



LATIN AMERICA



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Winnipeg Film Group executive director Cecilia Araneda: 'Every artist needs to find their own practice that makes sense to them.'

Filmmaker's work informed
by personal history

Cinematic Chile

By Randall King

IF you venture onto a film set in Winnipeg, it's an easy bet a good percentage of the crew — including producers, directors, cinematographers, sound recorders and gaffers — came up through the city's film co-op, the Winnipeg Film Group.

With creative alumni including Guy Maddin, John Paizs, Sean Garrity and Deco Dawson, the WFG is one of the most storied arts organizations in the city.

The organization's Chilean-born executive director, Cecilia Araneda, has a compelling story of her own.

As with many stories from Chile, it starts on Sept. 11, 1973. In Chile, the date of Sept. 11 is as much a day of infamy as it is in the U.S. It's the date the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup, ushering in the brutal dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Support of Allende was immediately considered criminal and subversive.

Araneda, 42, says that in her family, worry was directed toward her father, Eliecer Araneda, whose job at the national railway was a political appointment.

"My dad was fired from his job right away," Araneda says.

"When we heard this was coming, everyone was getting rid of empty bottles in the house because they didn't want to be accused of having Molotov cocktails. They were getting rid of certain books."

But it was Araneda's mother, Federika, who found herself in the dreaded Estadio nacional in Santiago. The National Stadium is where thousands of enemies of the state were taken, since there was not enough room in the country's prisons to house all the political prisoners. Many would join the ranks of the "disappeared," prisoners tortured and murdered by the regime, their bodies dumped in secret.

"She was picked up from her work about a month after the coup," Araneda says.

"My mother was a scientist who worked in a lab. The charges against her were that she voted for Allende, and urged people to vote for Allende."

Her mother was lucky.

"She was held there for about a month and was released because friends of friends knew somebody who was able to put her file at the top," Araneda says.

"He was high up in the military, and he told my mother to leave the country because she was going to continue to get picked up over and over again until she was disappeared. So my parents left right away."

Cecelia was just four years old when her parents moved to Mexico while she and her three older siblings stayed in Chile with relatives. The family reunited in Toronto and relocated to Manitoba, where Araneda spent most of her youth in the northern communities of Leaf Rapids and The Pas.

By the time Araneda graduated from Winnipeg's Grant Park Collegiate, the arts beckoned.

She earned a BFA from Toronto's York University in theatre and playwriting and then an MFA from the University of British Columbia in screenwriting. When she came back to Winnipeg, her passion for film was funnelled into experimental film.

Her work has been formed largely by her personal history, explicitly with her 1998 documentary *Chile: A History in Exile* and her 2009 experimental documentary *What Comes Between*, more obliquely in her 2003 short drama *Amnesia*, about a woman who comes to believe her life is vanishing as the people in her life start disappearing.

"The Winnipeg Film Group was integral to me developing as a filmmaker," she says of the institution where she rose through the ranks to the position of executive director in 2006.

But Araneda has made time to flex other creative muscles, including her newly published novel *The Ocean*, a book that follows three female characters through the political turmoil of Chile in the latter half of the 20th century, all of whom share a bond with the ocean and all of whom find themselves in landlocked Winnipeg.

"I've been working on that novel longer than I've been a filmmaker," she says of *The Ocean*. It is a pronounced departure from her mostly experimental work.

"Every artist needs to find their own practice that makes sense to them," she says.

"And this is where I've landed."

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