

NOT SO FILMY

CLAUDIA MORGADO ESCANILLA interviewed by Ileana Pietrobruno

Sensual films that break through the constraints of traditional movie making ... poetic reveries featuring an opulent retro style ... erotic dramas about the guilty pleasures of watching. Claudia Morgado Escanilla's powerful films have been recognized with awards from around the world. I recently met-up with Claudia to chat about the shooting of her latest film, *No Bikini*.

Ileana Pietrobruno: In Ivan Coyote's short story *No Bikini*, a six-year-old girl spends the summer sans bikini top, passing as a boy during swimming classes. Why did you choose to turn this gender-bending short story into a film?

Claudia Morgado Escanilla: I've loved this story for a long time. I was working with Ivan on some show (she was doing props, I was doing continuity) and I went up to her and said, "I would love to make *No Bikini* into a film one day". That was ten years ago. Recently, I bought the story rights from her. We're both credited as writers, because I used her words for the voice over, and it's my visuals that tell the story as a film. Both the short story and the film begin with the line, "I had a sex change once, when I was six or seven years old", but because the actress has long hair rather than boyish short hair, the film comes across as being less about gender identity and more about a little girl who dares herself to become strong. The film turned-out to be more about gaining personal strength than about defining one's sexuality or gender.

IP: What was it like directing kids?

CME: When I suddenly found myself on set with eleven children, I was like, "Oh my god!" I mean, they never hit their marks ... ever. Their shoulders are always way too relaxed. I had to shoot really fast, like two takes and that's it, because they'd get cold. Remember, these kids are in a pool. They got tired and hungry, but they love swimming so at the same time it's great. They play, they laugh, they splash, they shout, they look bored, they do a whole lot of unexpected things – they're kids. You can't ask a child to do the same thing twice. Our lead actress, Matreya Fedor, was very very amazing in that she could do the same thing twice, but most kids are not actors. Matreya understood the camera, naturally. She understood how to position herself to be watched. With the other kids, I would say swim this way and they would swim that way. You tell them to all look left and they all look right but, in the end, it doesn't matter – it's so free. Kids have their own magic.

IP: So, you had a lot less control than you usually do.

CME: I had the same control over everything as I always do, except that this time, I did not care to have a perfect frame. It was actually a very freeing experience for me because this film is not so art directed. *No Bikini* is still very beautiful but it's not as symmetrical as my other films. It's not so filmy, it's not so much about the camera. I wanted to pay less attention to the camera and more attention to what could happen in front of it. I wanted to try something new. It was fun.

IP: How did you get the children in *No Bikini* to do what you want?

CME: They thought I was this strange creature because I directed them by gesturing. I direct adults in the same way. I want them to copy me, to repeat what I'm doing, because I know exactly what I am looking for. On *No Bikini*, I discovered that I'm a really good director for children. Yeah. They fucking loved me. It makes sense because I have this big personality, and I can go, "Okay everybody look at me! Do it like this!" I told them, "I grew up in a fascist country so I'm really good at marching. Right, left, right, left, right, left and turn!" And they all turned and then a little, cheesy gun went 'bang'.

IP: That takes the story right out of reality.

CME: That's how the film is: very weird, but at the same time, beautiful.

IP: Why do you make gay films?

CME: I think it works for me to make gay films because, having had a lesbian relationship in the past, I'm not afraid of the subtext. I don't have any issues with gayness and so, in some strange way, I think I'm the perfect lesbian director. I'm not interested in making films about, you know ... when I was a little girl, a boy slapped me. But if I was a little girl and a boy slapped me because I had a crush on his sister, that's more interesting,

right? Now you're questioning gender, you're questioning the system and that's what works for me. I like subtext, whatever the subtext may be, and the lesbian subtext is interesting. It uses my intelligence.

IP: How many films have you made, Claudia?

CME: Film films? Eleven film films.

IP: And the festivals love your films.

CME: Yeah, they seem to.

IP: Yeah, they do. What's happening right now in Berlin?

CME: Well, my wonderful film *Unbound* – it has given me an incredible amount of satisfaction, it's like my golden child – will be playing again at the Berlinale. It won a Teddy ten years ago. This year is the Teddy Award's twentieth anniversary, and so they're presenting past winners. It's a huge party and *Unbound* will be there.

IP: *Unbound* has had hundreds of screenings. The interest in that film just never stops.

CME: It was recently purchased by Brown University for their permanent collection. *Unbound* is a film about women and their breasts. I made it ten years ago but look at what the kid is doing in my present film, *No Bikini*. She's exposing her breasts. That's how she can pretend to be a boy, being unbound gives her freedom. I've always been concerned with the female body politics. More than whether you are gay or not, the question is, do you own your sexuality? When people interrogate me as to whether or not I'm still a lesbian, I'm like, "It's my body!" If I want to be lesbian, I will be a lesbian; if I don't want to, I don't want to. It's my body, it's my breasts, it's my sexuality. I do what I want with it. I am continuously going back to this same subject because I think it's really important. *Unbound* won at Berlin in 1996, and I've just shot *No Bikini*, in which a little girl chooses not to wear her top. Whether you are getting old or whether you are younger, everything about a woman is controlled through her body

IP: What makes a short film strong?

CME: I think it's the ability to tell only one small aspect of a story. A lot of times we try to tell many stories – oh, the character was abused and then he did this; but short films are about what is going on in this moment. *No Bikini's* story is all in the one line, "I had a sex change once, when I was six or seven years old". Whether she became a dyke, or whether her mother approved, or whether the swimming instructor noticed – that's not what the film is about. I think that I have been able to make successful shorts because I understand that my films are quite complete. You know, there's one shot in *No Bikini* that absolutely stands-out. I told the DOP, "I want a tight shot of the girl, underwater, looking straight at the camera". I told my little girl, "You jump in the pool and hold your breath like this ... [Claudia's cheeks puff up with air] ... Pretend you're a fish. You see this big fish, you float over to it and look straight at it". Now I have the most beautiful image of this little girl going ... [Claudia fills her cheeks with air, gesticulates to show that she is floating, and with her eyes wide open, she brings her face inches from mine] ... Everyone will remember my film because of that one image. It's unfucking believable. I think I've made a delightful little gem.

Audio tape to text transcribing by Kailey Patton