

FILM MOVEMENT and TAMARA FILMS
and TU VAS VOIR present



CASSANDRO THE EXOTICO!

a film by Marie Losier

France / USA / Mexico

English & Spanish with English subtitles

2018 - 1.37:1 - 5.1 - 73 minutes

“Fabulous and Ferocious”

– *The Hollywood Reporter*

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SYNOPSIS

Famed as much for his flamboyant drag and sky-high pompadour as for his show-stopping kicks and flips, Cassandro's trailblazing ascent as one of the industry's first openly gay wrestlers has resonated internationally for a quarter century. Marie Losier captures the moving, humorous, and always colorful dualities of this legendary figure. Cassandro, a prize-winning fighter who reinvented a staunchly macho sport, exudes resilience of all kinds – from his physical power to leave opponents KOed to his ability to revisit past emotional traumas and cope with the pain of a body pushed to its limits.

Cassandro's story – of an underdog and a queer icon, simultaneously fragile and mighty – is ever more evocative as it unfolds on both sides of the Mexican-American border. Losier's signature 16mm filming melds tender encounters and larger-than-life fight scenes into a stylish whole that reflects the vivid textures and hues of a dazzling life in sport.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE LOSIER

Cassandra, in many ways, embodies the quintessence of Marie Losier's universe. She is no stranger to the underdogs, the hard-luckers, the irresistible weirdos, flashy and insolent, like the avant-garde playwright Richard Foreman, the Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin, the Kuchar brothers — twin filmmakers of the 1950s New York underground, the minimalist composer Tony Conrad, Suicide's vocalist Alan Vega, the transgender artist Genesis P-Orridge, the singer April March, the filmmakers Jackie Raynal and Jonas Mekas, among many others. Mindless of the biographic and chronological conventions of portraits, Marie Losier puts the focus on a particular facet of her subjects through carefully crafted scenes, which allow her to explore the underlying social and political contexts in which they live, while also infusing reality with fantasy. Like a modern Alice in Wonderland, this time she adventures away from the New York art scene, and into an unknown world of big bulky wrestlers and resplendent lycra suits!

What did you know about Lucha Libre before making this film?

I had traveled many times to Mexico City as a film programmer, and each time I felt more drawn to Lucha Libre — the widespread name of Mexican Wrestling — which I had learned about many years ago through cinema. It has everything I love: bigger-than-life characters; an extremely funny, over-the-top theatrical setting; shiny, multicolored costumes; loud cries and suspense; spectacular acrobatic feats; and above all, it's a joyous celebration that brings together people from all different social classes with their heroes of the ring! It's the second most popular sport in all of Mexico after soccer, and the wrestlers are worshipped like living legends by the public. It's like a religion! And everyone takes part in it, the old and the young alike. It's wonderful! I was, just like the Mexican fans themselves, fascinated by the mystery of those muscled giants in masks, who can never reveal their true identities in or out of the ring. It's an explosion of sound and color! That's what made me want to get my camera and start filming.

How did you meet Cassandra?

I was in Los Angeles for the release of my previous feature, *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye*, and a friend of mine took me to see “Lucha Vavoom”, a burlesque show with a troupe of wrestlers, whose star was none else than Cassandra. He was the one who told me about the Exóticos (see below). But I really got to know him a few months later, in Mexico, on a sailing boat near a strange, haunted island, where we'd decided to meet. We talked for hours — for days, actually.



He took me to watch other matches, where he knew just about everyone in it. We drooled over those handsome athletic bodies, laughing at ourselves at the same time! He introduced me to his hairdresser, in a sketchy neighborhood just outside of Mexico City, where he got his hair permed for hours. He took me to the witches' market to buy magical medicinal plants. We met his Aztec Indian friends, with whom he sometimes engages in cleansing rituals. I fell in love with his kindness, his eccentricity, his acid humor, his wit, and, of course, his athletic prowess (he was the World Champion of the National Wrestling Alliance). Those are some of his many contrasts. He's short and sensitive. And he's had a hard time getting to where he is now.

He is, indeed, a very contrasted character...

Yes. You have to imagine the courage it took this man to get in the ring. Not just the fact that he was openly gay, or that he wore feathers and makeup in such an overtly macho world, but to do it without wearing a mask! Even if the Exóticos existed well before him, most of them — who were straight men, by the way — would just play out the clichés of homosexuality in a farcical, burlesque, almost-homophobic way. Cassandro waved it as a flag, and he rallied the whole nation to his cause. It was a wholehearted, no-concessions attitude, and his example was followed. He pushed all the boundaries, but he was always open, and supportive of others. He was always conscious of the fragility of his own position.



And today, he worries that his career is coming to an end...

It's understandable. Lucha Libre gave him everything. It got him away from the drugs, the self-hatred, the poverty and the street violence. He was able to transform his so-called weaknesses into strengths. But I understand that, at this point in his career, he worries that he might fall back into all that. It's only human. In this film, he is very frank about this, he speaks freely of his private life and his emotions. Our friendship allowed that. I am a very short person too, and during most of the shoot, it was just the two of us. I was like his Jiminy Cricket!

You were on your own with your 16mm camera!

16mm film is an essential ingredient of my work, just in the same way as some artists choose to work with oil or watercolor, marble or clay. It determines a certain relationship to things, a texture, a ritual, and also a history. I love all kinds of optical effects, filters, lenses — even kaleidoscopic ones. I love the more artisanal techniques of classic cinema, those of Méliès, Cocteau, Jack Smith. To work with film is to work directly with the stuff of cinema, with the mythology of cinema. But above all else, it determines a certain relationship to whom I'm filming, because most of the time I don't record sound live. It's just me and my camera. And I also love the wait before seeing the developed images. To me, it's the vector, the binder between the other person and myself. Our emotional connection, the beauty, the role playing — everything springs from that.



© Marie Losier

Moreover, Cassandro and I love to dress up and play different characters. That's an important aspect of our relation. Most of the times, it's also an occasion to express intimate and deep-rooted feelings that can't be voiced, and to transcend those emotions with joy. For example, when he reveals his fear of dying in a sort of tableau vivant of his own funeral.

This “role playing” is present in all of your films, but that's not what one usually expects to see in a documentary...

With Cassandro, artifice is always an integral part of the most ordinary reality. What draws me to the people I film, and to Cassandro in particular, is that their daily lives are so saturated with color, that the stitching between the “authentic” and the “reconstituted” realities tend to fade away. They are characters so baroque in their very essence, that even the most extravagant of those “fictionalized” scenes blend seamlessly with their regular existence. They are “living pictures” themselves. And I just try to communicate with their “work”. But I also love to make costumes, to sew and patch things up, to set up makeshift workshops in my friend's garages, kitchens or living rooms. I love to go cherry-picking for hats, fabrics and accessories. And getting all my friends to help me. That is one of the biggest joys I get from making films. In any way, I think that films are above all a portrait of the great energy that drives all the people who work in them, more than of its development history or its future career.



How is Cassandro's physical condition today?

He just recently survived a heart attack and, after all the fractures, the head injuries and all sorts of lesions, his body is sounding the alarm and forcing him to ask some questions. Besides surgery, he will need many months, and maybe years, to fully recover. At his age — even if he doesn't want to hear it — it's becoming less and less probable that he will ever be able to compete again. He can turn a bit sour sometimes. He is normally such an affable, warm and loving character, but he can suddenly become very harsh and coarse. It eats him up from the inside. It's obviously a very delicate moment for him. I understand him completely, because I also have gone through a similar and equally painful situation. When I was a teenager, I used to be a gymnast and trapezist, and I had to give it all up after I suffered an accident. Like himself, I had to go through this moment where everything that makes the backbone of your life is suddenly taken away. It's a watershed moment.

Did you know it was a "watershed moment" from the moment you started filming? Did you feel he was crossing a new boundary?

But his world is already so full of boundaries! Everything is double, everything "crosses" from one side to the other... There is the US-Mexico border, of course, where he's lived his entire life; but also the man and the woman that coexist in him; the combat of good versus evil inside the ring; his fervent religion contradicting the violence of the matches; his sheer physical power against the refinement of his makeup; the junkie he once was and the patron saint he has become. It all comes in twos. His complexity, the richness of his character, his paradoxes. He was a victim of sexual abuse, a suicidal drug addict, an ex-convict that would get in brawls until his face was covered in blood. Now he's model of discipline, of reliability, of solidarity towards others. But there's still a duality inside him.

This film is one of the first times you've delved outside of the New York artistic and music scene...

But Cassandro's world is also a very musical one! It's a symphony of cries, of bells, of melodies, of kitsch hymns, of different languages (between the raspy American English and the singing Mexican Spanish), and let's not forget Cassandro's own voice which resembles that of old storytellers. During his moments of solitude, the still silence of his house carries a completely different resonance after the furious hullabaloo of the combats, and I like this contrast very much! Really, it's the farthest I've been from home, geographically and thematically, but in the end, I think I'm right at the heart of everything that has always interested me. Maybe more than ever.



CASSANDRO

Cassandro (real name, Saúl Armendáriz) has been a professional wrestler from the age of 17. Born and raised in El Paso, Texas, he started training as a Luchador at the other side of the border, in Juárez, Mexico, when he was only a teenager. To him, happiness and family was to be found mostly in Juárez, with Lucha Libre — the flashy and pop version of professional wrestling. Each barrio had its own small arena where the masked heroes (técnicos) would fight off the bad guys (rudos) every Sunday. Saúl loved the shiny lycra bodysuits and the sweaty muscular bodies, as much as the rowing, passionate crowds. He idolized the bigger-than-life luchadores. He was athletic and full of energy as a boy, and in desperate need of a new self-image, of an alter ego.

When the Exóticos first appeared, they would play out the caricatures of homosexuals. The public loved to hate them, shouting “Joto!” (“Faggot!”) and other slanders. The Exóticos offered a contrast to the big machos they fought in the ring, but they insisted that it was all just an act, and that out of the ring, they were ordinary straight men. Cassandro, on the contrary, was one of the first to publicly and boastfully come out as gay. During his first match as an Exótico, Saul Armendáriz didn’t wear a mask. Today, some Exóticos are generally accepted as positive role models. “I know some straight guys who tell me they’re more tolerant now towards gay people thanks to me”, says Cassandro with pride. In the past, however, his outspoken confidence would rely on high doses of drugs and alcohol — mostly tequila, cocaine, marijuana. The world of Lucha Libre drew fans from all different places, from high-ranking police officers, the federales, to their counterparts in the criminal underworld, and this assured an almost inextinguishable provision of illicit goods.

For Cassandro, the party lasted more than a decade. Some years later, he hit rock bottom. His career was unravelling due to his addiction, and he was wrestling no more. Towards the end of that period, he lived in the garden shed of one of his friends. The date he decided to cut the drugs and the alcohol, June 4th 2003, is now tattooed on his back. He found the strength to begin his recovery in his desire to life live fully, in his belief in God, and in a number of Indian spiritual rituals that allowed him to get in touch with his Aztec ancestors. “People say religion is for those who are afraid of going to Hell”, says Saúl. “But spirituality is for those who have been to Hell. Like myself.” He started wrestling again, creating a new identity and a new style of combat. But today, he is facing a different ordeal. He has suffered two heart attacks, and cannot ignore any longer the physical dangers that threaten his health.



© Cassandro

THE EXÓTICOS

In the world of Lucha Libre, Exóticos are male wrestlers who dress up as women, or sometimes in “drag”, in open resistance to this sport’s codified virility. While not all Exóticos claim to be homosexual men, they like to nurture a certain ambiguity. From feathered boas to lacquered hairdos, from sequined dresses to skin-tight suits, no oddity is too extreme. They are kitsch, flamboyant, sometimes provocative, often extremely funny, but nonetheless excellent athletes, strong and shrewd. In such a male-driven and competitive world, Exóticos have had to fight for due recognition and acceptance. But in every match, they show that femininity and humor are no hindrances to their ability to crush their opponents.

The first Exóticos appeared in the 1940s (with Sterling Davis, aka Gardenia Davis, who would throw gardenia flowers at the public from the ring). But all of them claimed that their ring personas was just theatrics, and not at all a representation of their true identity. It was only in the mid-1980s that two

Luchadores known as Exóticos came out publicly as homosexuals. This effected a change in the way Exóticos were perceived by their audience, and in turn, contributed to a more general acceptance of the category.

One of their most singular characteristics is that the majority of Exóticos doesn't wear masks. This choice renders them unique in the world of Mexican professional wrestling, of which the most recognisable symbol is the masked warrior. It is also a way of owning up to their true identities, and setting an example to younger generations.

THE EL PASO-JUÁREZ BORDER

The El Paso-Juárez metropolitan area stretches over two different countries, the United States and Mexico. They are distinct cities opposed in every way, divided by the Rio Grande, but situated in the same urban sprawl between the mountains and the Chihuahua desert.

According to a recent census, more than two thirds of El Paso residents are of Hispanic origin. Contrary to its perceived image, it is a very safe town, that takes pride in its most famous museum, the United States Border Patrol Museum. Juárez, on the other hand, is an extremely dangerous and decaying city. The lack of a coherent immigration policy plan has led to the appearance of poverty-stricken shantytowns all around the city. Juárez is mostly and sadly known for its crime violence, which has earned it the nickname of "Murder Capital of the World". The ongoing war between the drug cartels has riddled the city's neighborhoods with hundreds of bodies during the last five years. Police cars and Army vehicles patrol the streets without rest, but can do nothing to change the situation.

Whether one chooses to ignore it — like the majority of the peace-loving residents of El Paso — or not — like the majority of the Juárez residents who never stop dreaming of going over to the other side, the border is always present, always in sight, with its tall fence overlooking each side of the river. And more so since the beginning of the Trump era. It is the spinal cord of the whole region.



MARIE LOSIER

After training as an acrobat (trapezes, beams, parallel bars...) in her youth, then as a contemporary dancer and a tap dancer, Marie Losier studied literature at the Nanterre University and painting at the School of Fine Arts in New York. She directed several avant-garde portraits of filmmakers, musicians and composers, such as Alan Vega, Jonas Mekas and Genesis P-Orridge. These innovative and intimate first films were made during her spare time, in the weekends, and with no funding. But it was her first feature film, *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye*, that showcased her work to a more general audience. After screening in more than 200 festivals around the world, the film was released in 2011 in France, the United States, Canada, Germany and Mexico. It has also won several awards. Today, her films are regularly programmed in the most prestigious film festivals (Berlin, Rotterdam, Tribeca, CPH:DOX, Bafici, Cinéma du Réel, Hors Pistes, etc.) and museums around the world, such as Tate Modern (London), MOMA (NYC), Centre Pompidou (Paris), or the French Cinémathèque and the Whitney Biennial (NYC). The first complete retrospective of her films took place at MoMA (NYC) November 2018.

FEATURE FILMS

The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye (2011)

16mm, color, 72 min

with Genesis P-Orridge, Lady Jaye, Psychic TV...

Prix

Grand Prix – Indielisboa Film Festival (Lisbon, Portugal)

Teddy Award – Berlinale – Forum

Caligari Award – Berlinale – Forum

Prix Louis Marcorelles and Prix des Bibliothèques – Cinéma du Réel (France)

Audience Award – Bafici – Buenos Aires International Film Festival (Argentina)

Best Art Director – Outfest Film Festival (Los Angeles, USA)

Special Mention – Sanfic – International Competition (Santiago, Chili)

Special Mention and Audience Awards – Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Montréal, CA)

SHORT FILMS (selection)

L'Oiseau de la Nuit (2015)

16mm, color, 20 min

with Deborah Kristal, Joao Pedro Rodriguez

Joao Rui Guerra DaMata...

Bim, Bam, Boom, Las Luchas Morenas! (2014)

16mm, color, 13 min

with The Moreno Sisters

Alan Vega, Just a Million Dreams (2013)

16mm, color, 13 min

with Alan Vega, Liz Lamere and Dante Vega

Tony Conrad, Dreaminimalist (2008)

16mm, color, 27 min

with Tony Conrad

Eat Your Makeup! (2005)

16 mm, color, 6 min

with George Kuchar

CREDITS

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Co-written with
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Color Correction
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L'Antenne
Simplement
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Carole Chassaing
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