

ELENA

In her first feature, director Petra Costa retrieves the memory of her sister

Conceived as a hybrid documentary, ELENA is a film about the irreversibility of loss that also inspires audience to heal the pain

The goodbye came with a simple gift: "When you miss me, put this shell over your ear. This way we can talk," said her sister, 13 years older than she. Petra, then seven years old, would go back to that shell many times in the following days. Weeks, months, two decades passed. Petra already was an actress and filmmaker when she returned to New York looking for Elena, intent on filming her absence. She found traces of her sister in scattered memories, fragments of what they had experienced together, impressions recorded on cassette tapes, and images caught on home videos when it was she, Elena, who dreamed of being a film actress.

ELENA is a film about the persistence of those memories, the irreversibility of that loss, and the impact the absence of her sister had on the seven-year-old girl. Petra calls her sister her "inconsolable memory." It also is a film about delicacy. Conceived as a documentary with a psychological undercurrent, Petra Costa's first feature film follows her journey to retrieve – and, to a certain extent, explain – the frustration and anguish that dragged Elena's life to its tragic end. In 80 minutes, the spectators are invited to immerse themselves in a still pungent past to, together with Petra and her memories, free themselves from the pain. "Slowly the pain turns to water, becomes memory," says Petra, who is both an actress and character in the film.

ELENA also is a film about Brazil, about the military dictatorship's aftermath, and about the generation that grew up in the 1980s – the "lost decade" – with the challenging task of fighting for their dreams when the majority accused them of neither having ideals nor sociopolitical engagement. Above all, that generation of the *abertura* (the transition to democracy) which was raised by politically militant parents who renounced all forms of oppression and sought to bring up their children with the greatest possible freedom.

Produced by Busca Vida Films, ELENA received funding from Oi, via the Brazilian Audiovisual Law, and from Tribeca Film Institute Latin America Media Arts Fund, and the Ford Foundation.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Elena moves from Brazil to New York to realize her dream of becoming a movie actress. At 20 she meets with a reality that forces her to give up her dream and to a drastic decision. Years later her sister Petra, 13 years younger, goes to the same city in search of the memory of Elena.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Elena, a young Brazilian woman, moves to New York with the same dream as her mother had, to become a movie actress. She leaves behind her childhood spent in hiding during the years of the military dictatorship. She also leaves Petra, her seven-year-old sister. Two decades later, Petra also becomes an actress and goes to New York in search of Elena. She only has a few clues about her: home movies, newspaper clippings, a diary and letters. At any moment Petra hopes to find Elena walking in the streets in a silk blouse. Gradually, the features of the two sisters are confused; we no longer know one from the other. When Petra finally finds Elena in an unexpected place, she has to learn to let her go.

FILM CREDITS

Director: Petra Costa

Cast: Elena Andrade, Li An and Petra Costa

Production Co.: Busca Vida Filmes

Movie Script/ Screenplay/ Screenwriters: Petra Costa and Carolina Ziskind

Photography: Janice d'Avila, Miguel Vassy and Will Etchebehere

Editors: Marilia Moraes and Tina Baz

Sound Designers: Olivier Goinard and Guile Martins

Executive Producers: Julia Bock and Daniela Santos

Production Coordinator: Vanessa Elias

Post-Production: Laura Futuro

PETRA COSTA: DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER

Petra Costa is a film director and actress. Before making ELENA, she directed and produced the short film *Olhos de Ressaca* (Undertow Eyes), a poetic depiction of love and aging as seen from the perspective of her grandparents. In 2009, *Olhos de Ressaca* was shown in several national and international festivals, receiving important prizes, among which Best Short Film in the Rio Festival 2009, Best Short Film in the London International Documentary Film Festival 2010, Best Short Documentary in Cine Las Americas 2010, Festival and Special Jury Prize in the Gramado Festival 2009.

In directing it, Petra's intent is to use intimate personal experiences as her raw material and project their poetry on the screen. Petra's cinematic interests are an extension of her education and artistic training. Petra completed her undergraduate studies Summa Cum Laude in Anthropology and Theater at Barnard College, Columbia University, NY; and, her Masters in Health, Community and Development at the London School of Economics, London. From the age of fifteen, she has been working professionally as an actress.

BUSCA VIDA FILMS

Busca Vida Films co-produced the short film *Olhos de Ressaca* (Undertow Eyes) and the feature film ELENA. Currently, it is co-producing the documentaries *Lira Paulistana* and *Vanguarda Paulista* by Riba de Castro, *Orestes* by Rodrigo Siqueira, and the theatrical play *Rouge* by Eryk Rocha and Martha Kiss Perrone.

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