

The Little Kite

Synopsis and Director's Statement



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THE LITTLE KITE - SYNOPSIS & DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

by James F. Robinson

LOGLINE

A young Guatemalan Mayan girl, Tomasa, clashes with her strong-willed mother, and loses a beloved grandfather - her first experience with death and loss. Through the process of making a kite to fly in a "Day of the Dead" kite festival, Tomasa overcomes setbacks, and finds a new connection to her family, her culture and a deeper understanding of herself. THE LITTLE KITE is a female-centric story of empowerment and the miracles of small victories.

SYNOPSIS

Tomasa (8) is a young indigenous K'iche' Mayan girl who lives near the remote mountain town of Chichicastenango, Guatemala with her Mother and baby sister Sophia. Her father has left the family to find work in Mexico, and has not been heard from in months. Tomasa's mother Veronica (25) makes intricate hand-woven textiles - the kind Mayan women have been crafting for thousands of years. It is the only source of income for the family besides what they grow in their small farm. Weaving is a sacred and endangered Mayan art, and Veronica insists that Tomasa become a weaver. Tomasa is not interested, a source of major conflict between mother and daughter.

The film begins at night, at the family's small adobe house on the side of a mountain. Veronica is trying to finish an intricate hand-embroidered blouse (*huipil*) to sell, she works by the light of a bare light bulb until the power goes out, then by candlelight as her children sleep. She is determined to finish it.

The next day, the family travels to the ancient town market to sell the weaving. But Veronica must also go to the bank, and leaves the baby and the weaving with Tomasa at the market. At the bank, Veronica tries to explain why they have not made payments on the loans made for the farm. She is humiliated when the Bank Officer asks where her husband is.

In the market, Tomasa is unable to sell the *huipil*. Tomasa tells her mother as she returns, "You are asking for too much money." This irritates her Mother, who reminds Tomasa that she spent a full four months weaving the blouse, and even at the price she is asking, she is making only a few dollars a day.

The Mother now tries to sell the *huipil* herself. A textile merchant, Mr. Galvez approaches her and offers her a price, but it is so low she must refuse. She is visibly deflated at having to say "no." Later at home, deep in the night, Tomasa is woken by the sound of a text message on her Mother's phone. Illuminated by the light of the screen, she sees her Mother's worried face as she reads it. She rises and goes outside. In the moonlight she reads the text again. We see the screen: "Grandfather is worse. He asks for you. When will you come?" For some reason, she doesn't attempt to answer.

Early morning; the blade of an old hoe slices into the ground of the family *milpa*, the hereditary plot of farmland the family has tilled for generations. Tomasa asks about the text message from last night. Veronica says they will travel to see Grandfather when there is money. When asked what she replied, Veronica tells Tomasa she couldn't reply. She says she has no phone credits to send a text.

When Tomasa returns from school, Veronica is weaving furiously, trying to finish a beautiful shawl (*tzute*) on her loom. Her technique is the same that Mayan women have used for millennium. Veronica reminds Tomasa that she must finish a belt she is making for her grandfather. "Weaving is important," Veronica scolds, "I learned from my mother and she learned from hers, going back to the beginning." She sets up Tomasa with a small version of a loom so she can work a simple red belt.

Veronica heads towards town with her textiles and her baby asleep in the sling on her back. She tells Tomasa to work hard. As soon as her mother is out of site, Tomasa defiantly disconnects the loom and starts to eat an apple.

Once again, Veronica is unable to sell her textiles at a decent price. Desperate, she approaches the textile merchant Galvez and offers him the shawl for 400 Quetzales (\$50). He criticizes her work, and offers her 150 Quetzales, (about \$20). Seething, she takes the money and leaves. As she walks away, she looks back and sees Galvez showing the shawl to his employee, enthusiastically. At a small shop, she buys phone credits with the money from the sale and is able to text a reply to her mother. She desperately tries to connect with her husband by text.

Veronica arrives at her home as darkness has already settled on the hillside. She discovers Tomasa's unfinished weaving on the ground. Exasperated, Veronica reminds her daughter that traditional weaving contains the soul of the Maya. Tomasa has heard it before. She doesn't see the power in clinging to old Mayan culture in an overwhelming Spanish society that looks down on indigenous culture. Even at her age, Tomasa understands racism. "They think we are nothing," Tomasa says.

"The act of creation is the ultimate power," Veronica tells her. "The tiny spider can weave a giant web, making threads from her own body. She feeds herself and her family with the web. She doesn't need anyone else."

That night the Mother cannot sleep. She sits up and watches over her children, as the glow of the dying fire flickers over them. She looks at a photo she has of the grandfather and her, standing in a yard. The grandfather's face is kind and wise. She gets up and walks outside, to her *milpa*. The moonlight seeps through the stalks of corn. The Mother sits in a small clearing at the edge of the cornfield, overlooking the valley below, as the first glow of the morning fills the sky.

Tomasa is awoken at dawn by her frustrated mother. She instructs Tomasa to finish the belt before she goes to school. But Tomasa makes a mess of the project - in rage, she rips it off the loom and hides it, a major act of rebellion for a Mayan girl. She rushes to school, hiding the weaving in her bag, before her mother can realize what happened.

That day the family learns the Grandfather has died. Tomasa instantly believes her rebellious action must have somehow caused the death of her Grandfather.

Veronica now must sell her intricate *huipil*, as well as her family heritage of vintage weavings for a pittance so she can pay the bank and pay to travel home for the funeral. Tomasa watches her mother take the money in agony. She watches Galvez victoriously carry the pile of family heirlooms to his store.

The family travels by bus to Santiago Sacatepéquez, a Kaqchikel town with a different language and culture new to Tomasa. There we meet Tomasa's Grandmother, a vibrant woman in her 70's with a sharp wit. Tomasa's Aunt, Claudia (30) is there as well. She is affluent, having married a man in the city. She has a 12 year old daughter, Yosalyn, who is dressed in modern clothes and is very jealous of Tomasa's "favorite grandchild" reputation. Claudia and Rosalyn refuse to speak Mayan, they prefer to deny their Mayan heritage. Yosalyn is forced to share a bed with Tomasa that night, and is angry.

Very early the next morning, the Mother goes to pray in the church, taking her children. All the statues of saints seem to be staring at Tomasa in judgement. Tomasa is certain that the saints know the evil she has done which caused the death of her Grandfather. The guilt is crushing her.

There is a traditional Mayan-Catholic funeral with a procession through town. That night, with her Grandmother's help, Tomasa finally finishes weaving the belt, which is placed on the family altar honoring the Grandfather. It is misshapen and ugly, but Veronica is proud of her daughter.

Tomasa meets Mr. Mérida (75), he was her Grandfather's best friend. He is a master in the making of giant kites for the Santiago kite festival on All Saints Day. This festival is famous throughout Latin America, where kites as tall as four story buildings are made by hand and displayed. Tradition says the giant kites play a part in the welcoming of the ancestors' spirits as they visit their family on that one day in the cemetery.

Tomasa decides she wants to build a kite to honor her Grandfather. She hopes this will make amends for her destruction of the belt. Mr. Mérida says, "Girls don't build kites. Only men." Tomasa is stubborn - she begins the difficult process to build a kite, eventually with Mr. Mérida's reluctant help.

As they spend time together making the kite, Mr. Mérida shares his unique world view with Tomasa, formed in part by Mayan tradition, and a lifetime of making and flying kites and connecting with his ancestors through them. Veronica observes them together, and sees the calming effect Mérida has on the girl. She has an enthusiasm for kite building that she never had for weaving.

One afternoon, Tomasa confesses her horrible guilt to Mr. Mérida, saying her rebellion caused the death of her sick Grandfather. The old man listens carefully and then tells her it is not true. He was with her Grandfather at his death, which was the night before the incident with the weaving. When Tomasa understands that she is innocent in her Grandfather's death, she starts to cry and runs away so Mr. Mérida cannot see her. She walks to the edge of town and into the forrest that edges the town. She sits in a glade. She watches the trees, trying to remember her Grandfather's voice. She closes her eyes and remembers a time when her Grandfather and she were walking in the same forrest, when she was a small girl (flashback). He took her to look for the mythical and almost extinct Quetzal bird, which they never saw, but heard only. She is distracted from the memory as she hears a sound in the tree-tops. High in the tree, she thinks she sees a tiny glimpse of the rarely seen Quetzal bird, it's long tail trailing behind it as it flies away.

Finally Tomasa's kite is finished, and it has a beautiful Quetzal bird as decoration. It is as beautiful as any Mayan textile, made of hundreds of tiny pieces of colored tissue paper.

Two days day before the festival, Mr. Mérida falls ill and Tomasa becomes afraid that he will die like her Grandfather did. He is confined to a hospital room. The next morning, her cousin Yosaly, jealous of the attention Tomasa is getting, destroys Tomasa's kite early one morning when no one is looking. Tomasa awakes in panic, seeing the kite gone. She eventually finds it crumpled up in a lump, outside with the livestock. It has been methodically broken in pieces. A piglet is chewing on the tissue paper. Tomasa catches Yosalin looking at her from a distance, as she picks up the ball of twisted paper and sticks.

But Tomasa is undefeated. She decides to rebuild the kite from scratch. Without Mr. Mérida's help, it is ugly and awkward. Veronica finds her daughter asleep on the unfinished kite late that night.

Early the next morning, the old cemetery is full of families celebrating *Todos Santos* (The Day of the Dead). The graves seem brand-new, swept clean and decorated with yellow flowers. Grandmother leads the family to Grandfather's grave, and they make the final decorations on the grave. Huge, brightly colored kites, some as tall as multi-story buildings, are lifted up by teams of young men. Thousands now fill the small graveyard.

Tomasa tries to finish the kite, but cannot string it correctly on the sticks without Mérida's help. Veronica sees her daughter crumbling. She sweeps her up and takes her to the hospital to see Mr. Mérida. he seems weak and small in the hospital bed. But he rises and finds a way to praise the ugly kite and expertly strings the kite on the sticks. Tomasa and her mother rush back to the cemetery.

Tomasa tries to fly the kite with her mother's help, but there is not much wind and the crowds make it difficult to find room to fly it. She fails again and again and again, devastated as the kite repeatedly crashes into the ground. The kite now looks battered and Tomasa is beaten. Veronica produces the belt that Tomasa wove for her grandfather. She writes a small prayer on a scrap of paper, and with the belt, ties then to the kite's tail. After a few more ties, the kite finally and triumphantly lifts off, and climbs high in the sky, flying proudly with the other beautiful kites. Tomasa beams.

At the hospital, Mr. Mérida has a view of the kites in the sky. He finally sees Tomasa's plain, small kite flying in the air, freely dancing among the giant kites of the men.

In the forest near the graveyard, with the kites soaring above, a Quetzal bird sits on a branch, almost hidden from view, watching the patches of color in the sky.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

30 years ago, I scouted rural Mayan Guatemala for a sponsored film I was hired to make for a non-profit organization. That film was never made, but my contact with the indigenous Mayan people made a lasting impression on me. It seemed as if these people, despite the horrific political persecution and war they have suffered over the centuries, lived an enviable, "centered" life compared to my complicated, stressful and "convenient" life in the United States. Their mystical connection to their land, their gift for design and the spiritual rhythms of their lifestyles reminded me how artificial our "First World" life had become.

THE LITTLE KITE is the result. It has echoes of De Sica's 'BICYCLE THIEVES', Truffaut's 400 BLOWS' and Kiarostami's 'WHERE IS THE FRIEND'S HOME' in that the film will allow us to see this magical world through the eyes of a child.

The beautiful and complicated textiles of this culture seemed to me to be a living art form. They are a physical form of mathematics you can hold in your hand and see with your eyes, a riot of color and design that proclaims Mayan pride and history. I learned that the Mayan language and tradition of weaving are about 3000 years old, predating the Latin language. Since first contact with the Spanish in 1534, both the Mayan language and textile art form have been under threat of extinction, especially during the genocide of the horrific Guatemalan Civil War of 1960 to 1996.

I always wanted to make a film among these people, and as America tumbled further into chaos and division as a result of the 2016 elections, my mind went back to Mayan Guatemala, and a story took shape. To my experience, these indigenous people live in a way that expresses a unique humanity which is little understood by outside cultures.

Some may ask why a non-Latino American filmmaker wants to make a film in Spanish and Mayan languages in Guatemala. Local Guatemalan cinema is in a period of growth and success right now, with IXCANUL winning the Alfred Bauer Prize at Berlin and NUESTRAS MADRES winning the *Camera d'Or* at Cannes Critic's Week. So why should an outsider come into Guatemala to make a film set in a Mayan community?

I believe the specific viewpoint of THE LITTLE KITE has a place in current world cinema and will offer a unique vision of this little-understood culture to wide international audiences, including in the USA where the theme and characters are especially timely. However, THE LITTLE KITE does not have immigration, war or genocide as its theme. It presents modern Mayan culture as it is today, especially focusing on the strength of Mayan Women in upholding their ancient culture, and holding their family together in the face of adversity.

I find "outsider" views of a culture can offer fresh and meaningful viewpoints. For example, there is a long history of non-Americans making insightful films about America, from mainstream projects from

Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Roman Polanski, Ang Lee, Louis Malle and Michelangelo Antonioni to art-house favorites from Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Agnes Varda and Park Chan-Took. These types of films illuminate American culture through the fresh eyes of a foreigner. I believe an outside view of Mayan Guatemala culture will have validity in the same way.

Stylistically, THE LITTLE KITE will be shot in a fresh, naturalistic style, with a palette derived from the colors of Mayan weaving. We will see the story unfold through the eyes of eight-year old Tomasa.

THE LITTLE KITE will be shot in two separate regions of rural Guatemala, in the ancient K'iche' Mayan market town of Chichicastenango in the mountainous Department of Quiché and the Kaqchikel community of Santiago in Sacatepéquez, the site of a giant kite festival that goes back hundreds of years. These communities represent two different Mayan "nations" and two different languages. The cast will feature many indigenous Mayan non-actors and will contain three languages; Spanish, K'iche' and Kaqchikel.

James F. Robinson
writer-director

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