



La Sirga

A Film by William Vega

"Thoroughly engrossing! A triumph!"

Rob Nelson, *Variety*



Drama / Colombia / 88 Min / Spanish / 1:1.85

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SYNOPSIS

Alicia is helpless. Traumatizing war memories invade her mind like a ceaseless storm. Uprooted from her destroyed village by the armed conflict, Alicia tries to start a new life in La Sirga, a decadent hostel on the shores of a great lake in the highlands of the Andes. The house belongs to Oscar, her only family member alive, and an old solitary hermit. There, on a swampy and murky beach, she will try to settle down until her fears and the threat of war resurface again.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

WINNER of Cinema In Construction Award & Cine Award **TOULOUSE Film Festival**

WINNER, Choral Award for the Best First Feature Film – **HAVANA Film Festival**

WINNER, Special Jury Award and Best Photography – **LIMA Film Festival**

WINNER, Best Director – **VLADIVOSTOCK Film Festival**

WINNER, Best Feature Film – **BRATISLAVA Film Festival**

WINNER, FIPRESCI Award for Best Feature Film – **MAR DE PLATA Film Festival**

WINNER, Best Director and Best Cinematography – **RIVERRUN Film Festival**

SPECIAL JURY MENTION FOR THE BEST FIRST FEATURE FILM – CUENCA Film Festival

OFFICIAL SELECTION

CANNES Film Festival (Director's Fortnight)

SAN SEBASTIAN Film Festival

TORONTO International Film Festival

SAN JUAN International Film Festival

ST. LOUIS International Film Festival

SANTA BARBARA International Film Festival

MIAMI International Film Festival

DIRECTORS STATEMENT (WILLIAM VEGA)

I took on writing and directing this story out of the need of recovering the narrative tradition to which I belong. My first mission as creative director beckons the question of which stories do I owe myself, which are able to captivate and invade me. This is how, with much pleasure, I remember the myths and legends that speak of villages, gods, semi gods, heroes and indigenous martyrs that perform around the great lakes. These places tucked in the Andes range have for centuries been the epicenter of wisdom, which thanks to our oral tradition permit the preservation of the tales that occurred there, and also those that have been invented. This fascination for the enchanted lakes of Latin America is the starting point for inventing my own story.

Writing *La Sirga* originated from my being seduced by the thought of a peripheral geographic location unknown to Colombians and the world. The manifestation of wonderment from the people of that area goes way beyond the space itself. Farmers with an Indian legacy are today ideologically resistant to maintain their traditions, for a clean and transparent relationship with the land and their brothers, so that it may extend throughout time and beyond space. Families and neighbors construct admirable lives amidst a country suffering conflict, hunger, inequality and war. This is a community with a proposal to transform thinking and relationships, which other brothers are unaware of, brothers who hurt and bleed the earth dry.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

The Contravía Films partner William Vega earned a degree in Social Communications from the University of Valle in 2004 and a master's in Film and Television Script from the College of Arts and Entertainment TAI Madrid in 2008. He has worked as a university professor, director, screenwriter, and assistant director for film, video and TV projects.

His first short film as a director and writer was *Amnesia* (2001) which was an Official Selection at the Havana Film Festival (Cuba 2002) and Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography at Colombia's 2002 Césares Awards. Two years later he directed *Sunrise* (2003) with Oscar Ruiz Navia, which won Best Fiction Film at the Equinoxio Festival (Colombia 2003) and was selected to be in the Toulouse Film Festival Section, "Ecran Libre" (France 2005).

In 2004 William worked at Telepacífico, a cultural TV Channel, as a director of the series *EducaTV*, produced by the National Education Ministry, Ecopetrol and the Carvajal Foundation. *EducaTV* won First Prize for Best Educational Series at the Telefestival of Young Video ATEI (Spain 2004). In 2005 he

directed his 3rd short film *Tricolor Fútbol Club*, produced by Antorcha Films, and screened in more than 250 theaters of Cine Colombia. Later, William was part of the team television series *Juan Mochilas*, produced by SEÑALCOLOMBIA, cultural TV Channel.

After one year studying screenwriting in Spain, and working on the structure of LA SIRGA, he came back to Colombia and was the Assistant Director of the feature *El Vuelco del Cangre (Crab Trap)* directed by Oscar Ruiz Navia, winner of the FIPRESCI prize at the Berlin Film Festival 2010.

His most recent short film *Simiente*, shot in Lake La Cocha, was released in Latin America in the International Short Film Festival Sao Paulo (Brazil 2011) and participated in the Film Festival of Havana (Cuba) that same year. He also received the award for best photography at the Festival Invitro (Colombia). The short film *Simiente* was a major source of inspiration for Vega in his production of *La Sirga*.

2012 : LA SIRGA
2011 : *Simiente* (short)
2011 : *Tricolor Fútbol Club* (short)
2003 : *Sunrise* (short)
2001 : *Amnesia* (short)

CINEMATOGRAPHER'S STATEMENT (SOFIA OGGIONI HATTY)

Looking through the fog is like looking through unfocused lenses. The figures get lost in blurred colors. Looking across the fog is like cautiously observing those undefined contours that are slowly revealed through it. The mist and the cold are the weather constraints on the lake and, therefore, set the climate of the film. The mist is the regulator of the information that is seen. It is selective and only shows us what it wants us to see.

But it is not only the mist that commands what is composed by the image. In all outdoor shots the light is natural light, always soft but contrasting the outdoor cold colors with the warmth generated by the indoor candlelight. The candles and the fire are important elements in the story, as not only do they register the isolation of the location where electricity is not available, but are also the lighting scheme for the interior of the hostel.

The lighting within the house, aside from reflecting a lifestyle, determines the description of the relationships between the characters, provided by candle lit closed frames with unfocused elements. The fire is a diegetic source of light for the outdoor night scenes; like the fog in the daytime, the darkness swallows the landscape that becomes an abstraction.

ABOUT THE CAST AND CHARACTERS

JOGHIS ARIAS (Alicia)

Acting was never part of Joghis Arias's plans. When she was eight years old, she and her mother were forced to run away from their hometown in Florida Valle (Colombia) to her maternal grandmother's home in Florencia (Caquetá). Her father and her grandfather died amidst the conflict, which forever shaped her life. When she graduated from school, it was very clear to her that she did not want to have the same fate as most of the girls in her town, pregnant at an early age. She knew that she should find her future in the city where she wanted to study Social Communication.

When she was 16, Jorghis tried to enter the Universidad del Valle. Based on recommendations, she enrolled in the Scenic Arts program hoping that would ensure her acceptance to the University, and later transfer to Social Communication. When audition time arrived, she did not have a monologue nor had she ever seen a theatre performance. But the young prodigy was one of the five selected among 50 candidates.

During her first semesters, she questioned the usefulness of acting, but an assignment on autobiographic stories changed her perspective and her professional title changed. Taking ownership of her own grief and life experiences helped Joghis Arias see acting as something more than a mimetic exercise, but rather a perfect communion and connection of the actor with space and the audience. After her classmates' insistence, Jorghis reluctantly decided to try out for the casting of *La Sirga*.

Jorghis always wonders what the director would have thought if he knew that the second time they met at her home, she had asked the doorman to closely watch the suspicious stranger. Her reluctance on that day made her smile, after working with William she is very fond of him, as he used to talk to her about the vicissitudes of a young country-girl seeking to cling to her only lifeline. The dynamic was similar to that of *Scheherezade*-day after day the young girl's story was enriched, but you could never tell how it would end.

Alicia's blurry image unveils through the fog; her face becomes visible only when she falls down. She rises up from lightness, but her journey is determined by the magnitude of her breakdown. The armed conflict forced her separation from her family; this sorrow motivated her departure, a journey where she comes along with the fog, and like when water gets released from the clouds, there is an intense expectation for the moment when the inevitable will break out. Alicia is stunned, suspended in time. She moves like the fog, softly pushed by the wind and the last drop of inward

energy: finding her uncle Oscar, the only relative who is still alive. She moves so as not to die, but not necessarily to live.

Interpreting this character encouraged Joghis to talk about the loss of her father and grandfather. It is Alicia's life, a simple life that people can identify as an organic character who takes ownership of a problem in which "one cannot tell who are the good guys and who are the bad guys; one is simply there, in the middle...It means finding courage and strength at all times. Alicia is the metaphor of the beginning, of starting over again".

In the diegesis of *La Sirga*, Alicia is an evolving character: from her breakdown, represented by her fall, to that moment of peace and stability reached at the hostel after being so badly wounded. Her end is a new beginning, an encounter with her inner self that fills her with strength.

For both, Joghis and Alicia, the lake is a special place. Jorghis was often quite stressed at the beginning of the shoot, until she realized that she could not go against the pace of nature, as the lake means stability and equilibrium. That is why Alicia sleepwalks towards the lake, "the lake is the call to forget our ties. It means finding a liberating energy". As much as *La Sirga* was an inner self-encounter for her through Alicia, it meant being in communion with nature and the artistic soul.

JULIO CESAR ROBLE (Oscar)

Although he had never acted before, interpreting the role of Uncle Oscar was not difficult for Julio César Roble. From the onset he understood the role of his character in *La Sirga*, as in many ways Oscar represented his inner self, his spiritual leadership and his commitment to society. He strongly believes in the call from the lake. It is not by chance that he came in touch with *La Sirga*, or by a casting he randomly attended; it is more a stroke of fate, a life he has committed to others. He was born in Popayan and defines himself as an empirical sociologist and humanist; he has worked with indigenous and afro communities and currently is the president of an NGO aimed at protecting the wellbeing of miners.

In Julio Cesar's opinion, Oscar is a lonely man who combines kindness and protection with bitterness. The sorrow caused by the abandonment of his wife and child make him introverted, only moved by routine. He is aware that it all ended and that it makes no sense trying to avoid it. However, Oscar harbors parental warmth inside and struggles to improve the life quality of the neighboring peasants by leading common benefit projects. The old man is a protector, a community guardian, and slowly becomes Alicia's guardian, bringing back some life to the household.

While the production team rested, Julio César spent time with the lake

natives, sharing his knowledge with them and, in turn, nourishing from theirs. He even submitted a proposal to the Ministry of the Interior to create a university in the rural district of El Encano.

The State welcomed the project, which is currently underway, and he now proudly states "more so than acting, my mission was to help the community".

Uncle Oscar is the faithful protector, in his laconic manner, who watches over everyone's well-being. Oscar, the oldest character in *La Sirga*, reveals rural traditional customs as well as the wisdom gained with experience.

DAVID FERNANDO GUACAS (Mirichis)

David Fernando Guacas is currently about to finish his Master degree in Visual Arts at Universidad de Nariño. By chance, his profession allowed him to learn about the film world. He joined the Aleph Teatro foundation, where he started as a light technician and stage designer for national and international performances. Very soon afterwards he got the opportunity to act in the play "Los Clavijos" (winner of the Bicentenary Scenes Scholarship offered by the Ministry of Culture). It was during this production he came upon the opportunity for the casting for *La Sirga*. By chance, he met the film's director, William Vega, who invited him to the casting.

Mirichis is the lake messenger, a joyful, sociable individual liked by everyone in *La Sirga*. Mirichis' character unveils gradually. Initially he is a rascal trying to get Alicia's attention. While rescuing her from her own fall, a second tier starts to unravel as he becomes the companion of the lonely girl. Once he gains her trust, he is willing to help her overcome her pain and invites her to live again, to get to know the magic of La Cocha and to trust again. However, in this journey a mysterious character, who knows how to keep a secret, emerges.

Mirichis buffers everyone's timid perspective of the conflict. He is unafraid, and because of that he becomes an enigmatic character. Mirichis goes to those places that others do not even dare to mention. He is the character who has clarity and defined motivations and to achieve his goal, to move away from the conflict, he must venture in his boat across the lake, through the fog, where one does not know what is hidden.

After filming *La Sirga*, David Guacas admits he is proud of his work and is more confident in his abilities. Initially he was afraid because the world of movies was unknown to him, but Gabriel opened the door to the audiovisual world, discovering movies as an art form. He is currently working on a number of regional documentaries for Señal Colombia: "Cochaguaira, between the pagan and the divine".

FLORALBA ACHICANOY (Flora)

Even though acting is important in her life, it is an activity that Floralba Achicanoy has not been able to actively pursue. After years of being away from the theatre, Achicanoy first learned about the auditions for *La Sirga* through a local TV channel. Her respect for Vega and for the location of the film motivated her to accept the casting. La Cocha lake is an Indian reservation, just like the one she belongs to, and she firmly believes in the special energy that emerges from this great lake.

Flora's character is not entirely alien to Floralba, who develops her character based on her mother's life, a hard-working peasant, and on the testimonials of women with whom she works as a mediator. Although she is more joyful and extroverted than Flora, she reminds her of her mother's strength, which led her to discover the world of farming women, those matriarchies where the female image suggests protection and care.

However, affection seems to be the most hidden part of Achicanoy, caused by an intimate life so marked by loneliness. This gives rise to a particular closeness with her neighbor Oscar, whom she feels she must protect for having been abandoned, as he does not take care of himself. That causes her to mistrust Alicia, because she is afraid she could lose the ground she has already gained with him.

The conflict is evidenced in the day to day displacement. "People who are foreign to the land are arriving. There is social commotion, cultural friction. The worst part of the conflict is that its daily routine has made us so insensitive that we perceive it as the normal way of things." This is how Flora and Floralba Achicanoy see a scourge blanketing the entire country. "Flora, as many of us do, prefers not to talk about the conflict. We accommodate in a bubble and the conflict only hurts us when we have to deal with it directly. It's a kind of numbing."

CREDITS

CREW

Director	WILLIAM VEGA
Producer	OSCAR RUIZ NAVIA
Screenplay by	WILLIAM VEGA
Photography	SOFIA OGGIONI HATTY
Sound	CESAR SALAZAR MILLER CASTRO MIGUEL HERNANDEZ
Production design	MARCELA GOMEZ
Editing	MIGUEL SCHVEDFINGER

CAST

Alicia	JOGHIS SEUDIN ARIAS
Mirichis	DAVID FERNANDO GUACAS
Óscar	JULIO CESAR ROBLE
Flora	FLORALBA ACHICANOY
Fredy	HERALDO ROMERO