



QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2021

Clara Sola

A FILM BY NATHALIE ÁLVAREZ MESÉN

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a vibrant blue, multi-layered dress, stands on a paved road that curves through a lush green landscape. She is looking back over her shoulder. In the background, there is a large, leafy tree and a utility pole with power lines. The sky is overcast and grey.

Clara Sola

A film by Nathalie Álvarez Mesén

2021- 106' – Sweden, Costa Rica, Belgium, Germany – Color – 2.39:1 – 5.1 & Stereo – Spanish

Synopsis

CLARA, 40, is believed to have a special connection to God. As a «healer», she sustains a family and a village in need of hope, while she finds solace in her relationship with the natural world. After years of being controlled by her mother's repressive care, Clara's sexual desires are stirred by her attraction to her niece's new boyfriend. This newly awakened force takes Clara to unexplored territory, allowing her to cross boundaries, both physical and mystical. Empowered by her self-discovery, Clara gradually frees herself from her role as "saint" and begins to heal herself.



Cast

Wendy Chinchilla Araya, Daniel Castañeda Rincón, Ana Julia Porras Espinoza, Flor María Vargas Chaves

Crew

Director: Nathalie Álvarez Mesén

Screenwriter: Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, María Camila Arias

DOP: Sophie Winqvist Loggins DFF FSF

Art Director: Amparo Baeza

Editor: Marie-Hélène Dozo

Costume Design: Patricia Alvarado Hurtado

Sound: Erick Vargas Williams, Valène Leroy, Charles De Ville, Aline Gavroy

Produced by: Nima Yousefi (HOBAB)

Producers: Alan McConnell (Resolve Media), Géraldine Sprimont, Anne-Laure Guégan (Need Productions), Karina Avellan Troz, Marcelo Quesada Mena (Pacífica Grey)

Executive producer: Peter Krupenin (HOBAB)

Coproducers: Lisa Widén, Beata Mannheimer (Film Capital Stockholm Fund), Ivanna Kozak, Antoine Liétout, Ivan Zuber (Laidak Films)

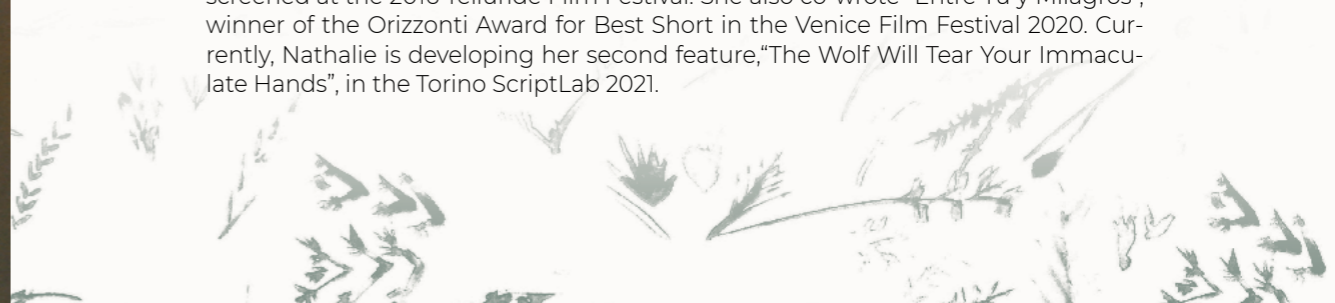




Director's Biography

Nathalie Álvarez Mesén is a Costa Rican-Swedish screenwriter/director. She started her career in physical theater in Costa Rica before pursuing her B.F.A. degree in Mime Acting at the Stockholm University of the Arts in Sweden. Nathalie later graduated from Columbia University's Graduate Film Program in NYC with an M.F.A. in Film Directing/Screenwriting.

An alumna of the Berlinale Talents, TIFF Filmmaker Lab and NYFF Artist Academy, Nathalie's shorts have screened at film festivals all over the world. Her short, FILIP, won Best Film Under 15 Minutes at the 2016 Palm Springs Shortfest, and ASUNDER, screened at the 2016 Telluride Film Festival. She also co-wrote "Entre Tú y Milagros", winner of the Orizzonti Award for Best Short in the Venice Film Festival 2020. Currently, Nathalie is developing her second feature, "The Wolf Will Tear Your Immaculate Hands", in the Torino ScriptLab 2021.





Questions to Nathalie Álvarez Mesén

Clara Sola is a strong story about a woman's self empowerment. How did the film idea emerge?

I come from a large family of mainly women and, inspite of that, unhealthy, patriarchal norms of how a woman should or shouldn't behave were reproduced and passed on to me.

Because these norms are unrealistic, we'll never feel like we're enough. I had a very hard time shaking this off as a grown-up (I'm still working on it), because it feels like part of the role I'm expected to assume to succeed in this society. The roles we have learned to play as women are something that interests me – what happens when we decide to stop taking them on?

Clara is a character that grew up with a conservative template to follow, and I was interested in exploring who she truly was when she had no role to play – alone with nature, unfiltered. There is something spiritual in that freedom that nature provides, as opposed to most religions, which have rules and restrictions that often put women at a disadvantage. In a world governed by retrograde norms and consumption, being kind and true to oneself and to nature is an act of re-

bellion. Hopefully the film feels empowering – I like to see the story as a calling to disobedience, to heal oneself/nature, even if on the way you may have to burn some religions/norms/relationships. I like phoenixes that way.

Why did you choose to set the story in a remote Costa Rican village?

Before directing Clara Sola, I had only done shorts in Sweden and the U.S., and I really wanted to go back to Costa Rica to make my first feature in my mother tongue, which is Spanish. I knew that exciting things were happening in the industry there with a lot of female directors doing the most exciting and internationally recognized works.

But most importantly, the settings' imagery was inspired by childhood memories from there. Even if the film is set in a fictional place that aesthetically relates to many places in Latin America (and since I'm also Swedish, we even threw in some discreet Scandinavian touches here and there), it is also very much Costa Rican.

We had been scouting for almost a year before we





decided to plant the Clara seed in Vara Blanca, where we ended up finding Clara's house and the majority of the other locations. It's a town with a foggy and soothing air at approximately 1,900 meters of altitude. We really fell in love with the place, the nature, and the people. The house was miraculously placed the way we had imagined in the script, with a green wall of life behind it and the art team did an amazing job making the house fit our world. Something else that is quite special is that many of our secondary characters are from the area, they are the actual neighbors of Clara's house.

Religion and tradition are sensitive topics in the film. What did you want to say about their place in Costa Rican society?

Colombian co-writer Maria Camila Arias and I were eager to set Clara Sola in the Latin America that we remembered from our childhood years and we wanted to talk about the topic on a broader level than just Costa Rica. We are aware that our memories may tend to give an enhanced version of reality and we did take some liberties with it in order to better represent the more "subtle" machismo phenomena.

I'm interested in how religion helped to form and reproduce gender roles that aren't healthy. I'm particularly intrigued by these patriarchal norms and discourses being inherited from generation to ge-

neration and disguised as traditions, even in homes where no men are present. In a way, the film points a finger at women too, to stir something in the recipe that patriarchy needs in order to keep existing. I was eager to give women a push towards inner exploration, instead of repeating machismo patterns coming from family or a wider societal circle.

Patterns are learned, and more needs to be done to put a stop to the harmful ones. The hard thing is that most women don't know that they are part of the this factory – conventions are engrained in our psyche and body. I have to question a lot of what I think I know or feel myself. And I know this has been said a lot, but change is happening too slowly. So here I am, talking about it again.

Why was it important for you to implement magical realism in the story? And how did you choose the cinematic grammar to represent it?

I've been familiar with the genre from a young age, it being a relevant part of Latin American literary culture. But most importantly, the magical realism was always an inherent element of the spaces where the story unfolds, because we are so close to nature all the time – and to me, nature is connected to something bigger, partly beyond human understanding.

We worked in two ways to convey magical realism. One has to do with the story: the slightly magical hap-



penings that the characters are aware of. We often wanted the camera to peacefully observe these happenings, to enhance the truthfulness of the event.

The other way has to do with the storytelling – these are not ingredients that the characters are aware of. A camera that sometimes has a life beyond the characters, the use of music to elevate certain scenes, presenting a character's inner images as parts of the narrative, are some tools that we used. This is why some films in which nothing really magical happens still can feel somewhat magical.

So one way has to do with content, the other one has to do with choosing that the format of the piece should be poetry. With the editor, Marie-Hélène Dozo, we tried to balance these two ways throughout the film.

Clara's desires are repressed, and her relationship to her body is complex. Wendy Chinchilla's performance is very physical. How did you work together to give shape to her character?

I was specifically looking for someone that had great control over her body. I had seen Wendy in a dance performance in 2018 and if you see her dancing you're going to be completely blown away by her abilities. The funny thing is that I wanted to cast her for a character that was very still and we worked a lot with inner images to make this observant way of being very active.

There were two parts in the rehearsal work. One, done with acting coach Carlos "Fagua" Medina, had to do with the character's inner life and their connection to the emotions of the performers. Since we were working with non-actors, this allowed them to be truthful in their performances by allowing themselves to be vulnerable.

The other part had to do with the physicality of the characters. With the group, I worked with contact improvisation to bring people back to being mindful of their own and each others' bodies, creating a sense of unity. With Clara's character we basically set the essence when we first auditioned Wendy, where we played with different percentages of "Wolf vs Human". From there on, there was always a wolf percentage that remained in Wendy's gaze and posture whenever she got into "Clara mode". The voice and the way of speaking we found using clown techniques, and her movements were always inspired by "inner-nature-images." I used to describe Clara as someone who on the surface might look frail, but if she grabbed you by the wrist she could crush it if she wanted to – like a tree branch growing around you at super speed. I think that you can feel Wendy's rich range of movements within Clara, which makes the fact that the character is trapped inside her own body so sad – it's like her body is too small for her, because she is a gigantic force.





Could you tell us more about the presence of Yuca, the white mare and its complicity with Clara?

Yuca is mostly white because of how the bright color pops against the green of the forest – it is impossible for her to hide in her natural environment. Also because of how whiteness has historically been read as purity, which is problematic. It relates to Clara as she can't hide either: she stands out among her fellow humans, assumed to be so "pure" that she can cure people, which is a role that she has no interest in fulfilling. If left on their own, both Yuca and Clara would roll in the mud and have a healthy coat of dirt.

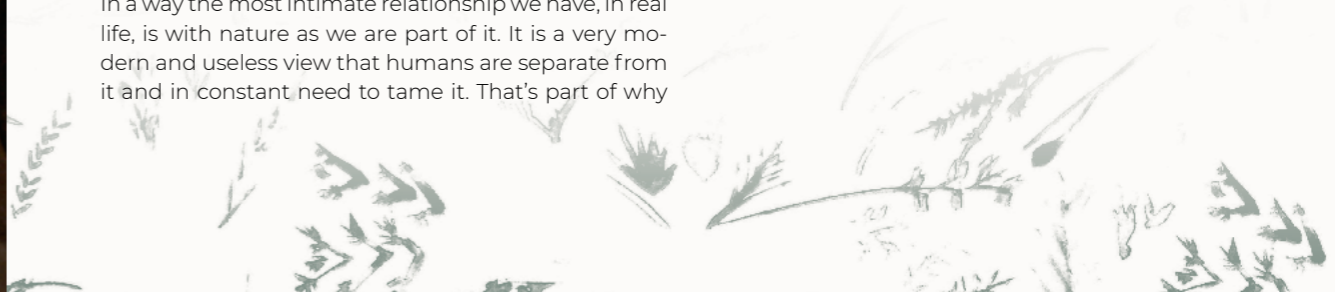
With each other they can be their truthful and untamed selves. In a way, Yuca also functions as a foreshadowing of Clara's own liberation. At some point, Clara realizes that her love is keeping Yuca tied to serving others, which is something Clara can identify with, as she struggles to break the patterns society keeps imposing on her.

Clara's connection to nature is often shot very closely, with much intimacy: the way she touches the mare, the insects, the mud... What was your original intention in showing it this way and was it challenging sometimes to shoot those scenes?

In a way the most intimate relationship we have, in real life, is with nature as we are part of it. It is a very modern and useless view that humans are separate from it and in constant need to tame it. That's part of why

the world is where it is today. Clara does recognize that nature and herself are one, and she is curious about what transpires underground in the same way that she is curious about herself. Sophie Winqvist Loggins, the cinematographer, and I wanted to give a very visceral feeling through touch – to bring the audience closer to the way Clara experiences the world with its animals, wind, plants, earth, water, fire and subtle magic.

Choosing to shoot it the way we did wasn't challenging as it was part of the vision. But of course, we had to be very patient and careful with nature – the river totally owned us and we had to be very careful with our human team and technical equipment, while the small insects and Yuca required big amounts of patience and care. You can't really direct nature, it will rain and the mud will be deep – so I try to be very flexible: there's no other choice really when you're filming on a tight budget.



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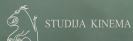
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