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Kevin Winter / Getty Images

"What keeps me fulfilled is getting to do all the things I care about," Ferrera says.

## America Ferrera has issues

The 'Ugly Betty' star takes on immigration with her small role in 'Moon,' and kidnapping in Colombia in a film she also produced, 'Towards Darkness.'

By Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, Special to The Times  
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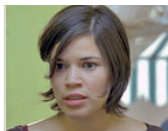
IN the scant time America Ferrera has had off from her hit television series "Ugly Betty," the 23-year-old actress has taken on some serious subject matter -- not only with a small role in "Under the Same Moon," but also starring in and serving as executive producer for the Spanish-language drama "Towards Darkness," written and directed by Antonio Negret.

The March 28 release, which costars Roberto Urbina, David Sutcliffe and "Ugly Betty's" Tony Plana, depicts a harrowing kidnapping in Colombia and the hours that then unfold for the captors and captured.

Unlike "Moon," on which Ferrera worked only two days, "Towards Darkness" has required years of

her attention. She and Colombian Negret, who met as undergraduates at USC, made a 12-minute short in 2004 about a young man taken hostage for ransom. When Negret, who has had three family members kidnapped, expressed interest in turning the short into a feature, Ferrera agreed to reprise her role and produce.

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"We spent a lot of time discussing why it should be 90 minutes," says Ferrera, who plays the troubled former girlfriend of the victim. In addition to drawing attention to the rife problem of kidnapping in Colombia, "For me what was intriguing about the story is that everyone is their own worst enemy," she continues. "No one is clean, yet no one is entirely guilty."

The biggest change in expanding the script was the switch from English to Spanish, a choice Ferrera calls, "true to the story and the director's home country."

Although the L.A. native was already bilingual thanks to her Honduran parents, the actress watched a myriad of movies in Spanish and hired a dialect coach to help her nail a Colombian accent. "It was important that my accent was regional and specific," she explains. By the time she arrived in Panama for the 23-day shoot, "I was totally comfortable." If there was any discomfort, it was only that it was so hot. By the second day, I wouldn't even let them put any makeup on me.

As the drama intensifies, every flicker of Ferrera's naked face is caught by the camera. That's exactly the kind of ego-free role that appeals to Ferrera, who says, "As an actor, you're on screen and you have power about what gets translated there. But as a producer, you have the power to actually shape a story and character, and that is so rewarding."

Ferrera says she is looking forward to working again in Spanish, though her next feature project is this summer's upbeat sequel to "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants." "What keeps me fulfilled is getting to do all the things I care about," Ferrera says unapologetically. "It's wonderful to go back and forth between the things that are fun, and the things that are important and fun."

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