



FILM: **TOTEM**

FDG RATING: 4.2 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Lila Avilés: *director, writer*
Naïma Senties: *actress, Sol*
Marisol Gasé: *actress, Alejandra. (Sol's mother)*
Montserrat Marañón: *actress, Nuria*

DATE: July 21, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **TOTEM**

The 2023 film, Totem, takes place in Mexico, in a single day, almost entirely filmed in one crowded house. It's seven year old Sol's grandfather's house, where the extended family is busy making party preparations to celebrate the birthday of Sol's father, Tona, who is critically ill and resting upstairs under the tender, careful watch of his caretaker, Cruz. Sol's aunts and other relatives create a whirlwind of bustling energy with the emotional undercurrent hanging in all their hearts, anticipating and dreading the event. We see each member coping differently. Tona's sister, Nuria, is intensely focused on the cake she is making, self-isolating herself. Her other aunt is overdosing on alcohol, not wanting to accept the inevitable.

In the opening scenes, we see the fun, loving, close, relationship Sol has with her mother. Driving to her grandfather's house, they share silly laughs and both hold their breath as they go under the bridge. Then they each must make a wish. Sol says her wish is that her father won't die.

Totem is a poignant and emotional film crowded with ancestral spirituality as the title implies. Superstitions abound. The family summons, "spirit hunters" to inspect the house and drive away evil energies but, of course, the family who is already having money problems and wondering how to pay for chemotherapy, is overcharged, since their house was much more difficult than expected. A witch doctor also visits the home to perform an exorcism.

For Sol, animals and insects offer some solace and have a special spirituality. Outside the house, she collects a handful of snails then puts them deep into the plants to purposefully line them up. She comes inside and places them on the paintings in the house, watching them slowly slink across the art.

The camera is completely focused on the family with intimate closeups of their faces, and the filming is done in the manner of a hand-held video, but a few abrupt close shots of a praying mantis (representing prayer and the cycle of life), a honeycomb of bees, and ants climbing up a wall, create a pause in the hustle bustle that includes roughhousing youngsters, bickering adults, and pets scampering about.

With all the commotion, no one pays attention to Sol, except finally, Cruz, notices Sol almost hiding in a corner, and understanding that this is a very difficult time for her, sincerely asks how is she doing. Sol desperately wants to see her father who Cruz is carefully helping get dressed for the party. The other family members try to protect her from seeing him but Cruz asks her father if it is ok and he agrees. We see that they have a loving, gentle relationship.

We agreed that the acting was outstanding and seemed so authentic, as if someone was showing us a home video. It did not seem scripted or staged. A memorable scene is toward the end when Cruz helps Tona join the party outside. He sees all of his friends holding up a mask of a smiling, young handsome Tona. As one discussion participant noted, this truly is a celebration of a loving life in the midst of dying. Tona's father is an artist. As a special gift to his daughter, he creates a large painting of her favorite animals.

The young actress was spectacular. A published critic highlighted the role of director Avilés stating that this film cements her skill at directing dynamic ensemble performances. One discussion participant who diligently critiques our films, gave it high praise saying it is a wonderful movie about the intermix of death and life in the day of an observant young girl. The choice of an aria from Lucia di Lammermoor for the climactic lip-sync scene at the end is inspired:

Sprinkle with bitter tears my earthly remains, while in heaven above I pray for you.
To join with you only then will be beautiful, heaven, to me!

The final scene is especially poignant. Tona is supposed to make a birthday wish but he says, "I have no wish" and blows out the candles on his cake. One day brings so much of the past to the present was another insightful comment. Some felt that the story was too somber and slow paced. Others disagreed feeling that there was pain but also so much love and joy. We appreciated the rich insight into their Mexican culture.

Totem received world wide acclaim and was named one of the top five international films of 2023 by the National Board of Review. We celebrated a spirited score of 4.2 for Totem on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best)



See you at the movies!
Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net
www.filmdiscussiongroup.com