

HOME > REVIEWS > IN THEATERS > XUN SERO'S DOCUMENTARY "MAMÁ" COVERS A LOT OF GROUND IN ITS SIMPLE PREMISE OF A MOTHER/SON CONVERSATION. [IMAGENATIVE]

## Xun Sero's documentary "Mamá" covers a lot of ground in its simple premise of a mother/son conversation. [imageNATIVE]

BY DOUGLAS DAVIDSON on NOVEMBER 30, 2023 • ( 0 )

When we're children, we look to our parents for our needs. We rejoice when we get what we ask for, and we encounter terrible pains when we don't. That pain can turn into resentment to the point where it festers and the relationship turns acrid. This is the beginning point for first-time feature filmmaker Xun Sero's new documentary *Mamá* (Mom), screening during imagineNATIVE 2023, which is executed as a conversation between mother and son amid images of their life as they exist now as they discuss what was then. Sero's film is one of heartbreak, determination, and survival in a patriarchal system that rewards men always and destroys women.



Hilda Rodríguez in Xun Sero's documentary MAMÁ. Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE and Xun Sero.

In the official summary for *Mamá*, Sero describes the film as a "dialogue" and the structure of the film supports this. Though Sero himself primarily stays behind the camera and the video/audio is of today, much of the discussions are about subjects that took place a long time ago. In the opening, there are two scenes, one after the other, which convey the varying tone and approach of the film as observer and interrogator of time "and" as active participant in the journey of discovery. In the first scene, the camera holds on a fire as it's being stoked by an unseen hand with no other light but that of the flame in the picture. As the hand moves around the base of the fire, a voice tells us that men will say all kinds of things when they want to get a woman alone and then resort to violence in private. As the dialogue continues, a figure (we presume that of the stoker) sits down in the distance of the frame against the wall as if secluded, hidden, or pushed away from the light. In the scene that follows, what ends up being the same room is fully lit, a figure revealed to be Sero's mother, Hilda Rodríguez, chopping away at a large green squash with a machete. What differs here, in addition to the staging and lighting, is the conversation that takes place about getting Hilda in frame as she chops, with Hilda occasionally stating through slight laughter that if she loses a finger it'll be their fault for distracting her through their verbal back-and-forth regarding framing. This is how *Mamá* mostly proceeds, with either the camera capturing Hilda doing something, aspects of nature, or the bustling life of the city she lives in (with extreme attention paid to the women and girls sitting by streets trying to sell wares) "or" through a back-and-forth with Sero, sometimes on-screen sometimes off.



A scene from Xun Sero's documentary MAMÁ. Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE and Xun Sero.

In the first type of scene work, Hilda tells us about her youth: the violence she endured as a young girl of nine refusing to marry an older man, the violence done to her when she was older that made her a mother, and the chronicling the ways in which she survived in spite of the lack of community support, as well as identifying those who didn't abandon her. In these portions, Sero either has Hilda in frame as she tells her story or uses a montage technique to show modern life as she talks about the past. Through this technique, one gets the sense that however long it go it was that this happened to her, it was not so far away that the girls and young women Sero settles into frame wouldn't likely face similar troubles in the same situation. It's here that past and present collide, instilling a sense of bitter dread despite the uplifting and often funny or touching moments we spend with Hilda herself.



R: Hilda Rodríguez in Xun Sero's documentary MAMÁ. Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE and Xun Sero.

In the second type of scene work, one might expect the involvement of Sero, either by vocal narration or inclusion in a scene, to reduce the authenticity of the journey just as one may question how true data can be when a subject knows they're being observed. In these instances, however, the inclusion of Sero deepens the impact of Hilda's story. Their relationship is more than cordial, it's loving, and she ribs him frequently on the things he's not so good at while being open to receiving some of it herself. When Sero's narration comes on, it's usually self-reflection, like he's sharing with us and his mother some long-held belief that, upon becoming an adult, he recognizes the poisoned well of his upbringing. Their conversation isn't just of a son recognizing his mother or vice versa, but of a person recognizing the complexity of another. More specifically, that all the things that troubled Sero in his youth, that made him come to disprove of or even have occasional feelings of hate for his mother, come entirely from all the things he didn't know as a child under the protection of a mother who is also a person saddled with multifaceted social and cultural responsibilities that only hamper women and not men. It's here, whether we're watching them each struggle to skin a rabbit (mostly not shown on screen, for the squeamish) or sharing a meal, that we come to see that the dialogue between them is as much about closing the gap that may exist between them as it is the ways in which women are given the burden of virtually everything and men nothing.



Hilda Rodríguez in Xun Sero's documentary MAMÁ. Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE and Xun Sero.

There's much of Sero's film that's powerful. The cinematography of Sero and José A. Jiménez (*Tote Abuelo*) is both free-floating and natural, sometimes seeming entirely spontaneous in what the camera captures, while alternatively laser-focused in its capture of aspects of both rural and city life. The synopsis says that Sero was raised caught between faith and nature and the cinematography matches this, as though it is somewhere between following tacitum rules of cinema and the unpredictability of the moment. Where one might expect this to create conflict or message distortion, it only empowers it, especially as one begins to realize that this dialogue between mother and son isn't just about repairing their own relationship, seeing each other as adults, but also as Hilda's experience goes from a private, culturally shameful tale, to a public, socially-supported one. Especially as we learn that Hilda, through a spot of luck, works to report on clinics and how they can help the community, her story of abuse and violence via Sero's documentary may help encourage others to get or receive support that would have aided her so long ago.



Hilda Rodríguez in Xun Sero's documentary MAMÁ. Image courtesy of imagineNATIVE and Xun Sero.

Though produced in 2022, *Mamá* continues to screen from Hot Docs 2022 to imagineNative now, and there's a reason it keeps booking screenings: it's a powerful and intimate story that's local to their home, but sadly universal. To live in shame is to think of oneself as less-than and to grow up unaware of what makes your parent a person can taint your view of who you are and what your life can be. Now, with Hilda's truth out there, we and Sero can do our part to ensure that there are less violators of trust freely roaming the streets and more families with peace in their hearts.

Screening during [imagineNATIVE 2023](#).

For more information, head either to the official [imagineNATIVE 2023](#) webpage or [Mamá website](#).

Final Score: 4 out of 5.



Share this:  
Facebook 13 X Post Twitter Save Post Reddit Email Print Pocket 0  
Telegram WhatsApp

Like this:  
☆ Like Be the first to like this.

Documentarian Bob Rose wants you to have next in "Token Taverns: An Arcade Bar Documentary." Chose to raise or call on VCI Entertainment's Blu-ray restoration of dramedy "The Gamblers." >

Categories: In Theaters, Reviews, Streaming Tags: documentary, drama, film festival, foreign film, Hilda Rodríguez, history, imagineNATIVE, imagineNATIVE 2023, José A. Jiménez, Maya Tzuc, Mexico, Spanish, Terra Nostra Films, Xun Sero

Leave a Reply

Write a comment...

Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

### Places To Find Me



### Subscribe to Blog via Email

Enter your email address to subscribe to this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

Email Address

Subscribe

### Archives

Select Month

### Link

Critics Choice Association  
NC Film Critics Association  
Southeastern Film Critics Association  
CLTure  
FilmFed  
Pretty Vacant One  
Poprika Reviews  
Rotten Tomatoes

### Pages

About EoM

### Elements of Madness