

Posted: Thurs., Feb. 1, 2007, 3:07pm PT

Super Amigos

(Documentary -- Canada-Mexico) An Open City Works presentation. (International sales: Open City Works, Toronto.) Produced by Arturo Perez Torres, Heather Haynes. Directed, written by Arturo Perez Torres.

With: Fray Tormenta, Super Gay, Super Barrio, Ecologista Universal, Super Animal.

By **ROBERT KOEHLER**

Social justice in Mexico City has a new face -- or rather, a new mask. Dressed in Mexico's popular "lucha libre" superhero wrestling costumes, a set of activists fighting for various causes from tenants' rights to clean air is captured with just the right cheeky attitude by documaker Arturo Perez Torres in "Super Amigos." Mexico-born and Canada-based, Torres benefits from an outsider-insider's perspective on the country's myriad issues and pop culture. His pic's engaging irreverence should click with younger auds at fests and in vid markets up and down the Western Hemisphere.

A quintet of unlikely men -- all anonymous, all from humble backgrounds -- takes on the style and appearance of Mexican pro wrestling's "lucha libre" persona that was lovingly spoofed for gringo auds in "Nacho Libre." The lineup includes Fray Tormenta, Super Gay, Super Barrio, Ecologista Universal and Super Animal.

Torres is intent to show, however, that these super-luchas aren't out to put on a show a la Abbie Hoffman's yippie spectacles of the '60s. Super Barrio, for example, conducts serious and lengthy meetings with tenants threatened with eviction, the latest victims of a gentrification trend in Mexico City's center that's devastating working-class communities.

Fray Tormenta, a former pro wrestler, is an ordained priest who achieves real results with neglected children.

Perhaps challenging the country's most entrenched bigotry, Super Gay works as a one-on-one counselor with victims of gay-bashing and parents of gay children, while helping organize a Gay Pride Day rally which brings out 100,000 on Mexico City's large boulevards.

Although he's fighting for the planet, Ecologista Universal tends to be the one superhero working alone -- trekking cross-country to protest everything from a tree-cutting to nuclear power plants. As anyone who's flown into or moved around Mexico City knows, this lucha's battle may be the most daunting of all, and Torres' portrayal of him as a modern-day Don Quixote is both witty and poignant.

Torres, however, seems most interested in Super Animal, a big, burly dude who wants to kick the behinds of as many bullfighters as possible. Staging wild demonstrations and direct actions in front of city hall or the city's central bull ring, Super Animal has built a real following and garners considerable media attention in his efforts to shame bullfighters and ban the sport. Torres also observes bullfight fans' rather disgusting rituals (bull blood drinking, among them). Pic is capped by an account of Super Animal actually running down and confronting a bullfighter in public.

Editor Cameron Esler's punchy pace and David Quesnelle's amusing if crude animated intros and bridges keep doc clicking along, extending the sense of a real-life comic book with deadly serious issues on its mind. Dick Dale-style music from Roko Citroen and his Hamster Heart Band is just the ticket.

Camera (color, DV), Mario Gallegos, Jose Luis Aranda; editor, Cameron Esler; music, Roko Citroen and his Hamster Heart Band; sound, Guinduri Arroyo; supervising sound editor, Rob Hutchins; re-recording mixer, Geoff Raffan; animation, David Quesnelle. Reviewed at Slamdance Film Festival (Special Screening), Jan.25, 2007. (Also in Santa Barbara Film Festival.) Running time: 82 MIN.