



A fantastic woman

Director: Sebastián Lelio

Country: Chile

Date: 2017

A review by Ryan Gilbey for *The Guardian*:

The dynamic Chilean comedy *Gloria* went down a storm at the 2013 Berlinale where Paulina García was named best actress for her portrayal of a divorcee hitting the Santiago singles circuit. Now its director, Sebastián Lelio, is back at this year's festival with another story of a resilient female refusing to live her life according to the demands of others. *A Fantastic Woman* has emerged as the mid-festival favourite for the Golden Bear, with the newcomer Daniela Vega likely to get her hands on the same prize as García. Such a win would be not only deserved but unprecedented, since it would make Vega the first transgender performer to scoop a major acting award.

Although *A Fantastic Woman* reunites the *Gloria* team, including Lelio's co-writer, Gonzalo Maza, and his ambitious cinematographer, Benjamín Echazarreta, the tone of the new film is moody, even Hitchcockian in places, with precious few of the depressurising laughs of its predecessor. That's only to be expected when the opposition faced by Marina (Vega), a young transgender singer in a relationship with an older man, is so brutal. She has only just moved in with Orlando (Francisco Reyes) when he suffers a fatal aneurysm. Before his body is even cold, she is being treated with suspicion and contempt by the authorities.

They're pussycats compared to Orlando's family, who openly insult the grieving woman. His flinty ex-wife, Sonia (Aline Küppenheim), bans her from the funeral, while his dishevelled son, Bruno (Nicolás Saavedra), graduates quickly from contempt to violence. An investigation into Orlando's death is conducted by the brusque Adriana (Amparo Noguera), who heads the Sexual Offences Unit. She tells Marina that she understands and supports her, but the look of revulsion on her face tells a different story. Lelio has rather mischievously littered the cast with doppelgangers: Adriana and Sonia are dead ringers for one another, while Marina's pick-up in a gay nightclub is the spit of Bruno. It's as though the rest of the world has descended into one homogenous, hostile mass, with Marina distinguished not by gender but by her courage.



A Fantastic Woman is ultimately a battle about point of view and who gets control of it. Orlando's family is thrown into chaos because life for them stops being exactly as it always was. When they meet Marina, they literally cannot believe their eyes. "I don't know what I'm seeing," gasps Sonia, while Bruno says: "I don't know what you are." What they can't comprehend is that this isn't their story. Whereas, say, *The Crying Game* views its trans character exclusively through male eyes and male desire, *A Fantastic Woman* affords Marina her own identity and perspective. It is her experience, rather than the way she appears to others, which defines everything from camera placement to music to the brief detours into fantasy which include a tinsel-strewn dance number. When the camera does finally show her practically naked, it is in a casual moment of relaxed solitude, rather than during the intrusive physical examination that is sprung on her earlier in the film.

Others keep trying to impose their vision of Marina on her. In the most disturbing scene, she is temporarily disfigured by her tormentors, who are desperate to make her see how she looks through their

eyes. But they don't realise they are mere supporting characters in a movie that celebrates her strength and spirit. In the restaurant where she waits tables, the walls are decorated with snarling triceratops and jabbing pterosaurs, but it is her enemies who are the real dinosaurs here. Perhaps that's why Lelio stages his own version of that moment in Jurassic Park when a car is menaced by a runaway Tyrannosaurus rex. Only here it's Marina doing the menacing for once, playing the dinosaurs at their own game.

Vega dominates virtually every frame, with Echazarreta's widescreen compositions placing her at the centre of closeups that revel in her quick, darting intelligence; she's like a softer, sweeter Tracey Emin. And she must have worn out a fair few pedometers during the endless backwards dolly shots in which she strides purposefully along the streets toward the retreating camera. Empathy was never going to be a problem for a film this single-minded. We have walked many miles in Marina's shoes by the time she embarks upon a hilltop run near the end of the movie, rising at last above the concrete and cruelty of the city below.



Two familiar names crop up in the end credits – Lelio's countryman Pablo Larraín (Jackie, The Club) and the Toni Erdmann director Maren Ade are both credited as producers. With *A Fantastic Woman*, Lelio proves himself easily their equal, as well as suggesting that he may be a pretender to Almodóvar's throne. He is currently directing Rachel Weisz and Rachel McAdams in his first English-language film, *Disobedience*, which he has adapted with the British playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz from Naomi

Alderman's novel. For now, though, he should savour the considerable accomplishment of *A Fantastic Woman*. It may be a timely film, but it is its timelessness, as well as its depths of compassion, that qualify it as a great one.

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A Boring Afternoon (Czechoslovakia, 1962, 13 mins)

"A Boring Afternoon" won the Grand Prix at the Locarno Film Festival in the early 1960s even though its director, Ivan Passer, was unaware that it had been entered! He later went on to direct "Intimate Lighting", described by Krzysztof Kieslowski as "one of the ten films that have most affected me" and worked closely with Milos Forman (director of "Amadeus" and "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest") on a number of films. Following the 1968 Soviet invasion, Passer moved to the USA – he is probably best known for "Cutter's Way", made in 1983 and starring Jeff Bridges.

