by Interior officials, but they star members of the Interior ministry’s forces, both in and out of uniform.

The idea comes from the top: Interior Minister Tomas Borge, who has long described himself as a frustrated filmmaker. But his motive has less to do with film culture than with politics. His goal: to create a positive image for police, after generations of negative associations created by Somoza’s National Guard.

The medium made sense. Television reaches more than half of Nicaragua’s population, and at night in Managua the cool light of the tube illuminates most houses. TV is now a nationalized system with two channels that, during part of every day, mix a hodgepodge of available foreign programming—Brazilian soap operas, Eastern bloc documentaries, old movies—with local reporting and nationally-made productions. While Sistema Sandinista produces its own programs, it also runs those made by other branches of the government, including the surprising hit docudramas from the Ministry of the Interior.

Cops and robbers

MINT’s first foray into image-making was a bank robbery story, drawn from a well known incident in which a policeman had died. (The show is dedicated to him.) The good guys wore uniforms, of course, but the robbers got some sympathy too. At the end of the episode, the cop-hero takes the robber’s son aside and gives him a lecture. "Your father is not a bad man," he says. "He was ignorant, a product of a cruel society. In prison he’ll learn better ways, and then you’ll all be a family again."

These days, under the direction of First Lieutenant Margarita Suzan, a Mexican national who before putting on a military uniform was an independent filmmaker, the shows are considerably more ambitious. They still are usually produced with one video camera and equipment borrowed from MINT storehouses. But these days the shows are often two or three-part series and feature several sets. They increasingly focus on the major security issues that fill MINT files: contra raids, spying, smuggling and subversion.

The shows are never shy to preach the Sandinista message—defense against bourgeois and American sabotage of the revolution. In fact, that’s a big part of their appeal—there’s widespread enthusiasm for stories that feature Nicaraguans as good guys under attack from nefarious outsiders.

"We get a lot of feedback," says Suzan in her Managua office. "Many of the calls are simply to find out when we’re going to run a particular episode again, but often people call to complain. And the most common criticism has been that they want to see more of the human side of our characters. So we’ve been writing more personal material into the episodes."

Foreign affairs

In the two-part Pyramid, affairs of the heart mix with foreign affairs. A young woman working for the Nicaraguan embassy in Mexico falls in love with a slick, upper-class operator. He tries to inveigle her into smuggling embassy documents, and when she refuses she needs to be rescued by her true love, the stalwart man.

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Police files turn into made-for-TV movies in Nicaragua.
Nicaragua

Continued from page 24 from MINT. The star, a doe-eyed lanky soldier who is featured in most of the episodes, has a large following, but in Panama he tripped over his lack of acting credentials: Suzu has a battery of calls complaining that the "love element" just wasn't credible.

"I think they're kind of primitive," says one Nicaraguan film producer about the shows. "But even so, they're enormously popular. In part it's just because Nicaragua's a small country. Everyone likes to see their own street corner on TV."

Producing the shows in-house makes them rock-bottom cheap, but that doesn't make them easy. One of Suzu's problems is getting dedicated police to play the parts of the bad guys. "In Nitxon, which is about a counterrevolutionary plot," she recalls, "at first we couldn't convince the troops to take the parts of the contra guerrillas."

So how did she get around the problem? "Fortunately," she smiles, "this is a military hierarchy. We ordered them to do it."

Fancy Hardware

Every show begins with a snappy lead-in logo, featuring images of MINT public servants at work, edited to an upbeat song heralding "Popular Power." The show also carries subtler messages about the MINT. For instance, each show features impressive hardware, whether it's computer screens on which Our Hero looks up records of subversives, or walkie-talkies brandished by cops on shiny motorcycles.

"We want to show that we're efficient and modern," says Suzu. But everyone who's spent an afternoon in Managua will be surprised at the idea that cops all have walkie-talkies, and downright wistful at the abundance of transport in these cop movies. And computers, in a country with regular power outages, might be more trouble than they're worth.

"Well, of course we're not going to reveal how we actually work in detail," she admits. "Part of this is showmanship, and part is counterinformation. We know that it isn't just our public that's watching the show, and we'd like to confuse any spies who are tuning in."

MINT's productions could be part of an international trend in military use of mass-media drama. Last year in Cuba, one of the most popular TV soap opera series, Algo Mas que Sonar (Something more than a dream), was produced by the Cuban armed forces. It features the story of four boys who volunteer out of a college prep school to fight in Angola, and chronicles their personal conflicts, their battlefield challenges and the heartaches among the girls they left behind. Even the U.S. military dabbles in mainstream TV with its "Be All You Can Be" commercials making Army recruitment look more fun than drinking Coke. In TV programming, though, American police and armed forces have so far maintained an advisory and supply, rather than producing, role. (The annual budget for the Miami vice squad is about the same amount as the

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and Sara Paretsky. Benefit for Chicago Abortion Fund, working to subsidize abortions for poor women and to restore public funding. Tickets $10, Wellington Avenue Church, 615 West Wellington. For more information call 644-0972. Sunday, March 16 at 3:00 p.m.

March 22

Saturday, March 22nd, 3:00-5:00 p.m. Margaret Randall will read from and autograph her new books, including Sandinos Daughters, Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution and Women Brave in the Face of Danger, at Guild Books, 2456 N. Lincoln Ave., Chicago 60614. 525-3667, Richard or Julie for more information.

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