

# For Esme & Elena with love and squalor

By Julio Nakamurakare / Herald staff

Ariel Broitman's feature debut *La vida anterior*, starring Argentina's West End and Broadway sensation Elena Roger in a role that allows her to showcase her thespian and vocal talent, is a deeply melancholy piece about the pains of growing up and refusing to let go of certain mutually destructive emotional bonds.



In *La vida anterior* — about a threesome seemingly unable to give up passionate bonds for the sake of socially-sanctioned monogamous relationships — affectivity is not tantamount to joy or happiness. Rather, it's a feeling that slowly consumes and erodes the soul in the same manner that Romantic writers perceived human emotions — inflammable and inevitably bound for loss, grief and regret.

In *La vida anterior* Roger takes on the role of Ana, an aspiring opera singer, and appears opposite actress Esmeralda Mitre (in her first major screen role) and distinguished theatre actor Sergio Surraco as a cellist, composer and painter whose languid eyes reflect the love, close friendship and jealousy of the two lady singers.

Ana is the possessor of a powerful soprano voice which she has been training for years with vocal coach Mara Bertolini (Adriana Aizenberg), a former opera star who teaches aspiring singers not only vocal technique, but also a few lessons in persistence and tenacity, perhaps as important as training a voice properly.

Married to the winsome Federico, Ana studies, rehearses and auditions for the roles she dreams of playing, encouraged by the ageing former diva Bertolini, who sees in her the possibility of realizing dreams that never came true. Not that Bertolini's career has been without accomplishments — in her day, she was the undisputed top soprano, but an opera singer's professional life is short, perhaps longer than a classical ballet dancer's, but only by a short stretch.

While Ana embodies all of Bertolini's subliminal hopes, the German soprano Ursula (Mitre), equally gifted as Ana but much more unstable and insecure of her own talent, is given the cold shoulder by Bertolini. "She's not up to it," is the way Bertolini dismisses Ursula. "She needs a lot of hard work yet."

Ana does not quite agree. Although Ursula, in spite of the teacher's misgivings, may prove a potential threat to her professional aspirations, Ana decides that the German soprano has an angelic voice and that Bertolini should give her a chance. Ana is selfless and goes out of her way to befriend Ursula, talk Bertolini into taking Ursula for private voice lessons, and introduce her to her husband, Federico, perennially lost in reverie, who has the kind of languor sentimental souls find hard to resist.

Federico, a gifted cello performer, is not happy with his professional achievements, and would sooner give up the cello in exchange for greater proficiency in drawing and painting, an art form he feels particularly attracted to and secretly engaged in.

This is what Ursula — who has come all the way from Germany to Buenos Aires to train with Bertolini — has in common with Federico. They are both unsure of their true calling, afraid to let their talent emerge and shine. Ana is their complementary opposite, the one strong soul they both need to propel them ahead.

Ursula is at first dismissed by Bertolini as lacking in technique and poise. But Ana, perhaps more sensitive than the stern teacher, falls under the spell of Ursula's voice and fetching personality. Ana has made a professional and personal discovery, and it will not be without consequence for herself and for her relationship with Federico, who sways with achingly sweet ease from one woman to the other. Although Ursula's appearance in their lives meant trouble, the threesome eventually become inseparable, inextricably so.

In the same manner that Ana is innocent, naïve and generous, Ursula, although perfectly convivial, has something to hide, or at least this is the feeling you get from her piercing eyes, and the clichéd, trite way she wins the young couple's trust.

Set in Buenos Aires and Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay, *La vida anterior*, with a sterling performance by Ms. Roger and a suitably suave attitude from Surraco, is visually gorgeous and an aural delight, courtesy of Ms Roger's singing and soundtrack composer-sound designer Pablo Sala, who turn the movie into an exquisite musical journey.

But things do not work quite as smoothly in regard to plotline and story development — the narrative is rather disjointed and the characters' motives are not correctly explained. It's not that absolutely everything should be spelled out in full, but *La vida anterior's* weak point is the superficial character development, and the fact that all the performers are left to fend for themselves. Which they do, fortunately, mainly in the case of Rogers and the stage and screen veteran Aizenberg. Mitre, less experienced than these two towering personalities, struggles hard to turn Ursula into something more substantial than a sketched-out profile.

A fourth character, León (Juan José Camero, playing an on-screen evocation of real-life tango bandoneonist Rodolfo Mederos) is rather intrusive as the ghostly reincarnation of Federico's older brother, an exceptionally gifted tango bandoneon player Federico always looked up to and under whose shadow he seems to be condemned to live.

Director Broitman agrees, in a way, when he says that "this project was a challenge in several ways, mainly on account of the musical counterpoint between tango and opera." All things considered, *La vida anterior* is the kind of movie that divides audiences: if you expect the

traditional values of a good narrative, a conflict treated with expertise to carry the action ahead, you're in for a tedious, disappointing experience. *La vida anterior*'s storyline is not linear. On the contrary, "linearity is disrupted, sustained and justified by (the fact that) the story is told from the protagonist's viewpoint," which, in turn, calls for a more attentive, sensitive reading by viewers, according to director Broitman.

The goal, Broitman acknowledges, was to make a personal, sensitive film set in a universe all its own, a film within the framework of *cinéma d'auteur*, which is not necessarily equated with solemnity and tediousness, but rather the best amalgam (between art) and mass entertainment.

My guess is that Broitman's considerations are right, mostly when you acknowledge that, leaving the wayward narrative aside, you may easily let yourself get carried away by the film's sumptuous visuals and musical riches. In this sense, and this sense alone, *La vida anterior* proves nothing short of sublime.

### **PRODUCTION NOTES**

*La vida anterior*. Argentina, 2013. Written by Ariel Broitman, based on Silvia Arazi's novel *La profesora de canto*. Directed by: Ariel Broitman. Cinematography by: Emiliano Cativa. Editing: Ariel Broitman, Mónica Gómez. Music: Pablo Sala. With: Elena Roger, Esmeralda Mitre, Sergio Surraco, Juan José Camero, Omar Caliccio, Angel Faretta. Distributed by: Primer Plano. NC13. Running time: 93 minutes.