



Locarno Film Festival

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TRANSAMAZONIA

a film by PIA MARAIS

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PIA MARAIS

FRANCE - GERMANY - SWITZERLAND - TAIWAN - BRAZIL
FEATURE FILM / 2024 / 112'
FORMAT: 2.35 / SOUND 5.1

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Synopsis

Rebecca, the daughter of missionary Lawrence Byrne, was declared a "miracle " after she survived a plane crash as a child, deep in the Amazon forest. Years later, Rebecca has become a miracle healer, sustaining their mission thanks to her growing fame. But when illegal loggers invade the land belonging to the indigenous people they're evangelizing, Rebecca's father manoeuvres them into the epicentre of this escalating conflict.



Director's note

It was my fascination for the true events of a young woman, who survived a plane crash and a dizzying fall into the Amazon rainforest in the 1970's, that initiated Transamazonia. At the time, her miraculous survival made her an overnight celebrity and people all over the world began to project onto her, trying to understand how she was able to survive.

Inspired by the idea of a young girl surviving a plane crash and involuntarily becoming famous, I undertook a research trip up the **Brazilian Transamazonica Highway** to see if it would be possible to set the film in Brazil. I accompanied a journalist who had written extensively about an escalating conflict between an indigenous nation and a neighboring logging town. We visited both "sides of the conflict", and some of the events I learnt about laid the foundation for the central conflict in the film and inspired some of the characters who inhabit it.

My first trip to the Amazon left a strong imprint on me. The reality of this frontier World felt like a contemporary Western. Fortune hunters, indigenous people and the Bible. Wherever we went, we found evangelical congregations, even in the remotest of logging towns, preaching prosperity and baptizing people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It occurred to me that these Churches were somehow accelerating the destruction of the surrounding Rainforest.

When I started to actually write, it felt important to find a way to bring the complexity I had observed along this area of the Transamazonica Highway, into the world of Rebecca's story. As I spent time working with the material, a sort of essential idea emerged. How does someone who survives a shattering event make sense of it?

Unbeknown to Rebecca, her father Lawrence Byrne has created a narrative that connects them and fuels their purpose and reason to be: bringing comfort and healing to people in need. Like two songbirds, they belt out songs of hope. They form a strange couple. Rebecca, the prodigy, Lawrence Byrne, her manager.

But as the question of Rebecca's past surfaces, **it puts the very mythology of their father/daughter relationship to the test.** In *Transamazonia*, I wanted to reflect on the ambiguity of such a narrative. Through Rebecca's perspective and journey of discovery, she will realize that she was misled, and her original identity was stolen from her by the person she loves the most.

But it felt important that the film also question the perpetuation of such schemes imposed upon us within a slightly larger context. Thus it is echoed in Rebecca and her father's pursuit to mission an indigenous people, and in doing so, impose a new narrative and belief system onto them.

The film follows different narrative strands that come together and interact with that of the central character, Rebecca. **She functions as a kind of vessel, both narratively and in the structure of the film.** Without her, the events would not be connected. The events in her life facilitate the back and forth between the different levels of narrative. Sometimes even taking the film's perspective, thus giving space for small moments of irony.

I drew the character of Byrne inspired by parents who live through their children, as if to give meaning to their own lives. **And thus unconsciously impose on the child the notion that love is conditional.**



This is an essential aspect of Rebecca's relationship with her father. He built his reputation by capitalizing on his daughter's miraculous aura, as a just return for the love he gave her. **I find the same ambiguity in the missionary whose help, far from being simply the translation of God's universal love, is subject to conditions.**

For her part, does Rebecca really believe in her power to heal? Or is she not just trying to help her father achieve what he expects of her? She bends to his will in order to win his love. Raised in the fabricated certainty that she is a vessel for divine power, **Rebecca will have to step down from the pedestal her father has created for her and build her own belief system.**

I think the movement I have sought is to **find a positive outcome.** Where conditional "love" will shift to an unconditional feeling and Rebecca and Lawrence Byrne will finally choose to belong to one another by choice. From this point of view, the film does not refute either mysticism or faith, but seeks to show a broader palette, **wherein love and nature find their place.**

Transamazonia is my fourth feature film. In this feverish setting, **I wanted to work loosely with elements of suspense and genre.** In moments to create an uncanny dream atmosphere. Somehow drawing inspiration from films like Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, or Hitchcock's *Marnie*, we follow the central character, Rebecca, who has yet to fully grasp who she is.

I have always been fascinated by female characters who in order to function in their world, have to repress a part of themselves. Even keeping it hidden from themselves. It was therefore important that Rebecca maintain something unreal, like a facade. A child healer, who functions as a projection, and who finds herself growing up and coming of age. She arrives at a conclusion herself. In a gently resolute way, she turns the tables on her father and re-purposes herself.

Because the story of Rebecca's origin in the film is a "fake narrative", I thought it would be interesting to visually turn up the volume. To give certain sequences a more staged, artificial space. We tried to achieve this through **choice of color.** Especially in the Mission itself, where Rebecca and her father perform Miracle Healings. The intention was to separate this from the reality around, emphasizing the artificial aspect of their magic show. **Staying ton sur ton, with shades of white and pastel color,** we hoped to create a kind of UFO tent in the surrounding natural environment. Also emphasizing the foreignness of it.

In contrast to the exteriors, where we looked for sets that corresponded to the impressions from my initial trip up the Transamazonica Highway. The location scouting, which took place in Brazil and French Guiana over the period of months was hugely important. **We combed vast areas looking for a wide gravel road, with dense forest on either side.**

Visually the film was created in layers, as the challenge was to find places that would allow us to create an atmosphere of a Frontier World. Obviously the forest was essential. I was looking for something that atmospherically felt mythical and dramatic. We chose to shoot the forest scenes in French Guiana, close to the border with Brazil, because this area has primary Rainforest. **The atmosphere in this forest felt vastly untouched and remote.**

Somehow, *Transamazonia* narratively and visually happened as a negotiation between ideas, references and the realities we discovered on the way. And how these aspects merged into one. If I think about the process of this film, it was a submersion into a reality far from my own. The stages it took were necessary to acclimatize and take in the nature of the places we encountered, in order to interpret them into the visual language of the film. Hopefully creating **a sensorial experience** to draw an audience into this still largely unknown World, in which this film takes place.

Pia Marais





Interview with the cast & crew

INTRODUCTION BY PIA MARAIS

Transamazonia tells the story of Rebecca and her missionary father, but also the story of a place. It felt imperative that the characters who inhabit this World, be authentically portrayed. Therefore it was of utmost importance, to initiate a communication with the FUNAI (Brazilian National Indian Foundation) and the leaders of the indigenous nation we hoped to collaborate with. We wanted them to have the possibility to participate in the development of the story and impact the representation of the indigenous people they embodied in this fiction.

We were introduced to Cláudio Barros through Jorane Castro, our Brazilian co-producer based in Belém. Cláudio had very strong ties to indigenous communities and extensive experience collaborating with them both in theater and film. Cláudio began the casting process in 2022, reaching out to several indigenous communities helping to find the first members of our cast: Hamã Luciano, leading role, from the State of Amazonas, whose heritage is Sateré-Mawé (father's side) and Ticuna (on his mother's side). And João Victor Xavante from the Xavante nation in Mato Grosso.

As the casting process was underway, we began looking for a gravel highway that would work for the film. The road needed to be densely forested on either side and sufficiently wide. The search took us to Tucuruí municipality, which is about 10 hours drive from Belém and where John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* was filmed (in part). There we found a small stretch of the BR 422 road passing through the Trocará Indigenous Territory. This is how we came to know the Cacique (Indian chief of nation), Pira Asurini and the Asurini people. Through the FUNAI in the State of Pará, we were able to initiate a communication asking if the Asurini would be interested in collaborating. Thankfully they were open to meeting us and consequently agreed to become a part of this film, hosting us on their territory, becoming actors in the film and producers by association. I am forever grateful, as without them the film wouldn't be the same.

CLÁUDIO BARROS, acting coach and casting director for the indigenous actors

You are a staunch advocate for Indigenous peoples in Brazil. But you also have extensive experience working with Indigenous peoples, including preparing them as actors. Could you tell us a bit about how this started and what is important to you?

I did my first work in cinema in 1990, at the age of 27. The film's cast included American actors, Brazilian actors, and many non-actor Indigenous people from various Brazilian ethnicities. This was my first contact with Xavante, Bororo, Kaapor, Temb , Kayap  communities. Indigenous culture took over my perspective and, consequently, my heart, radically changing my perception of Brazil's Indigenous peoples. I am still friends with them today. We make films together whenever possible. It was from this cinematic experience that my conscious relationship with Indigenous peoples was established, and my interest in preparing Indigenous and non-actor cast members began.

With 34 years of experience and many similar processes, I have learned to identify, within myself as a white man, signs of inherited colonial behavior and to put them in check during preparations. Listening more, receiving more, being more of a learner, and always starting any action from the cultural pathways of each Indigenous nation.



Could you say something in general about your working method and training of non-professional actors for a film? And, more specifically, could you talk more about how you worked with the three different ethnicities in Transamazonia? The Assurini, the Saterê-Mawé, and the Xavante peoples.

There is a central principle in our work, which is the pursuit of the living presence of the performer on stage, whether they are an actor or not. To achieve this breath of life, we use numerous pedagogical tools, derived from existing methods and others invented by me. In the case of Transamazonia, we started visiting dozens of villages in the states of Amazonas and Pará. In the villages, we carried out specific dynamics aimed at pre-selecting Indigenous people who fit the profiles of the characters sought. That's how we found Hamã, a Saterê-Mawé from the state of Amazonas. We also found João Xavante from the Xavante ethnic group in the state of Mato Grosso and Pirá Asurini from the Asurini village of Trocará in the state of Pará. It was from each of their cultural realities that the actions of the film were structured, always aiming to understand the conflicts presented in the written story.

With your guidance, a fictional Indigenous tribe has been written for the story of the film, the Iruaté. Could you talk more about this collaborative process with the Asurini people and Hamã, the lead indigenous role? What were the reasons for this, and what was important to pay attention to, given that it involves Indigenous identities?

It would not have been possible to privilege the cultural values of only one ethnicity without risking discomfort with the other Indigenous nations present in the film. The solution was first to promote a demonstration of cultural aspects (dances, songs, rituals) from the three ethnicities: Saterê-Mawé, Asurini, and Xavante. Then, select some aspects of each manifestation and create a kind of collage, aiming to create a fictional Indigenous nation composed of cultural elements from the three involved ethnicities. Everything was decided collectively. Thus, all the nations felt respected and represented. Another important factor in the preparation of the Indigenous cast was the interest and respect for the other's culture, resulting in a powerful exchange of ancestral knowledge.

PIRÁ, Cacique (Indian chief of nation) of the Assurini People and the lead indigenous actor

Can you tell us about what your experience was like working on the preparation with Cláudio and later during the filming both in Aldeia Trocará (Terra Indígena) on the BR 422 road and later in Belém?

My experience was very difficult at first. But I met Cláudio, who helped me gain knowledge about film preparation. And with Cláudio I learned. Organizing and participating in a film was an experience that had never crossed my mind. Cláudio was a great partner, and I gained practical knowledge about filmmaking and acting with him.

During the filming in the Trocará village, it was very important, because the participation of my community was included and it was very rewarding for me and for them. On BR 422, there was a moment of filming the conflict between indigenous people and loggers that reflects a sad reality of our daily life.

And, in Belém, I went to accompany the filming of the movie. Because we were invited to participate, and with the participation of children and women, it was fundamental in every step of the experience in Belém with the film crew.



Do you feel that the Assurini could identify in some way with the story they became a part of creating, portraying the Iruaté people fighting for their land and resources?

Certainly, the Assurini people identified with this creation of the film, because they were based on our reality with the loggers, for instance in the closing of the BR 422 highway.

You are an associate producer on this film. What does that mean to you?

This means that we participated in dignified conditions. I believe that we, as a community, had a very special participation in making the film important in its achievements.



Pia Marais

Pia Marais is a writer and director from South Africa and Sweden.

She has written and directed 3 feature films. Her feature debut *The Unpolished* won the Tiger Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 2007. *At Ellen's Age* screened in Competition in Locarno in 2010, and in more than 30 festivals, including Toronto. *Layla Fourie* was set in her home country South Africa and premiered in Competition at the 2013 Berlinale, receiving a Special Jury Mention. In 2018, she made her first documentary *Cari Compagni* for Arte.

Transamazonia is her fourth feature film.

Filmography

2013 *Layla Fourie*

Berlin IFF Competition - Jury Special Mention

2010 *At Ellen's Age*

Locarno FF

2007 *The Unpolished*

IFFR - Golden Tiger Award

German Film Critics Association - Best Debut Award



Helena Zengel

Helena Zengel, born and raised in Berlin, began her acting career at age 5. She landed her first main role at 8 in *Die Tochter* (*The Daughter*) by Mascha Schilinski.

In 2019, Zengel starred as Benni, a traumatized kid, in *System Crasher* by Nora Fingscheidt, which premiered at the Berlinale. She received the German Film Prize for Best Actress in 2020.

Following the international success of *System Crasher*, Zengel was cast by Universal Pictures in the American Western *News of the World* by Paul Greengrass alongside Tom Hanks.

For this role, she received nominations for a Golden Globe, a Screen Actors Guild Award and Critics Choice Award for Best Supporting Actress.

Zengel also dubbed her English lines in Italian, German, French, and Spanish versions of the film. In 2021, Zengel appeared as Nina Cutter in *A Christmas Number One*, a romantic comedy with Freida Pinto and Iwan Rheon. In 2021 also she starred opposite Willem Dafoe in the A24 fantasy adventure film *The Legend of Ochi* which will be published soon.

In 2022 she played a leading role in the German Amazon Original series *Die Therapie* based on a bestseller by Sebastian Fitzek.



Cast

Rebecca

Lawrence Byrne

Denise

Silas

Alves

Helena Zengel

Jeremy Xido

Sabine Timoteo

Hamã Luciano

Rômulo Braga

Junior Alves

John

Jilvan

Pirá Iruaté

Young Indigenous man

Iruaté woman

Philipp Lavra

Sérgio Sartório

Iwinaiwa Assurini

Pirá Assurini

João Victor Xavante

Kamya Assurini



Credits

Director

Pia Marais

Screenplay

Pia Marais, Willem Drost, Martin Rosefeldt

Producers

Sophie Erbs, Tom Dercourt, Pierrick Baudouin, Murielle Thierrin, Claudia Steffen, Christoph Friedel, Jean-Marc Fröhle, Stefano Centini, Chuti Chang, Camilo Cavalcanti, Viviane Mendonça, Jorane Castro, Pia Marais, Alex C. Lo, Guilherme Cezar Coelho, Fernando Loureiro

Co-Producers

Christine Vial-Collet, Thomas Jaubert

Executive Producers

Annette Fausbøll, Jean-Alexandre Luciani, Joanne Goh, Keong Low

Associate Producers

The Assurini People

Screenplay

Pia Marais, Willem Droste

Cinematography

Mathieu de Montgrand

Sound

Dana Farzanehpour, Andreas Hildebrandt, Frank Cheng

Production Designer

Petra Barchi

Music

Lim Giong

Editors

Matthieu Laclau, Yann-Shan Tsai

Costume Designer

Chiara Minchio

Special Effects

ArChin Yen

Casting

Isabella Odoffin, Cláudio Barros, Gabriel Bortolini, Ila Giroto

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