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Friday September 25th, 7.30pm

## Pelo Malo (15)

dir: Mariana Rondón

starring: Samuel Lange, Samantha Castillo

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For 15 years now, the filmmakers Mariana Rondón and Marité Ugás have been making incisive political cinema with their Caracas-based company Sudaca Films. While they co-directed *At Midnight and a Half* in 1999, their habitual practice involves alternating producer and director roles on each other's work. Their most recent collaboration sees Rondón as writer-director on a beautifully realised coming-of-age tale set in Caracas against the backdrop of Hugo Chávez's deteriorating health. Fevered news bulletins show locals shaving their hair in empathy and tell of the 'sacrifice' by a local man of his mother, murdered in the hope of saving the ailing president. Evangelism is manifest, not only in the tone of the news items but also in the Marxist slogans that litter the streets and the animated religious meetings witnessed by the film's nine-year-old protagonist Junior in his neighbour's apartment.

*Pelo Malo* (*Bad Hair*), winner of the Golden Shell at San Sebastian in 2013, is a film about intransigent ideologies refracted through a tale of mother's love, misunderstanding and the need to belong. Junior doesn't fit into his frayed mother Marta's ideas of masculinity: she wants him to act like a *varón* (male), cut off his curly Afro hair and stop his dreamy dances (which contrast with the agitated breakdancing of the neighbourhood boys). Marta resents his difference, and shows him little affection. She snaps at him, incessantly, rebukes him for his tender glances and even tells him off as his scrawny legs peek out from below the cubicle door of a public toilet, remarking "Men don't sit down to pee." The policing of his behaviour begins at home: Junior speaks to his infant brother with the same disdain.

Indeed, the film shows the cyclical patterns of oppression that operate in the microcosm of the family and the society beyond.



Marta bullies her son but she in turn is exploited by the security guard that contracts her. She sleeps with potential employers to secure a job with a minimum wage, no benefits and no liability insurance in the case of an accident. "What if I get shot?" she asks a contractor. He wonders why anyone would want to shoot at her, a reply that rings hollow in a film where the sound of gunshots is as common as the deafening noise of the oppressive traffic. *Pelo Malo* never confirms how Junior's father met an early death but the implications is that some sort of gun crime was involved.

The film presents Caracas through Junior's eyes; queues at the bus stop, overcrowded pavements, endless lanes of congested traffic, graffiti-strewn walls, and a broadcasting culture where beauty pageants vie with official bulletins promoting slavish Chavismo. The tiny windows that peer out from the compressed units of Junior and Marta's decaying social housing estate offer a soured vision of Le Corbusier's utopian living; unkempt exteriors, cramped conditions, menacing walkways. Junior and his diminutive friend and neighbour Niña ("Girl") play respectively with tiny plastic soldiers and dolls; she says that she would rather die than be raped by one of his toy soldiers. And as they play on a merry-go-round, she informs Junior that she is keen to leave the neighbourhood because she doesn't want to be raped; it's a telling comment on a society where she, like Marta, is expected to function as a pliant plaything for macho males.

Unsurprisingly, this society is governed by appearances, and otherness disparaged. Marta admires the logo on the new security guard uniform, a status symbol that explains her unwillingness to

**Synopsis:** Caracas, Venezuela, the recent past. Nine-year old Junior lives with his recently widowed mother Marta and his baby brother on a social housing estate. Marta hopes to return to her earlier job as a security attendant. Junior craves a photograph for his school yearbook in which his hair is straightened. Junior and his mother do not have an easy relationship - she wants him to be less concerned with his appearance. She takes Junior to a doctor for a check-up, equating his effeminate ways with illness. His grandmother Carmen purports to understand him and offers to pay Marta so he can move in with her. Junior argues with his grandmother over an outfit she has made for him; returning home, he fights with his mother when she finds that he has put mayonnaise on his hair to help him straighten it. Marta gives Junior an ultimatum: if he wants to continue living with her he must shave his head. At the end of the film a shorn Junior stands in the school playground alongside fellow pupils, who are reciting the national anthem.

### Credits (selected)

**Junior:** Samuel Lange

**Marta:** Samantha Castillo

**Grandmother:** Nelly Ramos

**Niña:** María Emilia Sulbarán

**Boss:** Beto Benites

**Doctor:** Luis Domingo Gonzales

**Director:** Mariana Rondón

**Writer:** Mariana Rondón

**Editor:** Marité Ugás

**DoP:** Micaela Cajahuaranga

**Music:** Camilo Froideval

**Venezuela/Peru/Argentina/Germany, 2013.**

accept further employment as a cleaner; Niña yearns for a Photoshopped photograph of Miss Venezuela, shaped by the female idea - Barbie-doll looks and docile smiles - promoted in the TV beauty pageants she avidly consumes; and Junior is encouraged by a local photographer to pose as an 'action man' child soldier, complete with red beret, fatigues and large rifle. Marta's brutal insistence that Junior cut his hair may also be a comment on a society where Afro-Caribbean is seen as an inferior other to European heritage.

Cinematographer Micaela Cajahuaringa, a regular collaborator of Rondón's proffers a gritty documentary style that complements Samuel Lange Zambrano and María Emilia Sulbarán's unmannered performances as Junior and Niña. Songs such as Henry Stephen's cheery 1960s hit 'Mi limon, mi limonero' and Tepeyac Usto's 2012 'Solo ida' are deftly deployed to provide different rhythms to punctuate the action, allowing the space for Junior to dance to a beat that accommodates both the past and the present. At the end of the film, the shorn Junior looks bereft but defiant. The hair may be gone, but the gaze is bold, rebellious and firm. His fellow pupils may slavishly sing out the national anthem but Junior's silence suggests that he, like Rondón in this impressive film, is not quite ready to toe the party line.

#### **Another view** - (Sophie Monks Kaufmann, Little White Lies)

*There's nothing in the plot description of Pelo Malo ('Bad Hair') that does justice to the subtlety of its writer/director Mariana Rondón's achievements. With two combustible lead performances and a vibrant representation of the high-rise life among Venezuela's working poor, Rondón leads an assured dance through universal themes of poverty, family and sexuality.*

*A lighter dance occurs between nine-year-old Junior (Samuel Lange Zambrano) and his grandmother, Carmen (Nelly Ramos). Knowing his predilection for singing, she tells him to whack on an old Henry Stephen vinyl, a rock 'n' roll hit called 'Mi Limón, Mi Limonero'. Carmen sings along in a startlingly baritone, shaking her ass like a teenager.*

*As with most encounters in this clever human drama, there is more to the situation than its superficial charms. Sure, Carmen is a loving granny inviting her charge to have some fun, but she's also trying to engage him in a more serious type of partnership. Rondón spaces out pivotal conversations between her cast, providing enough of them to enable understanding of key motivations but not so many that we stop searching body language for further clues.*

*The looks that Junior's mother Marta (Samantha Castillo) shoots her son zing along a spectrum which has maternal ferocity at one end and plain old ferocity at the other. Castillo delivers a fascinating, not always likeable performance. As a single mother harbouring suspicions about her son's sexuality, she is as obsessed with getting her old security guard job back as she is about hounding Junior for every queer thing that he does. Rondón's camera stalks the trio comprised of Junior, Marta and baby around a tiny apartment where no one can hide anything, be*

*it sex or hair-straightening. Poverty proves the ultimate equaliser, forcing all family members into open space.*

*Castillo is given a lot of heavy lifting. The camera drinks in her youth, which, thanks to no make-up and a minimalist wardrobe is shown as incidental to a tiring life. In one sequence, she pulls on her only party dress, posing for a second but then furiously booting a piece of furniture. Marta is a pragmatist. Dreaming about another life interests her less than calculating survival.*

*As conflicted as her character is, this is Zambrano's film. The doe-eyed child is never a victim of his mother's frustration for he is as plucky as his hair is curly. His nascent homosexuality is telegraphed with the lightest of touches. Pelo Malo opens with Junior blissfully submerged in someone else's jacuzzi. It's sensual shorthand for the character's tendency to sink into pleasure. Rondón presents a film that via disciplined social realism earns the delightful sentiment that no one is too poor to get lost in the magnetic beauty of a crush's eyes.*

#### **Our next screening - Friday October 2nd, 7.30pm**

##### **Human Capital (Italy, 2014. Cert 15)**

Human Capital begins at the end, as a cyclist is run off the road by a careening SUV the night before Christmas Eve. As details emerge of the events leading up to the accident, the lives of the well-to-do Bernaschi family, privileged and detached, will intertwine with the Ossolas, struggling to keep their comfortable middle-class life, in ways neither could have expected. Paolo Virzi's taut character study deconstructs the typical linear narrative, observing transformative events from each character's perspective. The result is a nuanced account of desire, greed and the value of human life in an age of rampant capitalism and financial manipulation.