

Santitos

México 1997 100 minutes DIRECTOR: Alejandro Springall SCREENPLAY: María Amparo Escandón PHOTOGRAPHY: Xavier Pérez Grobet MUSIC: Carlo Nicolau and Rosino Serrano SOUND: David Baksht and Juan Manuel Aceves EDITOR: Carol Dysinger CAST: Dolores Heredia (Esperanza), Fernando Torre Lapham (Padre Salvador), Ana Bertha Espín (Soledad), Alberto Estrella (Angel Justiciero), Maya Zapata (Blanca), Demián Bichir (Cacomixtle), Flor Edwarda Gurrola (Paloma), Regina Orozco (Vicenta), Roberto Cobo (Doña Trini), Luis Felipe Tovar (Doroteo), José Sefami (Dr. Ortiz), Felipe Ehrenberg (Customer at La Curva), Dario T. Pie (César), Scott Haynes (Roger Cudney), Lilia Ortega (Landlady in Los Angeles), Enrique Ocotilla (Wrestling Announcer), Rey Vikingo (La Migra), Mónica Dionne (La Morena), Pilar Ixquic Mata (La Flaca), Georgina Tabora (Hospital Receptionist) PRODUCERS: Alejandro Springall – John Sayles – IMCINE – C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures (Canada) – Fonds Sud Cinema (France).

Comedy. No doubt that *Santitos* plays as a comedy, with comedic rhythm and situations, albeit the fact that it deals with a painful subject: a girl's death and her mother's inability to accept that devastating fact. One day, Esperanza goes to the hospital to pick up her daughter, where she was to have a "routine" tonsillectomy done, but the doctor informs her that the child has died of an unknown virus. For this reason, the casket has been sealed, and Esperanza is unable to see her daughter for one last time. Back at home, and on her knees in front of the grimy oven window, she has an "apparition" of her favorite saint, San Judas Tadeo, who tells her that her daughter is alive, and she must go looking for her. The first part of the story tells of a mother who has lost her wits, and her comings and goings, back and forth to the town church, where she tells father Salvador time and time again of the appearances of San Judas Tadeo, and the priest's efforts to both pretend that he believes the story, as well as to avoid her telling anyone else about it, as she will be presumed to have gone mad. Esperanza entrusts her secret to her *comadre* Soledad, who's life story has been shared with Esperanza by the grief that they are both widows and the fact that they brought the

young girl up together. One rainy night, Esperanza digs up her daughter's grave and is caught by the night watchmen who force her out of the cemetery.

The second part tells of the journey where Esperanza goes searching for Blanca, her daughter. Esperanza is convinced that Dr. Ortiz (who disappears from the hospital the day after the incident), could have kidnapped her daughter and sold her into prostitution (the priest had already pointed out that "these things happen all the time"). Esperanza gets a job at "La Curva", the local brothel, where she hears some customers speaking about a place that offers young virgins to wealthy clients. She inquires about that place and obtains information –in addition to a scene of error where the customer takes her up to a room to have sex with her– that it is in Tijuana. So Esperanza decides to depart to the Mexico-US border immediately. The movie goes on telling of Esperanza's adventures and mishaps, full of errors and uncanny situations, with exotic and colorful characters such as Cacomixtle and Dototeo, in addition to Paloma, a travel companion who is a perfect example of the variety that can be found along the border.

Esperanza goes from Tijuana to Los Angeles when she is told that the whorehouse where they have teenagers is in that big city where there is an abundance of Mexican immigrants. She crosses the border hiding in a car trunk, perhaps under the protection of San Judas Tadeo's statuette that accompanies her wherever she goes. Besides from other particulars, Esperanza is always looking for hotels that have grimy oven windows in their kitchens, like the one that her saint first appeared on. But slowly, San Judas Tadeo goes quiet. Esperanza finds a job at a peculiar travel agency in Los Angeles, where she has a unique boss, Vicenta, who also does business selling tickets for wrestling matches on the side, opening an unexpected door to hope: she finds out that "La Migra" will fight "*El Angel Justiciero*" (The Righteous Angel). Her face lights up when she hears the wrestler's name, as she is continuously "interpreting" the messages from her saint, and the Angel must be one of those messages.

San Antonio, the saint for love, soon replaces San Judas. Esperanza catches one of the Angel's boots during the wrestling match. When she later takes it to his dressing room, he feels like Cinderella, but immediately invites her to celebrate his win over La Migra on the ring. They dance together at the party; he then chivalrously drives her home and

they soon end up in bed, in a different sort of match that leads to Esperanza's "unmasking" of the Angel. (When a wrestler is defeated in match, his rival removes the loser's mask in public, in Esperanza's bedroom; it's just the two of them.)

Esperanza has another job aside from the travel agency in Los Angeles. She works in a whorehouse where she suspects they may have Blanca. Esperanza becomes Scott Haynes' –a wealthy San Diego judge– favorite. He pays her 4000 dollars each visit so she doesn't have to tend to any other clients but him. Since the brothel has a room that is always locked and under close watch, Esperanza believes that Blanca is trapped in there. Using her ingenuity, Esperanza talks Doña Trini, the madam, into opening the door when she's doing a "cleansing" of the entire house. When she's finally able to enter, much to her surprise and disgust, she discovers that instead of having a girl locked in there, there's a cow. At this point, she is convinced that she will never find Blanca in Los Angeles, so she decides to go back to her native Tlacotalpan, Veracruz. Other miracles happen upon her return, but above all, there is one key event: Blanca appears on the bathroom wall, next to the mirror and the washbowl. Life continues its course, but soon enough, *El Angel Justiciero*, in the flesh, wearing his immaculate white wrestler suit, appears in church while she is there. That isn't a miracle; he's traveled from Los Angeles to Tlacotalpan looking for her because he's in love with her. He asks Esperanza to come back to LA with him, but Blanca's "apparition" forces her to stay home. The solution to all things troublesome: In the last sequence we see Esperanza and the Angel in a pickup on their way back to Los Angeles, and in the flatbed, a chunk of the bathroom wall, with the mirror and the washbowl...

Alejandro Springall tells this story with energy and self-assurance, and the support of an exceptional cast, particularly Dolores Heredia's outstanding performance as Esperanza. The character transmits a sort of determination that has nothing to do with insanity, but with the boundless love of a mother for her child, and a sort of candor and spotlessness that cannot be "contaminated" by her work in the bordellos. This must be one of the few stories where a woman becomes a prostitute with ingenuousness and no idealizations, and where female sexuality is dealt with just as naturally as male sexuality. Somehow the movie not only narrates Esperanza's search for her daughter, but for her own sexuality. It should be pointed out the movie leaves something unexplained: Tlacotalpan

is a sleepy little town, on the margins of the Papaloapan River, with very traditional customs, and a sexually repressed “widow” is a typical prototype of the local culture.

The film’s positive and celebratory intention towards life is clear, and far from any attempt towards achieving “naturalism” or “realism”. But it doesn’t fall into “magic realism” either, except for the grotesque brothel imagery (or the existence of a “sacred” cow). To an extent, *Santitos* bears similarities to another Mexican film, *Danzón* (María Novaro, 1992), where Julia looks for a dance partner and goes to Veracruz, also finding her sexuality in the midst of whorehouses and cross-dressers; while in *Santitos*, Esperanza looks for her daughter and embarks on an even longer journey. Perhaps *Santitos* is closer to the Cinderella fantasy, ending in the encounter with the man she loves, her beloved Righteous Angel. Sometimes we grownups also need stories brimming with fantasy to recover the charm lost to everyday life. *Santitos* is abundantly charming. That’s why, while it is not a masterpiece, it is a wonderful film, as good as the book also written by María Amparo Escandón. (The movie *Santitos* is based on a short story written by Escandón; when Springall shot the film; the author reworked the story and started writing the novel on her own. And she wrote it twice, once in English: *Esperanza’s Box of Saints*, and the other in Spanish, *Santitos*.)

Jorge Ruffinelli