

T O T E M

PRESS KIT





TÖTEM

A FILM BY LILA AVILÉS

2023 — MEXICO / DENMARK / FRANCE — 4K — 4:3 — 5.1 — SPANISH — 95 MIN

Limerencia Films, Laterna, Paloma Productions, Alpha Violet Production Present



LOGLINE

Seven-year-old Sol spends the day at her Grandfather's home, helping with the preparations for a surprise party for her father. Throughout the day, chaos slowly takes over, fracturing the family's foundations. Sol will embrace the essence of letting go as a release for existence.

TÓTEM is a choral film about life. Seven-year-old Sol spends the day at her Grandfather's home, helping her aunts Nuri and Alejandra for a surprise party they are throwing for Sol's father, Tonatiuh. As daylight fades, a strange and chaotic atmosphere takes over, shattering the bonds that hold a family together. Sol will come to understand that her world will change dramatically, embracing the essence of letting go and cherishing the breath of life.

SYNOPSIS





DIRECTOR'S NOTE

My interest in TÓTEM was to continue portraying everyday life from a very intimate point of view, to look inside of things. I like microcosms, the essence of things, matryoshkas, pyramids, things that contain other things. As the central theme was the concept of home, staying in one place was my immediate, common-sense response to the film's simple premise. It's not that I want to be a "single-location-director", it just happened.

TÓTEM is a story about family and friends. Hence, I also knew that I had to put the emphasis on the characters and the way they communicate.

I love slang. Even when it is just chatter, there is something there that already contains its own charge of linguistic transformation, the awareness that words matter, words that become micro universes within language itself. Most families have ways of communicating that are almost like a new language. You don't speak to your father the same way you do to your mother or to your dog. This diversity fascinates me, even though it is very difficult to transmit, but the energy of the words you never lose interest me a lot.

Whenever an animal species or a language is lost, we lose a piece of the bigger puzzle and abandon a way of thinking. The genome of a species is a kind of manual. When the species dies, the manual is lost, whether it is an ant or a rhinoceros. We forget that we are animals. Today, extinction occurs so often that we seemed to have gotten used to it.

Life and death are one duality, just like wisdom and ignorance, inside and outside, day and night, sun and moon, light and darkness, yin and yang.

Another duality that deeply interests me is that of time and duration. Measured time and our perception of its passing are very different, even though they both describe an identical sequence of events. We have all lived through days that seem like months, and days that pass in seconds. Our experience of time is often shaped by the spaces we inhabit while time passes. I often feel that there is an intuitive, concrete sense to the concept of a space-time continuum that the Theory of Relativity posits. Because they shape our sense of time, the places we inhabit, are not external to us. Rather, we must find these places inside of us, too, with all our imperfections and regardless of gender, religion, country, status, idiosyncrasy... Finding this true dwelling place of ours is a process of subtraction, a paring down and concentration on the essential. As Tolstoy has it: "Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold." And while the truth itself may seem elusive, once you get down to essentials, I am convinced that Cassavetes was right: "Everything is about Love."

Lila Avilés



INTERVIEW with Lila Avilés

Can you tell us a few words what TÓTEM is about ?

Well, TÓTEM is about many things. I like films that are ambiguous, that open themselves up to different interpretations. But mainly I think it speaks about LIFE. Just as simple as that.

I wanted to make a film about communication, about the virtue of human relationships and its communion with nature. I wanted to create a principal character who is already mature even at seven years of age, a girl that can handle the capacity for being awake and tries to create a world with her own gaze.

Nowadays, we tend to be so immersed in what is outside that we forget to pay attention to the inner essence. As a society, we are disconnected, not understanding that everything is about perpetual cooperation, about total respect for animals, for nature, for family, for friends, for ourselves. Concepts like wisdom, effort, kindness, community, family, groups, are increasingly isolated. Languages are collapsing as fast as animal species. I guess this film came as a response to my enquiry into the sense of “the house” or “the home”. What can we do to remain connected? The closer we look, the nearer we are to the roots, the easier this gets. In a single family, I find a constant diversity in behaviors and points of view, a micro-universe - as William Blake says: to see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.

From this beginning, I just started to write, to mold and fuse one character with another until it was baked into what became TÓTEM.

How did you come up with the idea of the film originally ?

Finding the title is supremely important for me. Titles are just like our birth names, They are “keys”. Sometimes, I start with a particular name and then it starts mutating, but when I know with certainty that I cannot change the title, it is a very profound experience.

The film came to me when I had just become a mother, so I suppose it is a kind of gift for my daughter. I have always appreciated her enthusiasm, her wild heart, and her patience for me as a mother. We are not born knowing how to be a parent, but in our “mother-daughter” story we just have always been at the same level, something I treasure very much that. In a way, I think the film is a celebration of love, of this kind of relationship.



What are the main themes running through TÓTEM ?

I think there are many different layers. TÓTEM speaks about a lot of different things, or so I hope, at least. For me, it is always emotional when people take away something that resonates with their own story, associations with their own family or a friend, for example. That is the virtue of art, to transcend barriers we all build and welcome others to our interior life, our “inner home”, as it were. Of course, the film has shades, just as a painting. To understand light, we need to understand shadow. Sometimes, it is shadows that make life most difficult, but also the most resilient. They make life a journey, and they make life so vibrant, like a mystery that needs to be lived.

TÓTEM tells the story of a large family. Why ?

Mainly, because families in Latin America, are giant. There are always cousins and uncles, animals, just as a party. But also because I wanted to portray that universe. I like languages. How they speak and relate each other in a family, there could be slang and codes even in the same lingua, but in their own tribe means something different. The rituals that families experience as a day to day. That need to understand that everyone is different and to be conscience handling that, because it can also work as a pandora's house. As the song says it could be: One way or another..





How did you work with the young non-professional actors ?

Since I was writing, I knew that this film was going to be as I dreamed, if I could find the particular ensemble of actors. That was the goal. I invited Gabriela Cartol, the principal character in *The Chambermaid*, to do the casting with me, and together we searched for that hive and our queen bee Sol. Casting was very exhausting, but the energy needed to be there. I like to work a lot with non-professional actors, so casting is always a big effort. Sometimes when you meet people, there is an intuition that tells you in your heart “hooray, she is the one”, and that is such a powerful feeling. When I met Naíma, I loved the feeling I had being near her. We could talk for hours about many things and be completely comfortable, and with Saori, I was laughing all the time. What a perfect match!

For me, pre-production is always stressful, but when things finally get going, everything comes to life. I wanted for the girls that sense of joy, a feeling of playfulness. It was even more gratifying that their free spirit ignited the entire team. It's always good to remember the child that we left behind, and to reunite with it as if in a mirror. As a director, you become almost like a mother, you need to hear, feel and project common sense, building something potent, without pushing, only guiding, giving all your confidence and knowledge. I love those spirited girls, we have become really good friends, they are two gems that are very close to my heart.





LILA AVILÉS

Lila Avilés is a Mexican independent film director, screenwriter and producer, she founded her company Limerencia Films in 2018. She is recognized for her first feature film "The Chambermaid", 2018. "The Chambermaid" was chosen to represent Mexico at the 2020 Oscars© and Goya Awards. It was invited to more than sixty festivals around the world achieving a large number of international and national awards, plus a strong reception from critics. She has been jury at San Sebastian International Film Festival (Spain 2021), Morelia International Film Festival (Mexico 2019), FICUNAM (Mexico 2020), Lima International Film Festival (Peru 2020), Antofacine Festival (Chile 2020), Nespresso Talents 2019 (Festival Morelia 2019), Fic Monterrey 2022.

FILMOGRAPHY:

"The Chambermaid" (La Camarista) - 2018 - 102 min - Ariel for Best Debut, Mexican Entry for the American Academy Awards 2020©

CREW / CAST

CREW

Director & screenwriter : Lila Avilés

DOP: Diego Tenorio

Edition: Omar Guzmán

Sound Design: Guido Berenblum

Music: Thomas Becka

Sound Mixer: Rune Palving

Production Design: Nohemi González Martínez

Costumes: Nora Solís and Jimena Fernández

Make up: Vanessa Campos

Casting: Gabriela Cartol and Lila Avilés

Assistant Director: Carmina Carballal

Production Manager: Héctor Zubieta

Co Producers: Per Damgaard Hansen, Jean-Baptiste Bailly-Maitre

Producers: Tatiana Graullera, Lila Avilés, Louise Riousse

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Visions Sud Est with the support of the SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation)

CAST

Sol : Naíma Sentíes

Nuri : Montserrat Marañón

Alejandra : Marisol Gasé

Esther : Saori Gurza

Tonatiuh : Mateo García Elizondo

Cruz : Teresita Sánchez

Napo: Juan Francisco Maldonado

Lucía: Iazua Larios

Roberto: Alberto Amador



CAST



Naíma Senties (Mexico City, 2012) At the age of two Naíma went to live in Coatepec, Veracruz, where she had a lot of contact with nature, learned to work the land, sow and harvest. TÓTEM is her first experience in film.



Montserrat Marañón (Mexico City, 1974) is a TV, film and theater, actor. She's been performing for 30 years. In film, she began her career with the short film Desde Abajo by Guillermo Arriaga, she also had a part in Tiempo Compartido directed by Sebastián Hoffman, winner of the award for Best Script at the 2018 Sundance Festival. Among her latest films is Bardo by Alejandro González Iñárritu alongside Daniel Giménez Cacho.



Marisol Gasé (Mexico City, 1972) is an actress in film, television, theater, radio, director and playwright. She has made more than 100 theater and cabaret theater shows over 23 years with performances in Mexico and abroad. In film she has collaborated in more than fifteen short films and movies, including Smuack by Alejandra Sánchez with several mentions and international awards, including the award for best actress at the Playa del Carmen Queer Film Festival.



Teresita Sánchez (Mexico City, 1964), is a playwright, actress, director, and musician. She has worked in more than 20 feature films, many of them awarded in national and international festivals. Nominated for the Ariel in 2012 as Best Actress for *Verano de Goliat* by Nicolás Pereda; in 2019 she was again nominated for the Ariel for Best Female Co-Actress for "The Chambermaid". In 2022 she won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival, she also won the Ojito for Best Actress at the Morelia International Film Festival, all for her work in the film *Dos Estaciones* by Juan Pablo González.



Mateo García Elizondo (Mexico City, 1987) is a screenwriter and author. He wrote the feature film *Desierto*, by Jonás Cuarón (2015) which won the FIPRESCI prize at the Toronto Intl. Film Festival, His first novel, *Una Cita con la Lady*, won the City of Barcelona award for Literature in Spanish. He has made appearances in the feature film *Año Uña*, as well as the short film *Clickbait*. *TÓTEM* is his first major acting role.

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