

a Cinema Guild release

SANSÓN AND ME



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2022 / 83 min / 1.85:1 / HD / Color

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Press Materials:

www.cinemaguild.com/theatrical/sansonandme_press.htm

SYNOPSIS

During his day job as a Spanish criminal interpreter in a small town in California, filmmaker Rodrigo Reyes (499) met a young man named Sansón, an undocumented Mexican immigrant who was sentenced to life in prison without parole. With no permission to interview him, Sansón and Reyes worked together over a decade, using hundreds of letters as inspiration for re-creations of Sansón's childhood—featuring members of Sansón's own family. The result is a vibrant portrait of a friendship navigating immigration and the depths of the criminal justice system and pushing the boundaries of cinematic imagination to rescue a young migrant's story from oblivion.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 2012, about a year after I started working as a Spanish court interpreter in rural California, I was assigned to work on my first murder trial. I was very nervous because I understood the huge responsibility I was carrying to do the best job I could in a setting where the stakes could not be higher.

Enter Sansón, a 19-year-old kid who was very quiet and super-polite, facing some of the most serious charges you can imagine. I sat next to him for three weeks, side-by-side with a fellow Mexican migrant whose future was on the line—but I never got to hear his story. Everything was focused on a single moment, on the incident that brought him to court, but not on who he was or where he came from.

At the end of the trial, Sansón was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole; and I remember clearly that he got up, the bailiffs put his handcuffs on and he shook my hand and thanked me for my help. That image stuck with me. I couldn't let him go. Did he really deserve such a harsh sentence? Life without the possibility of parole? He was just a kid! And we didn't know his story. Where did he come from? What did he live through? And what happened to bring him into this situation? I could not help but think that as a fellow Mexican, there but for the grace of God went I.

A few months after the case ended, I met my dear friend Su Kim, who ended up producing the film. It was she who encouraged me to reach out to Sansón. I wrote him a letter and he responded with generosity, inviting me to visit him. The collaboration just grew naturally from that re-encounter, as we got to know each other and I became more and more connected to his story.

I realized just how necessary it was for this film to come to life when I saw the depth of the injustices he had endured. I'm talking about everything that happened to him before trial, all the trauma he experienced that nobody was held accountable for, that nobody tried to heal. Society had basically either ignored him or thrown the book at him—both Mexico and the USA had let him down.

The idea for the film is really born out of the obstacles and limitations imposed by the criminal justice system. I was not allowed to film Sansón himself, because the argument was that being in a film is like giving him a reward for his crimes. So this led to a unique cinematic challenge: how do you make a film about someone without interviews, without archives? Even recording phone calls was impossible because the quality and timing was so bad. Sansón would sometimes go for months without being granted a call.

To be fair, it took years to find the solution; years of trial and error testing everything from an animated approach to a more essayistic style. That was a dark time where nothing was clicking. But we kept going, pulled forward by Sansón himself who was the biggest champion of the process. He kept his faith, and that gave me strength to keep going all that time.

I remember re-reading our correspondence, and opening Sansón's very first letter to me, and right there in those initial pages full of excitement and joy, he asked me point blank: Do you think they will let me get out of here to be a part in the movie? Or are you going to use an actor to tell my story? Back then, my answer was shortsighted and kind of lame, I told him documentaries had to stick to the truth. Yet Sansón had been right all along!

It was clear almost immediately that we could not go for a polished, Hollywood approach. We needed to invite his family to act in the film! They understood his story and were still living in his universe.

As my dear friend and mentor to the film, Alan Berliner, said to me time and time again, you have to listen to the story. Listen to what it wants and don't be afraid to try, even if you have no answers. Once we hit on the concept for bringing the letters to life, I could hear both life and the film talking to me in the poetic language of cinema.

There is something terrible that happens inside our institutions and in the gaps of our society, where people fall into the abyss and are effectively erased, sent off to another planet. We may think, idealistically and even naively, that our courts will take care of these problem people, but really all they do is clean-up the mess and get it out of our sight.

I could have made a lot of stories about incarceration and immigration, but the fact is that Sansón is my friend. I love him and I don't want his story to be erased. This film is my contribution to his resistance, and I hope that struggle rings true for the audience as well.



INTERVIEW WITH RODRIGO REYES

How did you address the many obstacles in making this film?

You know, I learned something about our industry in making this film. We all love something new, a new vision that makes us vibrate and fills us with energy. But most of us are afraid of taking the risks that artists need to get there. We are afraid of starting on a journey without clear answers, without a destination. And that's where the real breakthroughs happen, when we jump into the ocean with just our hopes and dreams to keep us afloat.

For the longest time, we struggled with fundraising precisely because we were out there, swimming in the ocean, trying one thing after the other. It was painful but in hindsight, it was an amazing experience: I was privileged to spend 10 years testing the waters of my craft together with friends and collaborators that I admire and that also fell in love with this film.

What brought about the formal aspects of the film? How was this visual language created?

Documentary has the power to rival anything that has happened in the history of cinema, but it can only do so by honoring with beauty the lives of real people who open themselves to working with us.

From the very moment Sansón agreed to work with me, I was committed to mustering whatever talents I have to crafting a beautiful film, one that spoke the language of cinema in a way that demanded your attention. I honestly don't believe it came from a place of conceit, instead, I wanted this because Sansón deserved it. He deserves for his story to be told with all the powers of the medium, so that it can come to life on the screen with beauty and grace.

That's why we worked so hard to bring poetry to his memories. In fact, I actually hate the concept of reenactment or recreations, because these labels are loaded with a sense of hard truth, like these are the facts and we are just coloring by numbers to show you what happened. I much prefer to call what happens in the film a re-imagining—because imagination and poetry were so important to that process.

I was proud to work with Mexican cinematographer Alejandro Mejía to craft a look that placed us in the timeless universe of a child, balancing the unique spark of natural acting from Sansón's family with the incredibly vibrant locations of his hometown of Tecomán, in Colima, and California's Central Valley. We stuck to natural light and intervened just enough in each scene, so that we could strike a balance between what was already in the world and what we needed to incite.

The production of the film was like dancing, moving through all the layers and feeling them out, trying to find our bearings while using Sansón's words as our compass. We were constantly filming while on location and then going back into the edit, where we would discover connections that helped us on our next shoot. And slowly, the face of the film began to emerge.

What was it like to work with Sansón's family and with the actor who plays Sansón, Gerardo? The process led to some difficult moments. How did you navigate that?

The acting process was a loving struggle, as we were trying to collaborate across our own experiences and history, trying to build bridges that could bring us together around the project. Yes, we definitely had tough moments where we felt things would fall apart, but all of us, the family and myself, would always go back for Sansón. We were there because of our shared love for him, and once we remembered that, we could move forward.

I am in awe of the bravery of his family, and their willingness to welcome me into their experience. Both their joys and their traumas came into the film, and that was sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes inspiring, but always important.

And about Gerardo, I simply don't have the words to express how grateful I am for his trust in this project. I met him on a recommendation from his High School Science Teacher, who just absolutely admired him, and I soon understood why. Gerardo is a young man, but a man of his word. He gave the film everything he had and crafted a tremendous performance that is remarkably close to the real Sansón. I think this comes from Gerardo's profound understanding of Sansón's world, of his life in two countries that can be very brutal and indifferent to young men of color.

When I look at the film, I see their incredible efforts in these amazing performances that feel unabashedly authentic and yet still have the magic of Sansón's prose.

How much did you shoot and what was the process of editing?

Sansón and Me actually had many small shoots, concentrated in time but spread out over several years and following many styles, from the verité work of the early days to the lyrical re-imaginings of Sansón's childhood and the stark moments of the trial. In the midst of this, we began editing, and the result was a fabulous creative storm where all the layers of the film were floating in the wind, and our task was to bring them together into harmony.

I was lucky to work with a dynamic duo of editors: Andrea Chignoli and Daniel Chávez Ontiveros. We tackled the edit as a dialogue between the three of us, with Andrea playing the role of the captain of the montage ship, giving Daniel and I homework and puzzles to solve, which we would then discuss and breakdown again, eventually shifting the process so that Andrea could take the lead in the final stretch. The arrangement was so invigorating, pushing the film over and over again, until we found equilibrium between all the parts.

The other element in the edit, which is the very backbone of the entire film, are the letters I've shared with Sansón. As of this day, we have close to 900 handwritten pages of correspondence! There's basically an enormous text, almost a novel living underneath the film, and we soon realized that as opposed to a normal biopic built in chronological order, we had to break the tyranny order and subvert the chronology to really mimic how a friendship is built. Because if you think about how you actually get to know someone? It's a flow, right? You learn a little here and there about the life of this new person, all while going through new experiences together.

Can you talk about the use of music in the film? How did you collaborate with Jacobo Lieberman? And speak a little about the song that appears in the film.

When I shared the film with Jacobo, he immediately opened his heart to it, with a deep and unfiltered love for the story that is reflected in his work. He managed to give musical resonance to the emotional universe of the film in a way that feels pure, immaculate and just plain honest. I love that he worked with the soundscape of Mexican folk music, bringing together instruments that could easily live in a local brass banda, a clarinet, a horn, or a raw guitar. The music feels organic, as if it was born within lived experience behind the film.

The song is actually an original, with lyrics based on poetry by Sansón himself, set to music by Leo Soqui, a wonderful Mexican composer who guided me on the path of capturing this corrido. I've always loved the format of the corridos, these ballads that speak truth through poetry that are so fundamental to our music in Mexico. We collaborated with a talented young band of musicians named Made 4 La Calle who fell in love with the song and made it their own.

How does the film invite audiences to consider or confront the question of justice?

I would argue that Sansón was really trying to go beyond and break into, what for lack of a better term I would call the fifth wall.

What's the fifth wall? That's when you not only understand how things are being built also the why. Why is it important to tell this story? Why are these decisions being made? The process of making this film was all about that for me, and I agonized over these questions until I realized, I must share this struggle with the audience. This didn't make the process less painful, but what happened was that the struggle became a strength.

Shouldn't we all wonder how stories are constructed? Shouldn't we be willing to look and take part in the entire journey? I think these questions matter beyond the poetic beauty of a work of art, because if we don't understand the whys and the hows, we will never be able to truly connect with Sansón and interrupt the cycles of violence that have trapped so many young men like him. That's the path to real justice.

We need to look fully at each other, and that process is painful. I wanted to embrace this, with as much love as possible, within the experience of this film. Because Sansón is more than his crime, but he is also more than his memories. He is a man trying to bring sense and purpose to his life, a man who invited me to look into his soul and who is welcoming us into his hopes for the future.

How does Sansón feel about the film coming into the world? Will he be able to someday watch the film?

Sansón is incredibly excited for the film to be seen. Yet he is also conflicted by anxiety at what folks will think of the story. Will they understand him? He wrestles with the happiness and fear of putting his story out into the world, of being vulnerable and resilient to what folks may think. You can see this in a letter he's shared with the public.

I wish he could see the film now, but it is impossible due to the constraints of the prison environment. I am definitely going to be sending him printouts of the reviews and sharing as much as I can of the experience with him in our letters.

And what's most amazing is that the film will be available on Independent Lens, an amazing series that lives in the universe of public broadcast, which means it will run inside prison walls across the entire country. This is a mind-blowing event on the horizon if you think about all the people who can be reached, from incarcerated folks, to the staff and guards, to their families back home who care for them and so on. Sansón likes to refer to his story as a little bird, and this bird is going to fly far and wide.

Can we understand another person's life through cinema?

Human beings have a deep, visceral need for art and storytelling. They are part of how we come to know the world and yes, absolutely, understand one another. In many ways, that's the heart of what Sansón and Me is all about, two friends trying to understand each other by sharing stories. We must believe in the power of cinema to tell these stories, otherwise it would be an artform without a soul.

I know in my heart that Sansón is not alone. There are thousands of other young men who have lived through his journey, who will unfortunately be caught up in the dual tragedies of their mistakes and the failures of society just do right by them. I know that folks will see themselves in this film.

CREDITS

Directed and Produced by	Rodrigo Reyes
Produced by	Su Kim
Story by	Sansón Noe Andrade, Rodrigo Reyes, Su Kim
Executive Producer	Inti Cordera
Executive Producer	Sally Jo Fifer
Executive Producer	Lois Vossen
Executive Producer	Sandie Pedlow
Director of Photography	Alejandro Mejía, AMC
Edited by	Andrea Chignoli Daniel E. Chávez Ontiveros
Story Consultant	Doris Baizley
Original Music	Jacobo Lieberman
Supervising Sound Editor Re-recording Mixer	Ruy Garcia
Cast	
Sansón- Adult	Gerardo Reyes
Sansón - Child	Antonio González Andrade
Sansón - Baby	Miguel Andrade

RODRIGO REYES BIO

The films of award-winning Mexican director Rodrigo Reyes have received the support of The Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE), Sundance and Tribeca Institutes, featuring on PBS and Netflix. He is a recipient of the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, Creative Capital Award, the SF Indie Fest Non-Fiction Vanguard Award, and the Rainin Fellowship. In 2020, his film, "499," won Best Cinematography at the Tribeca Film Festival, as well as the Special Jury Award at Hot Docs.

SU KIM BIO

Su has received industry support from ITVS, Sundance Documentary Fund, NYSCA, California Humanities Council, and the Tribeca Film Institute. She was a 2015 Women at Sundance Fellow. Her work has screened at festivals across the world, including Sundance and Berlinale, and has been broadcast on POV and Independent Lens. Su has won multiple awards at Sundance and was nominated for an Academy Award in 2019 for "Hale County This Morning, This Evening." She received an Emmy in the Outstanding News and Current Affairs Documentary category, as well as two Peabody Awards, for Midnight Traveler and Hale County This Morning, This Evening and was part of the producing team for the Academy Award winner documentary short "Learning to Skate in a Warzone."

SANSÓN ANDRADE BIO

Born in Tecomán, Mexico, Sansón immigrated to California as a young boy, where he worked many jobs, from farming to cooking, as well as construction and more. He is an avid reader and a devoted student, currently working on his GED. Over the course of this project, he has written hundreds of letters detailing his life story and documenting his experiences in the California prison system.

RODRIGO REYES FILMOGRAPHY

Memories of the Future (2012)
Purgatorio: A Journey into the Heart of the Border (2013)
Lupe Under the Sun (2016)
After the Raid (2019, documentary short)
Abuelos (2020, documentary short)
499 (2020)
Sansón and Me (2022)

SELECT FESTIVALS & AWARDS

WINNER – Best Film, Sheffield DocFest 2022
Official Selection - Tribeca Festival 2022
Official Selection – SFFilm Doc Stories 2022