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The Second Mother & The Architecture of Story

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015

The craftsmanship is evident in the construction of the tight and touching tale, *The Second Mother*, from Brazilian writer-director Anna Muylaert. The story concerns the relationship between a nanny to a wealthy family, Val, and the biological daughter she has abandoned years prior, to pay their keep in the world. When daughter Jéssica arrives on the scene in the big city of São Paulo, intent on taking her shot at the entrance exams for FAU, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, mother and daughter are reunited after fifteen years apart. This disturbs the balance of the household in all method of funny and unnerving ways.

Muylaert boasts that she was pleased to work with “her dream team of artists.” The elegant cinematography by Bárbara Alvarez, modernist production design by Thales Junqueira and Marcos Pedroso, and sensitive editing by Karen Harley, EDT., harmonize here to perfect effect. As Val, Brazilian celebrity Regina Casé weaves her magic spell, in counterpoint to the focused and uncompromising directedness of Camila Mágila, as Jéssica. There is not a false note in the ensemble that includes Michael Joelsas, as Fabinho, the swaggering prince of privilege; Karine Teles, narcissistic matron of the household, Donna Bárbara; and Lourenco Mutarelli, the fawning patriarch, Dr. Carlos. The emotional effect of the whole is subtle and sustained, and it builds to a wonderful crescendo for a satisfying resolution.

Muylaert’s fourth film, *The Second Mother* has received numerous accolades on the festival circuit, including the Audience Award at Berlinale and a Special Jury Prize for Acting at Sundance. I would not be surprised if the film earns an Academy Award nomination in the new year. It certainly scores my vote of approval. I was honored to speak by phone with Anna Muylaert about *The Second Mother*, her almost mathematical approach to writing, her predilection for improvisation in rehearsals, and about the changes in her homeland, Brazil.



*Regina Casé (Val), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”),
written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.*

Sophia: You began writing the screenplay of *The Second Mother* (*Que Horas Ela Volta*) twenty years ago. How did your thinking about the story evolve over time?

Anna Muylaert: I spent two years writing the first draft of the screenplay. At that time, I thought that I was not mature enough as a director to make it, so I moved on to other projects that seemed more simple. I wrote a second draft about ten years ago. Then, eight years ago, I began researching

the story once more, rewriting the plot from scratch.

I participated in a lot of screenwriting labs over the years and had talked to lots of people about the story. Concurrently, the country was undergoing significant changes. Dilma Rousseff became President of Brazil. [January, 2011 was the first time in the history of Brazil that a woman had been elected to the office of President.]

From the start, I had made the daughter of the housekeeper, Jéssica, more of a cliché. A screenwriting consultant, Jeremy Pikser, questioned me: “Anna, I think you’re a very nice girl, you want to talk about social issues in your country. But if Jéssica came to São Paulo only to become a hairdresser, she would end up becoming a nanny again in the end. If your mother was a housemaid, wouldn’t you want to rewrite this ending? Wouldn’t you make it more hopeful?”

That idea stayed with me for about five years. I was thinking, I want to make it better, but I didn’t want to write a “happy ending” — I didn’t want Jéssica to become a famous singer or anything like that! So six months before shooting, I locked myself in the office, and I worked like crazy. I was committed to finding a new direction for Jéssica and for the film. Because I knew that this subject is very important in Brazil. And for this actress …

Then one night, it came to me — the idea that Jéssica was already a Brazilian citizen, that she would come to São Paulo to study architecture. From that point on, everything was easy. But it took me a long time to arrive at this idea. To free my mind from the clichés.

Sophia: I was so impressed by the simple elegance of the film. It is so economical. The story proceeds so directly, without excess ornamentation. You have commented that “There is a musical way of writing.”

Anna: You know, I work in a way that I learned in one of these lab schools, it’s a method called “The Sequence Approach,” described by Paul Joseph Guilino in his book of the same name.

I used to work Act I, Act II, Act III, plot point 1, plot point 2, plot point 3... So I had these big blocks. With the sequence approach, you work with sequences. So Act I is two sequences of seven scenes, in which the seventh is a climax. Act II is five blocks of five scenes, and the fifth scene is the climax. In this way, I take control of the rhythm of the structure. So it gets easier to fly. Because if you’re very grounded — you know that every ten minutes you’re going to have a climax — around that you can fly, you can improvise because you are sure that the story won’t fall down.

This is talking about structure. But when I rehearse, I also use “metrônomo,” how do you say — you know the music, tick, tick, tick — metronome. Cinema is music because it’s in time.

Sophia: The actresses, Regina Casé (Val) and Camila Mårdila (Jéssica), were awarded the Special Jury Prize for Acting at Sundance. Their performances are so nuanced. American audiences may not be aware but Regina Casé is big star in Brazil. Can you tell us a little bit about Casé’s career in Brazil?

Anna: Regina Casé first appeared to me as an actress on stage. She was so fantastic that she became famous from doing one play. It was called, *Take Care of Me Leo*, which translates roughly as *Take Care of Me Leo, the Lion*. Then she did TV (and so many other things that I didn’t see). But she did a film that I love, called *ME YOU THEM*. For the last thirteen years, she hasn’t acted. She

has been producing documentary type television shows. Now, she has become a big host with her own show on TV Globo, *ESQUENTA!* — like Oprah. Regina does interviews, but she hasn't acted for all these years. It seems to me that she has kept all that talent and suddenly, it just comes out. I really was impressed by her performance during the shoot.



Regina Casé (Val), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”), written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: Her performance is amazing. How did you direct her? How did you collaborate together?

Anna: During rehearsals, I never rehearse scenes, I rehearse characters. I rehearsed Val's relationship with Edna, the maid who works with her. So Val and Edna were there in the kitchen cleaning, you know, cooking. Then I rehearsed Val's relationship to Fabinho — Val was there laying down and caressing him. The rehearsal with Jéssica was all day long. Because Val and Jéssica didn't know each other, I put up a black sheet in the middle of the rehearsal room, and I asked them to make ten years of phone calls. I had a script for them. In the beginning it was: “Oh, momma, when are you coming back?” Then the next year, Val tells Jéssica about her travels. Then after a certain point, Jéssica doesn't want to speak with her mother anymore. She's angry. When Val tells her: “Oh, Momma went to Disney,” she responds, “Oh, you went to Disney ... I don't like Mickey. I don't!” You know, we really created this tension. At the end of the phone calls, we arrive at the departure point for the action in the film where Jéssica tells Val: “I'm going to São Paulo.” We took down the black sheet, and they hugged each other. It was very intense.

So that's what I did. I kind of created a past. I chose actors who are able to create their characters pulling essential characteristics from within themselves. I give them the grounding to walk, and I want them to walk by themselves. I'm not a director who says: “Do this,” “Do that.” I tell them, “The function of this scene is ...,” and they improvise.



Regina Casé (Val) and Michel Joelsas (Fabinho), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”), written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: When President Dilma Rousseff assumed power, she invited you and a group of women filmmakers to meet with her over dinner in the Palaácio da Alvorada, the presidential palace. What did you discuss?

Anna: She made a small speech that was very moving for us. She said, “I wasn't elected because I am a woman. But we should not forget that I *am a woman*.” “You make films, and it is important that you show women, ‘Look, at how you're sitting here!’” [at dinner in the palace of the President] So she really made us feel valuable. It was very, very good.

We were there a long time. We drank wine. It was during the film festival, and my second film *É Proibido Fumar* had screened just before the dinner. She talked about poetry and cinema, and she said how much she needed art when she would come to her room at night and needed to forget about everything. When she just wanted to feel like a normal person, and to never to believe that she is something else, other than a person. It was very nice.

Something funny happened there. We are women and we are artists, and all the time, we were calling her — ‘you.’ “Dilma, you ...” When we left, somebody said, “Oh, you should never call the President by ‘you,’ there is ‘Vos Excelênciа,’ which is almost, ‘Your Highness.’ And we didn’t know ... so maybe that really helped [to set the tone].

Sophia: What has the reception been to your film, *The Second Mother*, in Brazil?

Anna: It is opening this week, concurrently with the release in the United States. We had two premieres just this week, and it was great — because here, *The Second Mother* (*Que Horas Ela Volta*) is more than a film. It is an open door to a debate. Yesterday, I did a pre-screening for housemaids only, and it was very moving for them. People cry, and they become aware of the things that we show — things that they do, of course, but that they are not aware of doing. One of the maids came up to me: “Thank you, thank you so much. Now, we are here talking, and crying because we are realizing things.”



Karine Teles (Barbara) and Lourenco Mutarelli (Dr. Carlos) “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”),

written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: I think the film captures something true to the American experience, given the widening economic stratification in this country. To the degree that there are many ‘second’ families in the United States, the kind of boundaries that are erected in love relationships as portrayed in the film feels relevant. I knew a family here that employed multiple nannies, and I witnessed some of the realities that you address: a wealthy mother who is unavailable to her children, but then becomes very jealous when her children become attached to those hired to work with them. How did you navigate the challenges of parenting and working as a filmmaker in Brazil?

Anna: I have two kids. As a film writer, I had the chance to spend most of my time working from home. All of my life, we’ve shared lunches and dinners together, and I was always there if anything happened. For one year (when they were 8 and 3 years old), I decided not to work and to just take care of them — with no maids, nobody but us. That was an enchanting time. We developed a very close relationship that lasted.... During film shoots, my kids knew that mama gets crazy. But being nourished, they had the patience to know how to wait for me to come back.



Camila Mardila (Jéssica), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”),

written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Sophia: Jéssica defies the rules of the house, crossing lines and space forbidden to her, and she is expelled from those spaces. You have observed, “any attempt to put her in her place fails, as this ‘place’ no longer exists and is no longer relevant.” How specifically have things changed in recent years in your country?

Anna: In Brazil, the workers have their ‘right station’ in life. If they obey those boundaries and keep in their place, all will be ok. But during the last 10 years, things have started to change, and now — in spite of all the protests — there is no turning back. The maids’ daughters have started

attending universities — not the majority, but some. The maids' daughters have started using airplanes to fly to visit their parents, instead of traveling 24 hours by bus to reach them. Those who find these changes disgusting and try to send those people back to their places of the past, they will not win this battle anymore.

Regina Casé (Val), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”), written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Top Image: Camila Mardila (Jéssica) and Regina Casé (Val), “The Second Mother” (“Que Horas Ela Volta”), written and directed by Anna Muylaert. Photo by Aline Arruda, courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.

[“The Second Mother” – Official Website](#)

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