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### Lucia Puenzo

by [Rachael Scott](#)  
14 January 2011

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Lucia Puenzo had many a film critic tied up in politically correct knots when she made the award winning *XXY*, the story of Alex, an intersex 15-year old coming to terms with the physical and psychological consequences of her condition. Most were agreed that her directorial debut was a beautifully shot, sensitive and thought-provoking film and the lead performance by a 23-year old Ines Efron, superb.

Her follow-up is thriller *The Fish Child*, adapted from her novel of 2004 – a tale of impossible love between two young girls set in Buenos Aires forced to commit murder to be together.

Puenzo recasts Efron as Lala and newcomer Emme Mariela Vitale as Guayi, the live in maid and general skivvy to Lala's wealthy but dysfunctional family. Lala's father is a lascivious judge; her brother a drug addict recently home from a spell in rehab and mum fanatically runs marathons to get away from it all.

This self-absorbed environment allows Lala's relationship with Guayi to flourish and they hatch a plan to run away.

Puenzo talks to Rachael Scott about her film.

#### Where did the inspiration for your story come from?

My first novel, *El Niño Pez* (*The Fish Child*). I wrote it when I was 23, with the freedom (I'd dare say impunity) of not having published anything yet. I sent it to a small publishing house who offered to publish it right away. Five years later, after shooting *XXY*, I asked myself what was next and knew right away it was *The Fish Child*.

#### The narrative unfolds in a non-linear timeline. What appealed to you about telling the story in that way?

As a reader and spectator, I've always been interested in character tales - stories that force you to make a journey with its characters, to see the world through their eyes, and not from the outside. I like the emotional rides in which it's difficult to judge if the character is right or wrong. In *The Fish Child*, the plot was originally linear, like in the novel, but I slowly began to rewrite it into a low-key film noir in which the crime became the element that triggered the plot.

#### You've worked with Inés Efron twice now. What initially attracted you to her and how has your working relationship changed?

With Inés we have a very close friendship today. When she made the casting for *XXY* I was amazed to meet a girl that could look 15 being 23, which allowed me to work with a woman, with the head and understanding of a woman, in the body of a girl. That was a big help for such a complex character as Alex, from *XXY*.

Inés has eyes that look so young and so old at the same time. She can talk and move like a child, but can be sexual and powerful at the same time. She creates combinations, which would seem impossible.

I'd been casting for eight months, seen hundreds of girls, before I found her. After that, for *The Fish Child*, I didn't think originally to work with her again. But I did another casting of around six months, and ended making a casting with her and Emme (Mariela Vitale). The second I saw them together I knew they were dynamite.

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**"I'd heard a thousand times that making an adaptation of your own novel was the most difficult of all - and was sure it was a lie...But it turned out to be the toughest adaptation I've done."**

**XXY was nominated for eight Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of Argentina awards and won three. *The Fish Child* was nominated for ten and won one. How do you feel about winning awards and what does being honoured in this way mean for your career as a filmmaker?**

Right now I'm trying to shoot my third film (and fifth novel) *Wakolda* - and making a film possible doesn't really get any easier from the production point of view. It always takes about a year to make it happen. I'm always thinking, what's next?

By the time a film is released I've usually been working for a year on a new project and that's all I care about in the present, to make it possible. Being a director is no short race - it's more like a marathon, every film will take with it a few years of your life.



**Newcomer Emme Mariela Vitale gives an amazing performance as Guayi, the family's maid. What was it about her that made her right for the role and where did you find her?**

I was completely certain Guayi had to be a Paraguayan girl. I made a casting in Asunción, and another long one in Buenos Aires - and couldn't find her. She was the first character I started looking for because she is the heart of the film. I didn't want to find any other role until I knew who would play la Guayi.

Then Emme called me and asked to come and make a casting. She is Argentine and couldn't speak Paraguayan Guaraní, which is an impossible language to learn and speak to perfection. She told me she could do it.

The day of the first casting a Paraguayan friend came to listen to her accent. She was Guayi from the second she crossed the door. I made three more castings with her that month, making her train with a Paraguayan coach. A few weeks later her Guaraní was perfect.

**"Even the most conservative areas of our society have had to accept things are changing. I would say today, here and in many other countries, gay issues are not taboo anymore."**

***The Fish Child* is adapted from your own novel. What challenges did you face turning the book into a screenplay?**

Every challenge. I'd heard a thousand times that making an adaptation of your own novel was the most difficult of all - and was sure it was a lie. Who better would know the story, the tone, the world of *The Fish Child* than me? But it turned out to be the toughest adaptation I've done. So difficult I kept making changes in the editing room, which is something that other directors who work with my scripts don't usually do.

The narrator of *The Fish Child* is Serafin, the dog. The story is told through his voice, filled with humour. The second he becomes a character, but not the narrator, the story lost its humour and become a genre film. This changed everything.

**As a writer and a filmmaker what do you like best about each process? And which areas are you least comfortable with?**

Writing and editing are the areas where I feel most happy, especially writing. There are no limits there, you can go where your imagination takes you, and everything is so cheap!

When I'm writing literature I can write a super-production from Bollywood and I'll have no producer tapping over my shoulder. Nevertheless, the shooting weeks are also big fun. Teamwork, and being used to long periods of silence and solitude, are a lot of fun.



**Is there a thru-line in your films? What subjects interest you most?**

I would say I write about my fears and phantoms, but not in a direct way - only the people who know me very well can hint why I'm writing about a specific subject in a precise moment of my life.

**How did you decide on the visual style of the film?**

I had a long list of references (films, literature, paintings), which I liked for specific reasons and aspects of the film. I have heads of team with whom I've worked for a long time, we know each other very well and we trust each other, which makes things easier. The pre-production, the weeks in which we build the visual style of the film, are also a lot of fun, like going out to play with a bunch of friends.

**You've been surrounded by filmmakers all of your life. Your father and three brothers are directors and you're married to a writer and a director, but has there been a particular film, movement or person that particularly shaped your thinking about your work?**

When I was 15, I watched all Bergman, Cassavettes and Herzog for something we were doing at school. For a month, that was all I watched. I've always felt it had a big impact on me, as a teenager. I read long hours every day, since I was a kid. I remember my mother used to force me to get out of my room and go out and play. But I still remember clearly the feeling that nothing could get better than those stories in which I was submerged. That life could not get any better than fiction.

I'm a huge fan of Patti Smith and she was a tremendous influence for me all of my life. Then I started studying literature and began to read even more: Aira, Puig, Lamborghini, Borges, Pizarnik, Arit, Nabokov, Cheever, the list is endless. And then I met my husband when I was only 23 and he was 20 years older, and was adopted by him and his literary friends. Sergio and many other contemporary Argentine writers have been the biggest influence in my life.

**"I always believe one must trust in the intelligence of the audience - people understand everything. The tiny details many spectators have seen in my films fill me with wonder."****It's often difficult finding funding and distribution for any independently made film, but was making *XXY* and *The Fish Child* more so because of their subject matter?**

Yes, of course - and my third film *Wakolda*, about the months the Nazi doctor spent hiding in Patagonia and his relationship with a girl and her family, is being just as tough, because of its subject. But I'll manage to do it eventually.

**There aren't many films made with gay female characters and even fewer released, despite a high demand for them. How do you view the current state of gay-themed films coming out of Hollywood at the moment?**

At least in my country, this year the law of gay marriage and adoption was approved, together with another law, which allows any individual to choose their name and sex. Things are changing fast, with gay couples getting married, adopting, meaning that whatever makes them happy is not an issue anymore. That aperture can be seen in the streets, in the TV, in the media - even the most conservative areas of our society have had to accept things are changing. I would say today, here and in many other countries, gay issues are not taboo anymore.

**Can you tell me of any life changing feedback from fans after they've watched one of your films?**

I'm always impressed at how many interpretations and readings one same story can find. And I've always hated directors and writers who go out to explain what must be read or seen in their films. I think the second you publish a book, or release a film, it's not yours anymore. The best you can do is let go of it and start thinking what's next. I always believe one must trust in the intelligence of the audience - people understand everything. The tiny details many spectators have seen in my films fill me with wonder.

**You're asked to convince the average festival attendee to see *The Fish Child* instead of the 30 or so other options they have. How do you do it?**

I don't. I never do anything with my films after the release. I'm lucky enough to have a great sales agent doing that. Then, everything is a question of luck, of being in the right place at the right moment. One film can be selected one year and not the following. It can even win a prize one year and be badly received the following - there's nothing more subjective than art.

**Is there one moment in the film that just says, "That's brilliant filmmaking" if you**

**do say so yourself?**

I try not to see my films again because I'd like to change everything.

**And anything that looking back on you'd do differently?**

Many things. Aira, a great Argentine writer, always says he doesn't read back to rewrite - if he wants to change something he does it in the following page. I think that's quite a healthy approach. Many directors keep making films to do it better in the next one.

**What are you working on next?**

*Wakolda*, it's my fifth novel and hopefully will be my third film. The novel was a finalist in an important literary prize in Argentina, and will be edited by Emecé/Planeta in Argentina and Spain by March, and in France, Germany and other countries later this year.

I plan to shoot it by August, in Patagonia. In the meantime I'm producing the next film of Bizzio, my husband, and the films of a close friend and great director, Fendrik. I'm also writing a few scripts for other directors, and a series of short stories. But, before all that, I'm off to my holidays in Uruguay, near the border with Brazil, for 15 days. Emptying one's head is just as important as filling it up again.

[Read Our Review Of \*The Fish Child\* »](#)

Click to find out what we thought including verdict, plot, gallery, trailer and queer ratings.

**The Fish Child** [2009]

**Studio:** Peccadillo Pictures

**Released:** 17 January 2010

**ASIN:** B003XUIV0K

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