



Rara



Director: Pepa San Martin
Country: Chile
Date: 2016

A review by Jonathan Holland for *The Hollywood Reporter*:

Home is where the hurt is in *Rara*, a take on a conservative society's quietly destructive effects on a lesbian marriage. But though that might look forbiddingly earnest as a summary, *Rara* is anything but. Wonderfully light of touch, full of well-observed human detail and even-handedly compassionate, this richly human film is full of the quieter values and is topped off by an assured performance of great maturity by the young Julia Lubbert as the teen, Sara, whose moving tale this really is.

The script, co-written by Chilean director Alicia Scherson, is based on true events: the 2004 loss of custody by a Chilean judge of her children because of her sexual orientation. But what could easily have been a Kramer-vs.-Kramer yarn of courtroom battles and fine speeches is in fact a gentle but taut study of a family slowly falling apart without quite knowing why. (It's giving nothing away to say that San Martin's story ends before the trial begins.)

Paula (Mariana Loyola, best-known to non-Chilean auds from Sebastian Silva's *The Maid*) has separated from Victor (Daniel Muñoz), and is now living with Lia (Agustina Muñoz) along with her children, Sara (Lubbert) and the younger Catalina (Emilia Ossandon, bespectacled and delightful, but not cutesy). Domestically, things are superficially fine, with Victor and his new partner Nicole happily joining in — but even from the outset there's a sense of threat, with a drawing by Catalina of the all-female family having raised eyebrows at school.

Sara (note the significant rhyme with the title, which means 'strange' in Spanish) has had the braces removed from her teeth, which in the lives of many youngsters symbolizes the arrival of adolescence: now, in theory at least, she can get on with some kissing. As well as sharing her secrets with her friend Pancha (Micaela Cristi), Sara is starting to flirt, particularly with Julian (Nicolas Vigneaux). Cata, meanwhile, is obsessed by a kitten whose role in the story, despite its obvious symbolism and generating early kitten alarm bells, actually works fine.

The pressure is on Sara and her family — a subtle pressure made all the more dangerous by the fact that those who are imposing it believe they're doing it for the best. Paula's provincial-minded mother reminds her daughter not to advertise the marriage, while Victor is unhappy with the girls' school performances on their domestic set-up, and the script is very clever on how, in such circumstances, problems which may



have nothing to do with same sex parents are immediately ascribed to precisely that. A turning-point comes following an outburst from the increasingly pressurized Paula after which Sara storms off through the night towards Victor's house: From now on, it's only a matter of time before Victor's long-sought custody battle will ensue.

If you put a little girl into glasses and have her obsessed by a kitten, then cutesiness will generally follow, but not here. The kitten is an index of Catalina's neediness, which

comes more and more to the fore as societal pressures increase and the trial looms. Thus nothing in Rara feels explicit or forced: the script works by displaying, rather than commenting on, situations and conversations in which the tensions are increasingly felt by characters and viewer alike.

Many societies have moved beyond the lingering sexism that blights even the modern Latin American cultures, and so Rara's subject matter might feel a little outmoded in some territories. But actually, the film's pleasures go well beyond its message of social injustice. Its observation of the rhythms and rituals of domestic life are spot on, with one fleeting example enough to show it: After Victor is nagged by Nicole to wash his hands before dinner, he in turn instantly and pathetically feels obliged to reclaim his power by in turn nagging Sara to take her feet off the sofa. This kind of glancing, subtle humor is typical of the film's tone throughout.

Indeed, Victor is well-played by Munoz as a slightly pathetic, well-meaning figure who wishes to have his daughters return to him despite the fact that it's pretty clear he's no good at communicating with them: At times of strife, all he can do, annoyingly to her, is meaninglessly stroke Sara's hair.

All performances are indeed fine, but it's the youngsters who impress most, particularly in their conversations together. It is fascinating and moving to see how, in the absence of guidance from the bickering elders who are using them as pawns in their power games, Sara is left alone to assume the role of Cata's real mother, even as her own confusions mount and end in her rejection of Julian, with whom she should surely be hanging out. Lubbert, who appears in most scenes and whose point of view the film essentially represents, wonderfully conveys the split inside Sara — necessarily tough on the outside, fearful within.



The final few minutes are intensely moving, with Ignacio Perez Marin's score starting up for practically the first time in the film to perfectly encapsulate the gentle, bittersweet tone of the film as a whole.

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