

Opening the doors of perception

Milagros Mumenthaler's feature film debut is a masterly, contemplative study in loss and bonding

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FILM REVIEW



Doors opening to unexpected secrets.

At some point in adult life, there's bound to be a place called solitude, a territory inhabited by the ghosts of the past we refuse to let go of, a space where we no longer feel the safety of the people and objects wrapping us up as in a cocoon. Some people call it family in the more traditional sense, some others refer to it as shared loneliness, but the end result is always the same: finding shelter in the mutual comfort of others and having somebody to come home to.

Milagros Mumenthaler's film debut *Abrir puertas y ventanas* is a metaphor for all of these pressing perceptions, centering as it does on three young sisters who

must confront the sudden death of their grandmother, a university lecturer who also played mother to the girls and took care of the household's every need.

The three sisters —Marina, 21; Sofia, 20; and Violeta, 18 — used to lead carefree lives in an old suburban mansion that had seen better days. It's the middle of summer, the girls have lost their grandma some time during the end-of-year festivities, and they cope with the sweltering temperatures closing the window shades so that the sun won't filter in, and sometimes venturing out on the garden to sunbathe, but mostly huddling together on the sitting-room sofa to watch TV, either blurry network broadcasts or a movie rented at the corner video store.

Although they are in the same age range and separated by only a few years, it feels natural that the eldest, Marina (the strongest in character and determination) should try to steer a ship whose captain has disappointingly deserted them. It's Marina who handles the little money they have left, the one who makes sure the utility bills are not left unpaid, the one who draws the grocery list with Spartan resolution, lest they should run out of supplies. Although this is a succinct description of what these girls are going through, it's not as though screenwriter-director Mumenthaler were following a classic narrative pattern with a linear development. We learn about all these happenings along with the girls in the here and now, through snippets of chopped conversation, through murmur and words muttered to themselves rather than one another.

In this sense, you'd be dead wrong to think that a film like *Abrir puertas y ventanas* is about a succession of events leading up in crescendo to a climactic grand finale. Introspective in nature, descriptive in its minimalist approach to character observation, *Abrir puertas y ventanas* concerns itself with the characters' habitats — the house, photographed from a static perspective or through swirling camera movements around the girls' own bedrooms — and the only tangible presence in it, which, paradoxically enough, is an absence. The three sisters are played by actors María Canale, Martina Juncadella and Ailín Salas with a much welcome combination of restraint and emotional outpouring, if such a thing is possible. Stressing the sexual tension in the air, actor Julián Tello embodies, literally, the masculinity the sisters root for — at times silently, at times graphically and shamelessly the kind of natural outlet everything is done in the household.

Abrir puertas y ventanas — a ludicrous action standing for the girls' need to open up and then slam shut slivers into their frightened souls — has a perplexing fixation with the way humans react to the loss of people and things that make up a safe environment. It's a story about the painful process of transition from the self-centred universe of adolescence to abrupt adulthood, a turning-point in which life-making decisions must be made in spite of the phenomenon known as inertia in physics 101.

If this were an HBO or Hallmark film, it would logically deal with the daily chores and responsibilities passed on by an adult onto unprepared children and their chronological, forced transformation and passage to adult life, interspersed with

predictable disputes and jealousy among three defenceless children suddenly thrown into maturity. In contrast, *Abrir puertas y ventanas* is rich in character observation and short on explicit motives, reasons and modus operandi. It is, in short, a slow-moving but far from static illustration of apparently erratic conduct. Although this is clearly not a transcultural problem, some foreign critics have erroneously pointed to the film's failure to spell out — either in full or in delineated form — such complications as a small stash of bank-notes drying out, how the girls manage to keep on running the household without visible signs of monetary income.

True, eschewing such explanations in traditionally formatted stories would be tantamount to unforgivable mistake, but *Abrir puertas y ventanas* does express a preoccupation with such daily toils — it does so through a barely noticeable flurry of actions. If secretively snapping open and shut a chest of drawers in search of valuables is not a sign of pecuniary concern, I would like to know what is. If the youngest sister's unashamed display of new, skimpy outfits, and coming back home dressed like a tart, is not another hint of where money — her own money — is coming from, I wonder what social commentary is all about.

Money alone, however, will not suffice to fill the girls' need for certainty. Certainty, Mumenthaler seems to be telling us, is to be found only in one's own inner self; the outer world, the otherness, can only equip us with a modicum of self-assurance to forge ahead for a while, then it's everyone for themselves.

Let's not, however, blame hurried opinion on lack of acute power of observation. A film like *Abrir puertas y ventanas*, enjoyably mute, is rather slow sinking in with all the force it is capable of at heart. It must be acknowledged that a film like *Abrir puertas y ventanas*, with its "dry" yet fully expressive narrative, owes much to Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (2001), a groundbreaking experiment in acid social dissection. In turn, *La ciénaga* was an explicit allusion — and may have been a followup to — Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's *La terraza* (1963), sadly misunderstood by critics and audiences alike and light years ahead of its time for its seemingly banal illustration of social malaise.

Another pivotal reference in *Abrir puertas y ventanas* may be found in Torre Nilsson's *La caída* (1959), a poignant exploration of solitude and confinement. Torre Nilsson, however, even if he set the action on eerily empty spaces, was more concerned with social decadence than with individual uneasiness with innermost circles. Far less sombre than Torre Nilsson and Martel, Mumenthaler's *Abrir puertas y ventanas*, physically and symbolically, lets a gush of fresh air breeze into the house once the understated, conflictive relations among the sisters and with the milieu comes to the fore.

Another issue addressed by Mumenthaler — as director Eugenia Sueiro does in her recent *Nosotras sin mamá* — is identity at individual and collective level within the confines of a family household. Which role is each family member expected to play? Which role is everyone ready to accept? In *Abrir puertas y ventanas*, it's the middle daughter, Sofía, who disrupts her sisters' apathy and

lethargy, a wake-up call to the sad reality that not every one will be there all the time for one another.

Eschewing the “normal” narrative pattern, Mumenthaler’s intelligent, resourceful script stays put where others would follow the ingrained precept that this state of affairs should help the narrative move ahead. It does, but it never follows a prescriptive approach. And herein lies Mumenthaler’s greatest cinematic achievement — in its beautifully understated expression of human sentiment.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Abrir puertas y ventanas (Back to Stay). Argentina / Switzerland / Netherlands, 2011. Written and directed by: Milagros Mumenthaler. Cinematography by: Martín Frías. Edited by: Gion-Reto Killias. Costumes by: Francois Nicolet. With: María Canale, Martina Juncadella, Ailin Salas, Julián Tello. Produced by: Alina Film, Ruda Cine, Waterland Film & TV, Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS), Fortuna Films, Bordu films. Distributed by: Happiness Distribution ((France); Just Film Distribution (Netherlands); Look Now! (Switzerland); Primer Plano (Argentina). NC13. Running time: 100 minutes.