

A movie poster for the film 'El Agua'. The background is a close-up of a woman's face and upper body, looking slightly to the side with a serious expression. Her hair is dark and wet, and her face has water droplets on it. She is wearing a dark, possibly wet, jacket. The background behind her is a blurred view of water and a rocky shore.

QUINZAINÉE
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2022

El Agua

A film by

Elena López Riera



ALINA FILM, SUICAFILMS, LES FILMS DU WORSO present



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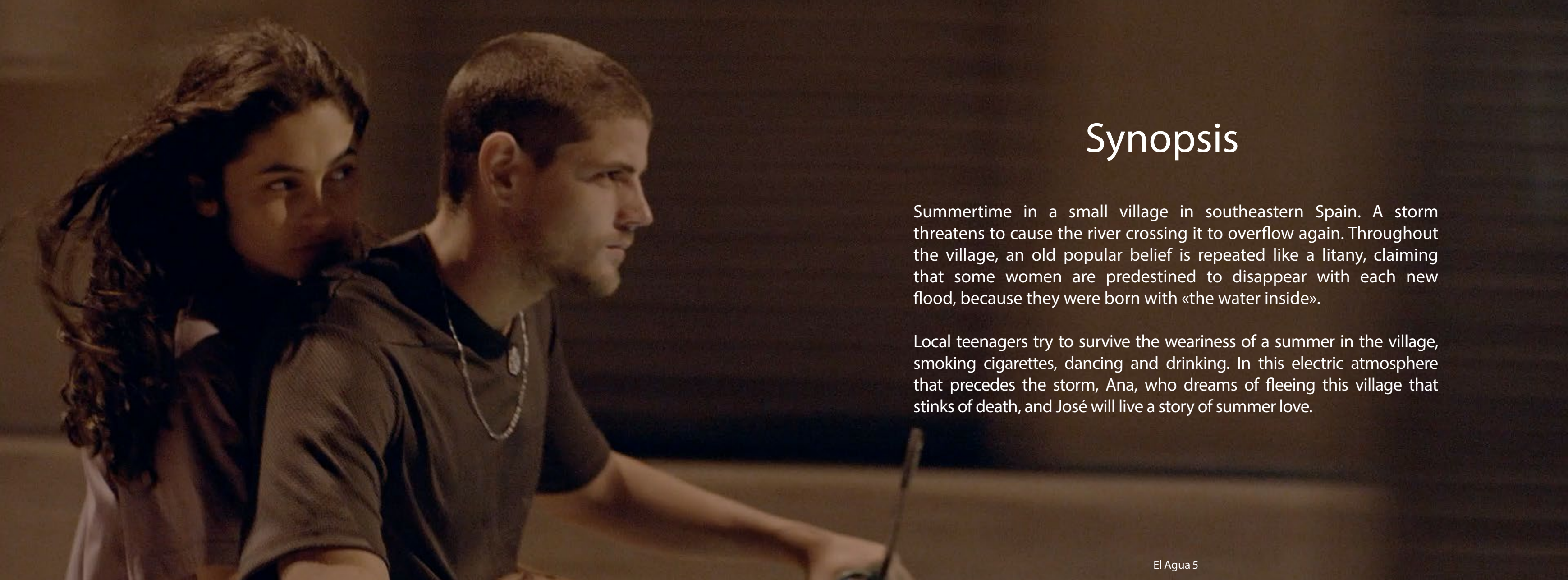
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Synopsis

Summertime in a small village in southeastern Spain. A storm threatens to cause the river crossing it to overflow again. Throughout the village, an old popular belief is repeated like a litany, claiming that some women are predestined to disappear with each new flood, because they were born with «the water inside».

Local teenagers try to survive the weariness of a summer in the village, smoking cigarettes, dancing and drinking. In this electric atmosphere that precedes the storm, Ana, who dreams of fleeing this village that stinks of death, and José will live a story of summer love.



Interview with Elena López Riera

El Agua comes from several places melted into one story. First, there is the legend of the river, the water, the women. Is it a true legend, specific to this region? The lineages, feminine (the young girl Ana, her mother, her grandmother) and masculine (José and his father). And the portrait of a provincial town with the feeling, conveyed through the youth, of boredom and confinement, with no possible escape. How did all this come together?

The film takes place in the town where I grew up. The most difficult thing was to articulate very distant things. I like to mix several dimensions which, at first sight, are not made to go together. The legend exists and it has been somewhat altered. Of the successive floods, in addition to the images of dead animals and the stories of missing people, I especially remember the stories of the old women of the village who spoke of women swallowed by the river. According to local beliefs, they

were destined to disappear with each new flood. Like a curse that pursues them.

The reality of water is the basis of this legend, with direct consequences on a daily basis, namely an ancestral fear of water and at the same time a vital need. Fear of floods and need for water because it is a very dry region that lives from an intensive agriculture completely created by humans from a domesticated nature. None of it, orange and lemon trees, has grown naturally. We have a conflicting relationship with water. We need a lot of water for the crops in a region where it rarely rains, twice a year, but when it does, it's always too much. We once saw a coffin being washed away. It wasn't magic realism, but simply the flooded cemetery, at a time when the vaults were not cemented. Then religion got involved, with very strong beliefs. You have to pray for rain but not too much so that everything is not devastated. There is a saint for rain and another to avoid too much rain. This ancestral fear of water, both desired and feared, has been passed on to women.



Why ?

At home, fears and taboos about sexuality are transmitted by the mother: «Don't do this, don't sleep with a boy before you get married, don't do this or you'll experience violence, etc.» To avoid the dangers of life, fears are passed on to us. Why do we reproduce what oppresses us? This is the most perverse side of machismo. Women internalize and reproduce the law of men. It tears me apart that we are the ones who transmit this. I do not say that my mother transferred all these fears to me, including the fear to make films. That's why this young girl in the film tries to break out from this, to transmit it in reverse, despite this generational fear that persists against all logic. Machismo, when men externalize it, you see it coming. But when it comes from within,

it is more complex to deconstruct. Why are we transmitted things that prevent us from growing?

Your short documentary *Los que desean* (2018), selected at the Locarno Film Festival, describes a race or competition between a female pigeon and a flock of pigeons. Were you already thinking about your first feature film, *El Agua*, since there is a similar scene in the film?

The collective rituals of my region interest me a great deal. In fact, a young man I knew well was taking part in this and I went to see the event, alone with my little camera. It's a tight-knit community, neighbors. I wanted to make a documentary about it. At home, this bird game seems normal, it's a tradition, but seen from afar, it can seem exotic. I was very surprised that it was selected in so many festivals, because for me it was just a shooting exercise. Because I film a lot before shooting in fact.

You co-wrote the script with the film critic Philippe Azoury. How did you come to write the story of *El Agua* ?

Writing with Philippe was very organic. We are very close, we were constantly talking about this story, about this region of southern Spain, Orihuela (Alicante), which he knows very well. He had read the first versions of a treatment that needed to be trans-

lated from Spanish to French and we started writing together very early on, imagining a way to articulate the documentary dimension with the fantasy one.

Everything we imagined during our year and a half of writing finally happened on September 13, 2019 when we were finishing the script. There was again a flood in my village, the strongest in 300 years. As I am very superstitious, I even believed that talking about it and making a film about it had caused the flood! The very fact of summoning the water, made it happen. I felt bad, because it destroyed everything. There were 11 casualties.

The legend, as the film tells it, made me think of what Jean Renoir said of *The Rule of the Game*: «a sacrifice is needed.» Here, it is to calm the wrath of the river, as in Animistic beliefs.

This is part of the folklore of this legend. As it is an orally transmitted story, it allows for many variations. Each family tells a different version. I was inspired by the one my grandmother used to tell me. For the women in the film who testified in front of the camera and talk about the legend, I first had to help them overcome their fear. I didn't want them to read or learn a text because nothing was written down. There was a mental block: they felt that they didn't know how to speak in public, they didn't feel legitimate. I wanted them to tell the story the way they wanted to. Speaking out loud made them grow and



evolve. We had lots of doubts and discussions about this because there was the risk of disrupting a fictional story. It is beautiful to be given this liberated testimony that reinvents itself and reappropriates a narrative. My desire to make films really comes from there. I grew up with women who loved to tell stories and cherished the language.

The legend of water is mentioned straight from the opening scene.

It was important to note that this legend exists from the start and does not resonate in the same way for all characters. It stays subtle, as it's the case with these stories that we don't really believe in, or that we never pay much attention to. It is the opposite of a genre film where the mystery, the secret, is given a central place. Here, it remains trivial.



There is a gap in your film between a realistic approach and the mythical side. Your choice of fantasy goes against an entire tradition of Spanish cinema.

It was intentional. I like everything that has to do with the supernatural and with beliefs, like the evil eye, or talking with the dead. So how do you introduce all these things that belong to mystical forces into the concrete of life? I am very interested in mysticism and religion, as a practice, a belief or a way of seeing the world. It started with literature and then with fantasy films of the 1940s by Jacques Tourneur, such as *Cat People* (1942), which plays on people's perception and not on an external reality. I built Ana's story in this manner. We never know if this story is true, but as soon as it becomes a reality for her because she starts to believe it, it changes her perception,

her vision, and the supernatural becomes real. And then, there is this absolute need for magic and the supernatural that is specific to this region, which is very hard to live in, to overcome this and to invent a poetry, an elsewhere, since life cannot be reduced to its own reality.

In *El Agua* there is a beautiful attention to manual skills and their transmission. Like the scene of the plaster and bricks between the son and his father; the one of the artichokes between Ana and her grandmother; José, the son, under his father's eyes.

This is the traditional irrigation, which is slowly being lost. This irrigation system with these canals has been there since the time of the Arabs. It is a domination of the land. In the irrigation scene, José doesn't know how to use a spade and it shows. I have a real obsession for the transmission of manual skills, which is a concrete reality, versus the other transmission, that of the legend that repeats itself with each flood.

Among the footage that we see of the flood, some are not of you, but taken by amateurs.

In the script, came the flood at the end and I didn't have a way to show it. When I started this film, I didn't know that there would be another flood. Otherwise, I would have used archival footage. I wanted to show



the flood with documentary footage that I wanted to combine with the fantasy side of the story. The amateur images, taken with cell phones, interested me because of the commentary of the people who were living it live and talking about the Apocalypse. In spite of all this, we refuse to leave the land where we grew up. The anchoring to one's land, in the face of catastrophes, is a human logic that touches the supernatural. One cannot believe what one sees, which has already happened and will repeat itself.

All the actors are non-professionals, except for the mother.

The mother, Bárbara Lennie, is well-known in Spain. She was in Pedro Almodóvar's *La piel que habito* (2011), Asghar Farhadi's *Everybody Knows* (2018), as well as Jaime Rosales' *Petra* (2018). The grandmother, Nieve de Medina, is also a professional actress. She was in *Los lunes al sol* (2002) by Fernando León de Aranoa. All the other performers are from

the village. I wanted to mix actors with non-actors, as Jean Eustache did. The young actress who plays Ana, Luna Pamiés, is incredible. We found her one night dancing in a village party. Alberto Olmo, who plays José, and all the other actors were found in a long casting process that lasted a year and a half, because of the pandemic. Luna, we spotted her the first week and then she disappeared for several months. She didn't answer the phone, didn't come to appointments, we couldn't find her. Then she

came back and stayed. In life, she is very elusive, very ghostly, hard to catch. She was 17 years old at the time of the shooting and she gave her all. For all the other actors, with Bárbara and Nieve, it was also a very enriching working process. They were generous with the non-professionals, and always listening. We worked a lot before the shooting to create family bonds that go far beyond the dialogues and the scenes played. I think that mix was enriching on both sides.





How did you work with the non-professional actors and the two young people who play Ana and José?

In fact, as far as the dialogues are concerned, everything was written. It was my producers who alerted me to the risks of improvisation. But when I started to rehearse with the actors, I saw that they struggled to make them their own, to make them seem natural. We didn't necessarily keep in the editing what was written, but what was happening right after, in the gestures and words. In the end, the whole first scene of the film, where the group of young people are talking together, is improvisation, the result of research work with the actors. It takes time and many rehearsals to arrive at this result. It was very important, on a human level, to build a group during the shooting with the non-professional actors and to make it work

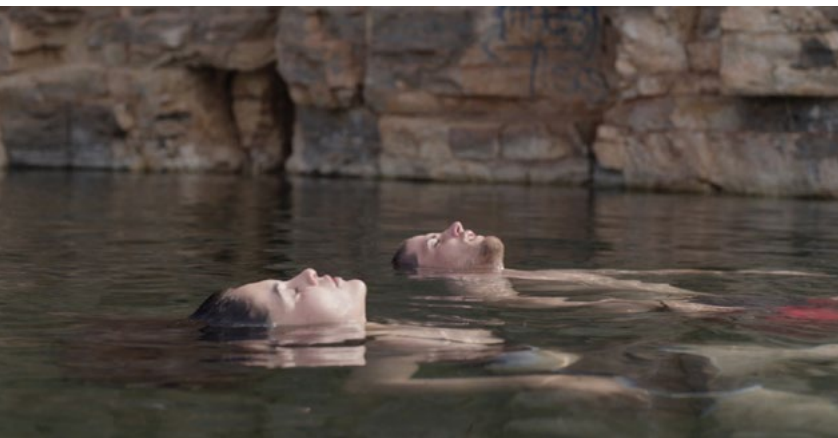
with professional actresses as well. I spent a lot of time working with the actors.

For example, the brick scene, when the son who prepares the plaster for his father, was not in the script. In fact, it is after their dialogues, when there are just gestures, that it becomes interesting. It's by filming that we realize it. Gestures have a story. I spent three months with the men who plays the father and the son, who didn't know each other at all before the shooting, and we worked to build a father-son relationship. Pascual Valero, who plays the father, is a mason by trade and has orange groves. He had not planned to play, he simply came to accompany his daughter (who was eventually not selected) for the casting. Creating bonds between these people for the film was the hardest and most beautiful work. And the most beautiful reward, like in a documentary. To give them dignity. Just like the young people in the first sequence who give the impression of knowing each other well while they come together for the first time.

Having shot a lot, how did the editing change the film compared to the initial script?

The first cut of the film was 4h30 long. In documentaries, you film and then you build a story. Here, I had fun inventing a story before filming it, even though I had never written a script. I trimmed the explicit to keep only the essential to understand the story.





And to introduce the women who speak about this story, which is the challenge of the film, by finding a balance. This choice to give the floor to women to speak about the legend came late, after the filming of the film itself, when I began the editing, although it was planned in the script, but in a more literary form. At first, we shot the film as if we were telling the story without the women's testimony, so that everything would be understood. The editing was decisive in giving balance to this heterogeneous ensemble, and in this process I relied heavily on the film's editor, Raphaël Lefèvre, on the co-writer Philippe Azoury, and on my producers.

Young Spanish cinema is doing great lately, and is often being rooted in specific regions. Oliver Laxe in Galicia, director Carla Simón with *Summer 93* (2017) and with her second film *Alcarràs* which

won the Golden Bear in Berlin this year, Clara Roquet with *Libertad*, which recently won the Goya for best first film, Pilar Palomero with *Las Niñas*, Goya 2021 for best film. Not to mention Chema García Ibarra with *Espíritu Sagrado*, selected at the Locarno Festival 2021, and David Pantaleón with *Rendir los machos*. What do you think of all this ? Do you all know each other?

This trend you speak of began with José Luis Guerín, especially with his documentary *Work In Progress* (2001). Oliver Laxe was an assistant on his films. There are also the documentaries of Isaki Lacuesta. They opened a new path by showing that you could make films without the help of the ICAA.

Among the people whose work I really appreciate are Chema García Ibarra and Carla Simón. We all come from the cultural and geographical periphery. Chema, Carla, David [Pantaleón] grew up in their village, from the lower middle class, and did not have access to culture through their family environment. We collaborate, we are very gregarious. Chema García Ibarra and Carla Simón read my script and I read theirs. I make a brief appearance in Chema's film, and Chema also plays in mine, in the karaoke scene. We all make a different kind of cinema, and different from what is being done and has been done in Spanish cinema.

What happens next, after *El Agua* ?

Fantasy, again. I would like to do a ghost story...

Interview by Charles Tesson, April 2022.



Technical sheet

Directed by Elena LÓPEZ RIERA
Written by Elena LÓPEZ RIERA, Philippe AZOURY
DOP Giuseppe TRUPPI
Editing Raphaël LEFEVRE
Sound Carlos IBANEZ, Mathieu FARNARIER, Denis SECHAUD
Set Design Miguel Angel REBOLLO
Costumes Nuria PASCUAL
Hair & Make-Up Katrine ZINGG
Composer Mandine KNOEPFEL
Assistant Director Adrián ORR
Artistic Advisor Philippe AZOURY

Production ALINA FILM, SUICAFILMS, LES FILMS DU WORSO • Coproduction
RTS - Radio Télévision Suisse • With the support of Office Fédéral de la Culture
(OFC) • With the participation of Cinéforum • With the support of La Loterie
Romande, Suissimage, Media Desk Suisse • Producers Eugenia Mumenthaler
David Epiney Coproducers Rafa Moles Pepe Andreu Sylvie Pialat Alejandro
Arenas • Associate Producer Benoît Quainon • Production Manager Andrés
MELINAS • French Distribution: Les films du Losange • International Sales: Elle Driver

Cast

Ana	Luna PAMIES
Ana's mother	Bárbara LENNIE
Ana's grandmother	Nieve De MEDINA
José	Alberto OLMO
Cristina	Irene PELLICER
Elena	Nayara De LUCAS
María	Lidia María CANOVAS
José's father	Pascual VALERO



Elena López Riera

Elena López Riera was born in Orihuela, Spain in 1982. After a PhD in Audiovisual Communication, she teaches comparative literature at Geneva University and Charles III University of Madrid and Valencia. She directed the short films Pueblo, presented at the Directors' Fortnight in 2015, and The Entrails, presented at the Locarno Film Festival, in the international competition Pardi di domani. Her latest short film Those Who Desire was nominated for the European Film Awards and won the Pardino d'Oro at Locarno in 2018. She is also a co-founder of lacasinegra, an artists' collective dedicated to research and experimentation with new audiovisual devices.

El Agua, selected in residence at the Cannes Film Festival Cinéfondation, is her first feature film.

2022 El Agua / selected at the 2022 Directors' Fortnight
2018 Those Who Desire (short film, 24 min),
2016 The Entrails
2015 Pueblo (short film, 27 min) / selected at the 2015 Directors' Fortnight
2014 Not In Geneva