



Totem

Director: Lila Avilés

Country: Mexico

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A review by Wendy Ide for *The Guardian*:

Writer-director Lila Avilés's tender film, told largely through the eyes of a seven-year-old girl, is a minutely observed ensemble piece in which grief and celebration go hand in hand

“When will the world end?” There’s a great deal of uncertainty in the life of seven-year-old Sol (Naíma Senties) right now, so she takes her mother’s phone to a quiet corner away from the bustle in her grandfather’s house and puts her big question to Siri. The little girl has picked up enough from the fragments of conversation of the adults thronging in the house to understand that, while the end is still a way off, her world, or at least part of it, is about to change for ever.



The second film from Mexican actor turned writer-director Lila Avilés, *Tótem* is exquisite – a vital ensemble drama that’s suffused with joy and love. Taking a child’s-eye view of the controlled chaos of preparations for a birthday party in honour of Sol’s terminally ill father, Tonatiuh (Mateo García Elizondo), it deftly balances grief against celebration; the shadow of death against a frame that is perpetually teeming with life (human, insect, animal and a goldfish named Nugget).

It’s a picture that cements Avilés as one of the brightest talents in a new wave of female Mexican directors – a movement that also includes Tatiana Huezo (*Prayers for the Stolen*), Fernanda Valadez (*Identifying Features*) and Issa López (*Tigers Are Not Afraid*). *Tótem* also represents a marked step up in terms of ambition and scope. Avilés’s widely acclaimed debut, *The Chambermaid* (2019), was a contained, subdued character study that followed the daily routine of a maid in a high-end luxury hotel in Mexico City. Like the diligent, quiet woman at its centre, it was hyper-observant, unusually tuned in to tiny details.

Tótem shares an instinctive, naturalistic approach with *The Chambermaid* but is more exuberant and intuitive, a free-flowing, multifaceted portrait of an extended family. The meticulous, minute details are still there, and the camera is attuned to them, but there’s something more satisfyingly complex at play here – a harmony of energies (and occasional moments of discord) that depicts the family both as individuals and as a single entity, a living, breathing creature. Avilés cites the work of John Cassavetes as an influence and describes the picture as a “choral” film. It’s a term that perfectly captures the minor key tenderness and attentiveness of *Tótem*’s embrace.

Grief hits everyone differently. Sol’s aunt, Tonatiuh’s sister Nuria (Montserrat Marañón), shaved off her hair in solidarity with her brother after his cancer diagnosis, only to note, wryly, that he has managed to keep his flowing locks intact. Nuria numbs her pain with several bottles of wine and channels her love into a birthday cake, painted in the style of Van Gogh and fine-tuned obsessively in the kitchen while the party is in full swing in the garden. Finishing it, you sense, is a step that Nuria is unwilling to take, symbolic of severing yet another link with her brother.

Meanwhile, her sister, Ale (Marisol Gasé), pays for a grifter spiritualist to rid the house of negative energy (“I also sell Tupperware,” says the opportunistic medium, having price-gouged Ale on the cost of an exorcism). Sol’s grandfather (Alberto Amador) gives his son the gift of a bonsai tree that he has cultivated for the past seven years. We see in Tonatiuh’s anguished smile of thanks that the tree is certain to outlive him. And in a heartbreakingly poignant scene, Sol and her actor mother, Lucía (Iazua Larios), put on a clown-wigged comedy performance in honour of the occasion.



There is no score, only the party playlist the characters hear. But Avilés finds music in the rhythms of the conversations, in particular the shorthand exchanges and in-jokes between family members who know each other inside out. In this aspect, I suspect that non-Spanish speakers relying on the subtitles – myself included – may be missing out on some of the subtleties of Avilés’s screenplay. But the film’s visual language is universal. Lithe, long takes weave between the legs of adults and turn the furniture into a playground. There’s a wayward sense of adventure in the way the camera moves within the walls of the house, reflecting a seven-year-old’s curiosity and quest for discovery. And the lyrical, recurring motif of animals and insects – a device also used in another film about terminal disease, Shannon Murphy’s *Babyteeth* (2019) – gives a sense of continuity and connection with the wider natural world, and an acceptance of the beauty and inevitability of cycles of life and death.

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