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**UN CERTAIN REGARD**  
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

# LA JAULA DE ORO



*"Seeds migrate on wings of the wind; plants migrate from one continent to another carried by ocean currents; birds and animals migrate; and above all collective and individual migrations as that of the human being, which even in the wake of catastrophe, made freely or due to necessity, winds toward its final goal, desirous of human fulfillment."*

-M. Scalabrini

# LA JAULA DE ORO

A FILM BY DIEGO QUEMADA-DIEZ

MEXICO | SPAIN - 2013 - 102 MIN - DRAMA - DCP - 2.35, COLOR

STORY AND DIRECTED BY DIEGO QUEMADA-DIEZ PRODUCED BY INNA PAYÁN, LUIS SALINAS AND EDHER CAMPOS CAST BRANDON LOPEZ JUAN RODOLFO DOMÍNGUEZ CHAUK KAREN MARTÍNEZ SARA CARLOS CHAJÓN SAMUEL SCREENPLAY DIAEGO QUEMADA-DIEZ, GIBRÁN PORTELA AND LUCÍA CARRERAS A PRODUCTION ANIMAL DE LUZ FILMS, MACHETE PRODUCCIONES, MEXICAN FILM INSTITUTE, EFICINE, CASTAFIORE FILMS AND KINEMASCOPE FILMS

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# SYNOPSIS

Three teenagers from the slums of Guatemala travel to the US in search of a better life. On their journey through Mexico they meet Chauk, an Indian from Chiapas who doesn't speak Spanish. Travelling together in cargo trains, walking on the railroad tracks, they soon have to face a harsh reality.

# DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The social reality in Latin America requires cinema to be deeply engaged with the world as it is. I am interested in making films firmly rooted in our contemporary society. True realism has it all: fantasy and reason, suffering and utopia, the happiness and pain of our existence. I want to give voice to migrants – human beings who challenge a system established by impassive national and international authorities by crossing borders illegally, risking their own lives in the hope of overcoming dire poverty.

This film is not a documentary, rather it is a fiction based on reality, reenacting it from a place of authenticity and integrity. We constructed the narrative and poetics of this odyssey from the testimony of hundreds of migrants and from the personal sentiments of each and every person who participated in the creative process.

As we identify with Juan and Chauk, we depart from our own daily lives and embark on a grand emotional adventure that delivers us to profound discovery – a journey dispelling the notion that happiness awaits us in a distant place, a journey offering reflection on the borders that divide

nations, a journey towards awareness of what separates us as human beings.

We made this adventure in the hope of deconstructing those conventions that imprison us so we can reinvent our own reality. My dream is that these boundaries that separate us dissolve, allowing us to board another train. One whose destination doesn't matter, a train whose passengers all know our all existence is interconnected, a train whose obstacles inspire us to celebrate our existence with respect and conscience that transcends nationalities, races, classes and beliefs.

The words of a Mexican man named Juan Menéndez López, spoken just before boarding a moving cargo train with seven of his companions, remains on my mind, "You learn a lot along the path. Here, we are all brothers. We all have the same need. What's important is that we learn to share. Only in this way can we move ahead, only in this way can we reach our destination, only a united people can survive. As human beings, there is no place in the world where we are illegal."



# ABOUT THE CAST

Guatemalans Brandon López (Juan) and Karen Martínez (Sara), 16 years old, were chosen for the lead roles for *La Jaula de Oro* out of a group of 3,000 young people who auditioned in a casting that took place in some of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Guatemala's capital.

During his audition, Brandon's ability to improvise, his potent gaze and talent for both verbal and non-verbal communication made him the protagonist. Besides acting in the film, Brandon is an up-and-coming figure on the Guatemalan hip-hop scene as an MC-DJ and breakdancer.

Karen has participated in street theater and performance art productions that focus on social issues in Guatemala, as well as acting in bit parts for staged plays. She is interested in developing her career as a professional actor.

We chose Rodolfo Domínguez, a 16-year-old young man of Tzotzil origin, to play the role of Chauk, building on his deep spiritual connection to earth, his indigenous culture, his charisma and his profound humanity. Rodolfo was discovered during castings held in a variety of remote villages scattered throughout the mountains of Chiapas. Rodolfo possesses a deep, artistic sensibility evoked through playing the harp and jarana guitar, as well as in the traditional dances and rituals of the Tzotzil people.





## WHAT'S THE STORY BEHIND LA JAULA DE ORO?

In 2003, I had read an article about a red-light district in Mazatlan, and in a totally irrational move, I took a plane there, looking for my next story to tell. Once I got to this part of town, I met a taxi driver, “El Toño”, in one of the clubs there, and we became fast friends. I ended up living two months in his house, which was situated right next to some railroad tracks. Every single day, a convoy of train cars packed with migrants would arrive. These guys would hop off and come knock on the door asking for tortillas and water. They would tell us these terrible stories – how they were travelling with nothing, how they were robbed of everything on the way. Many died; nevertheless, they chalked it up to experience with the idea they would be making money and sending it to their families, sacrificing their lives for the people they love. It seemed to me that they were heroes that their stories were like epic poems, their journeys metaphors for life – an extreme dramatization of human existence. I then spent several years collecting the stories from migrants. I met some wonderful people who taught me a lot of things, including generosity and the value of brotherhood.

I really fought to make this story feel real as well as for it to have a dramatic structure. I went over it again and again. Maybe that's why it took me so long to finish it. I wanted to make it a cross between documentary and fiction, but getting this right is complicated. In the end I realized that what I needed to do was to concentrate the testimonies I had compiled in a kid.

The research process took place in a number of places in countries where migrants leave from, as well as in the United States takes in migrants for the cheap, manual labor it needs to keep the wheels of industry turning. At this stage, the suffering this wall creates and the tremendous hypocrisy of the United States really hit me. You find families divided, babies ripped away from their mothers, children who are beaten and tortured during the deportation process – all under the auspices of what they call “voluntary exit” – thousands of people in prisons whose only crime was to cross an absurd border.

## HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR WORK STYLE?

Working with Ken Loach I had the privilege to learn his method, and I applied it to La Jaula de Oro. It's a way of filmmaking that comes from a deep commitment with reality, working with non-actors in real locations, using as much natural light as possible, without dollies, zooms or cranes.

I like going to a community and, through extensive research, discover which are the stories that want to be told – you assimilate them, you give them a dramatic structure, you drive the viewer to identify himself with what's happening to generate emotion. That's what gets you started, yearning to reach others. John Ford spoke about this already in the thirties; he expected films would be made this way, telling the stories of the people.

The concept with La Jaula de Oro was for us to make the journey that migrants make. We chose locations along the route they actually travel on from Guatemala to the United States, film in continuity and in super 16 format, which is lighter and more proximate to classic documentaries.

The kids never read the script. Every day, before we began, I would read them a little bit of the scene we were about to do. In this way they had a vital experience. We were putting them in situations without telling them what to do beforehand, encouraging them to live out what was happening around them, just be themselves. Ken Loach told me the best direction is the one that goes unsaid, the indirect one; you're simply there to provoke situations, to guide them along and to document what's going on, like a witness.

During the acting workshop, their gaze between each other just got stronger and stronger. In a short time the camera became completely invisible for them.

In human cinema you have literally a human point of view, the lens is always right at the height of a human being. We produce the illusion that the viewer is actually there, watching something real, inside the flesh of the hero in the story.

To me, what's interesting is to create a thin line between reality and film. Perfect filmmaking isn't that important to me. What is essential is capturing characters, a situation.

I think each of us we are not so important – we are all replaceable in some way. What is important is our purpose, in my case I try to become a channel for other people's stories. The fundamental purpose of this project is to communicate to others the true drama of migrants, from the feeling of the heart, in an intuitive way.

What is most interesting to me is the intersection of one's life and the lives of others. The characters of Juan and Chauk are molded from 500, 600 personal testimonies from migrants, as well as my own experiences and feelings, plus the reality brought by the actors and the people who collaborated with the project. This turns into something very powerful. You maximize the act of communication from heart to heart, which, in this case, is to convey that these kids are heroes but also filled with humanity; they have flaws, they make mistakes. Maybe that's why it feels like there is something of truth in the soul of this film, because we all brought part of our own story to the project. We attempted to create one truth by bringing together many truths.

## WHAT THEMES DO YOU EXPLORE IN THE FILM?

In many poor villages in Central America and in Mexico it seems that to embark on the adventure of risking your life going to the United States is like an initiation. For a lot of kids it's like being pulled out with the tide, like a current that drags you northward. They simply imitate what they have seen with their parents and relatives.

I also wanted to call into question social, national and racial barriers. We are all equal, we all have the same needs, the same dream of a better life. Migration is natural and borders artificial, created by humans not so long ago.

Another theme I address is the western obsession with progress and the fact that we don't know where it's leading us. We give so much attention to materialism, but what about spiritual and human development?

Behind migration there is colonization, behind that there is the expulsion or extermination of a people. One person or a group that occupies the land of another to exploit it and to exploit others. We have a long history of conquests, from the Romans to the Spanish, the English, the Aztecs; we've spent centuries trying to dominate one another via wars and occupations that continue to this day, just like in Iraq and Afghanistan. I ask myself what

political and business leaders are actually talking about, to what freedom do they refer when the only thing they truly value is greed and personal enrichment.

Maybe it is time to conquer one self instead of conquering others. A poet with the Guatemalan art collective Caja Lúdica told me that what we must do is de-colonize our mind: if my goal is to take advantage of you, to use you, I am never going to change society; we must turn inward, ask ourselves, “What do I have inside of me that tries to control others?” There is where the transformation begins. It is about having dominion over one's self, leaving behind our greed, aggressiveness, egoism and the tendency to think of others as our enemies. We must begin to work together.

One of the main characters in La Jaula de Oro comes from the Tzotzil culture. What did you want to reflect in your film that brought this particular people to your attention?

The name Chauk comes from my Mayan friend Chak. He taught me their cosmogony; a different way of seeing things. He gave me the book “Canek” by Emilio Abreu Gómez, a poetic gem that has both idealism and romanticism and yet filled with realism. I asked myself, “How can I try to capture and communicate the wisdom of his people, so connected to the land, with the spiritual and poetic side of existence?”

Chak told me that his grandfather used to ask him questions that pulled him out of his everyday way of thinking. For example, “What do clouds dream?” The first time you ask yourself this, you want to answer correctly, and, really, there is no adequate answer. He could tell you, “the dream of the cloud is to play with the fish in the river and end up in the sea,” The trick is seeing beyond the physical, to provoke a poetic vision of existence, to give the universe another dimension, not the materialistic one where there is logic to everything, and everything is a chemical or physical reaction. In the end, “What is the truth? I rather life's mysteries”

## TALK TO US ABOUT THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN JUAN AND CHAUK, THE LEADS OF THE FILM:

At one point it occurred to me to create a counterpoint for Juan, this character who dreams with getting to America no matter the consequences, someone who still believes in the American dream, that wishes to succeed in a materialistic society, with Chauk, who thinks in a totally different way, in more of a community mindset, more conscious of his connection to the land, to the value of goodness. This way you create a clash between the two that gives way to a growth, a change in the one who is more egotistical.

*The kids never read the script. Every day, before we began, I would read them a little bit of the scene we were about to do. In this way they had a vital experience.*

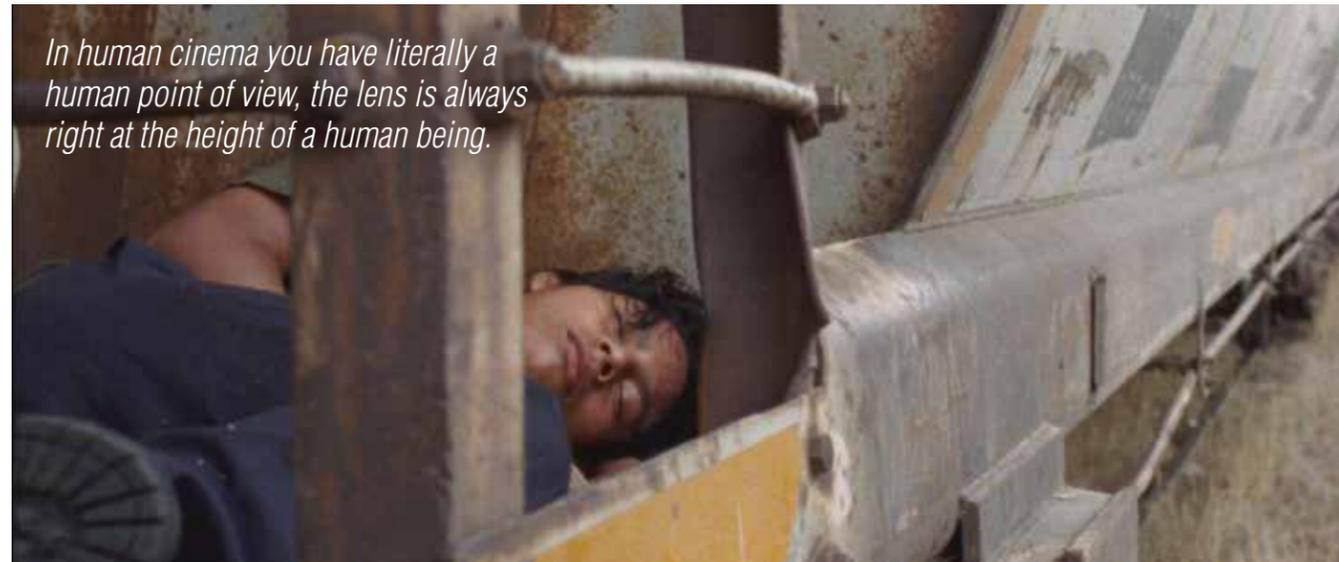
*I think each of us we are not so important – we are all replaceable in some way. What is important is our function, in my case I try to become a channel for other people’s stories.*

Little by little his armor falls away. He is transformed into someone different. He realizes that individualism is an illusion; a lie told by society, alone we can do nothing.

Another interesting thing about this structure of opposing worlds is that Juan represents the rational, the mind, and Chauk, the heart, the feeling. Over the course of their journey, Juan learns to feel. I wanted people to consider the content of the Tzotzil greeting, “K’uxi elan avo’onton?” (How is your heart?), to communicate on a more emotional level than just a mental processes. I think that inside all of us there is one part that is more like Juan and another that is like Chauk.

#### WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE METAPHORS PRESENT IN THE FILM?

The train is a metaphor for progress, a fundamental part of the assembly line in an industrial structure; it carries all of the raw materials need to feed the great machine and, in the most dehumanizing way possible, bringing cheap and utterly disposable labor. Migrants live in slave-like conditions within a system that proclaims to champion democracy and liberty.



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## DIEGO QUEMADA-DIEZ

Born in the Iberian Peninsula, raised in the Spanish cities of Burgos, Logroño and Barcelona, he has lived in the American continent for almost the past two decades.

His first job in the film industry was in 1995, in Ken Loach’s film Land and Freedom as a camera assistant to the director of cinematography. A year later, he migrated to the USA in order to film Things I Never Told You, (Cosas que Nunca Te Dije), Isabel Coixet’s second long-feature film and produced by Luis Miñarro.

He continued his career there, graduating in Cinematography at the American Film Institute (AFI) with the Anthony Hopkins/Amex honorific scholarship. His graduation film as writer/director/DOP, A Table is a Table, won the Best Cinematography award given by the American Society of Cinematographers

(ASC). Thanks to this award, he went on to work as Rodrigo Prieto’s camera operator in 21 Grams, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, which opened the doors for him so he could begin to work alongside film directors such as Fernando Meireles (The Constant Gardener), Tony Scott, Cesar Charlone, Oliver Stone and Spike Lee, among others.

In 2006, he premiered his second short film as screenwriter and director: I Want to be a Pilot, which after participating in the Sundance Film Festival, won more than fifty international awards. That same year he directed in Mexico his second documentary short film: La Morena. In 2010 he won one of the scholarships awarded by Cinéfondation, which enabled him to participate in the Cannes Film Festival Atelier and moved forward his first feature film, La Jaula de Oro.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- A Table is A Table (2001), short
- I Want To Be A Pilot (2006), short
- La Morena (2006), documentary short

