



LION'S DEN (LEONORA)

Autumn
Season
2010

Review by Jason Wood, Little White Lies:

Recipient of five Lima Latin American Film Festival Awards, *Lion's Den* is the characteristically exceptional fifth feature from Argentinean director and producer Pablo Trapero. Torn from countless contemporary headlines, this riveting and resolutely realistic tale addresses issues of maternity, jail and justice through the plight of mothers forced to rear their young in Argentinean prisons.

Julia (Martina Gusman), a 25-year-old woman, two weeks pregnant with no criminal record, awakens in her Buenos Aires apartment surrounded by the bloodied bodies of two men with whom it is suggested she had been intimately related. One is dead; the other clings precipitously to life.

Remanded in custody for what is presumed to be a crime of passion, Julia is finally convicted and finds herself and her baby son locked behind the bars of a foreboding prison facility equipped for mothers, their young children and other pregnant inmates. Initially distant and aloof, Julia eventually bonds with a fellow inmate who has herself reared two children in jail. She also re-establishes a tentative link with her mother, Sofia (Elli Medeiros), who seems keen to repair the mistakes of her past. However, as her young son, Tomas, grows, the dawning realisation that he will be taken from her when he reaches the age of four begins to exert a terrible pressure and foreboding.



With the majority of the film shot inside maximum security prisons, with real inmates as extras, *Lion's Den* signals an unprecedented first in Argentinean filmmaking. Many of the guards, matrons and keepers were also played by real staff of the Bonaerense Penal System. To complete the thirst for authenticity, the set was brought behind bars and the whole cast and crew co-existed with the penitentiary system for the duration of the production.

The result is a documentary verisimilitude that is unsparing in its rendering of the claustrophobia and indignity of prison life. The tone is never gratuitous or exploitative, however. Trapero instead brings a measured approach to the various challenges and battles Julia must face in order to stay alive and safeguard the wellbeing of her young son. There are also various gestures towards a sense of redemption, with the flickering moments of kindness and solidarity carrying a potent charge.

Though an arduous production that endured numerous hold ups and delays while the wheels of bureaucracy were greased, the film, for all its numerous virtues, is undoubtedly founded on the tremendous central performance of Martina Gusman. Hollow, harried, haunted and ultimately hardened, Julia – remarkably – is Gusman's first leading role.

Inspired by the reality of prison units like the one depicted, and the fact that society turns its back on the children that are equally punished by the sins of their mothers, the film, Trapero asserts, is intended to build not only a cinematographic tale but to encourage room for debate and reflection. In this, and in all other regards, *Lion's Den* is an unqualified success.

David Jenkins, Time Out:

The incessant wowl of bawling babies is not something you'd expect to hear in your average prison movie. But then, Pablo Trapero's militantly unsentimental chronicle of life in the maternity wing of an Argentinian women's prison is no 'Shawshank Redemption'. Martina Gusman delivers a magnificently understated turn as Julia, locked up on the back of a bizarre murder rap (we never discover the extent of her guilt) and carrying the child of her dead lover. She is our guide on the inside, initially petrified at the prospect of bringing up her child in such grimy and violent surroundings but soon learning to work the intensely restrictive system to her advantage.



Part meticulous character study, part hyperrealist drama, Trapero's film is as interested in documenting how such an institution functions on a day-to-day basis as he is in presenting the joys and pains of female cohabitation in such a confined space. His film also asks us to question whether it's right that the young innocents should suffer the same punishment as their errant mothers.