

# Tótem

A film by Lila Avilés



95 mins/Mexico/Denmark/France/2023 / Spanish with English subtitles

**Berlin Film Festival (Competition) 2023**

**December 1<sup>st</sup> 2023**

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## SYNOPSIS

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.

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## Cast

Sol  
Nuri  
Alejandra  
Esther  
Tonatiuh  
Cruz  
Napo  
Lucía  
Roberto

Naíma Senties  
Montserrat Marañon  
Marisol Gasé  
Saori Gurza  
Mateo García Elizondo  
Teresita Sánchez  
Juan Francisco Maldonado  
Iazua Larios  
Alberto Amador

## Crew

Director & screenwriter  
DOP  
Edition  
Sound Design  
Music  
Sound Mixer  
Production Design  
Costumes  
Make up  
Casting  
Assistant Director  
Production Manager  
Co Producers

Producers  
With the support of

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

Lila Avilés  
Diego Tenorio  
Omar Guzmán  
Guido Berenblum  
Thomas Becka  
Rune Palving  
Nohemi González Martínez  
Nora Solís and Jimena Fernández  
Vanessa Campos  
Gabriela Cartol and Lila Avilés  
Carmina Carballal  
Héctor Zubieta  
Per Damgaard Hansen,  
Jean-Baptiste Bailly-Maitre  
Tatiana Graullera, Lila Avilés, Louise Riousse  
EFICINE PRODUCCIÓN-BBVA,  
Danish Film Institute, HBF HUBERT BALS,  
AIDE AUX CINÉMAS DU MONDE – CNC,  
Visions Sud Est  
the SDC (Swiss Agency  
for Development and Cooperation)



## LILA AVILÉS

Lila Avilés is a Mexican independent film director, screenwriter and producer, she founded her company Limerencia Films in 2018. Her first feature film *The Chambermaid* from 2018 was chosen to represent Mexico at the 2020 Oscars and Goya Awards. It was invited to more than sixty festivals around the world where it received many international and national awards, plus a strong reception from critics.

She has been jury member at many international film festivals.

## FILMOGRAPHY

2023 *Tótem*

Berlin Film Festival Competition

2023 *Eye Two Times Mouth (Ojo Dos Veces Boca)* - short

2018 *The Chambermaid (La Camarista)*

Ariel Award for Best Debut, Mexico's entry for the American Academy Awards 2020

[Released by New Wave Films in 2019](#)

2017 *Nena* (documentary short)

2016 *Déjà Vu* (short)





### Director's statement

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 interests 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."



## 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 behaviours 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 wildflower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour. From this beginning, I just started to write, to mould 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 language, 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 consciencely handling that, because it can also work as a pandoras box. 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.

