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'Liz in September': Filmart Review

11:14 AM PDT 3/30/2015 by Elizabeth Kerr

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Courtesy of Cinema Management Group

The Bottom Line

A moving if slightly conventional drama

Venue

Hong Kong Filmart

Director

Fina Torres

Cast

Patricia Velasquez, Eloisa Maturen

Venezuelan writer-director Fina Torres adapts, updates and relocates the late Jane Chambers' stage drama.

The healing power of sisterhood and genuine emotional connection that transcends sexuality are at the heart of *Liz in September*, **Fina Torres'** first film since *Habana Eva* in 2010. Familiar in the best sense of the word, unfussy and resolutely one-hankie, Torres once again turns the camera on an independent woman who unapologetically puts herself and her needs first. *Liz in September* should have a good run at festivals and LGBT events as well as outlets seeking Spanish language content. Targeted art house distribution is a distinct possibility considering the film's overall polish and the recognizability of star **Patricia Velasquez**.

Based on play **Jane Chambers'** groundbreaking *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, Torres strips away much of the 1980 stage play's bigger plot points about marriage, children, career, family and the (at that time) hazardous move of coming out for a more streamlined drama about healing, closure and identity. That's not to say the hazards of being out gay have vanished, but at a time, 2015, when it is considerably easier and less pioneering to explore the LGBT experience in film and on television, Torres made the right choice to place heavily traded, political subject matter on the margins of the narrative and concentrate on the core story about two women that find comfort and companionship each other when they need it most.

While on her way to vacation with her husband, and perhaps mend a broken marriage, Eva (**Eloisa Maturen**) runs into car trouble and stops in a small town for repairs. With no accommodations available in the village, the mechanic directs her to Margot (**Elba Escobar**), who runs a seaside resort of sorts, which happens to be a lesbian colony (a charmingly retro idea). After an initially cranky encounter with resident Liz (Velasquez, *The Mummy*, *The L Word*) she takes her up on her invitation to dinner with the rest of the guests: Liz's oldest friend Any (**Arlette Torres**), her former lover and doctor Dolores (**Mimi Lazo**) and the aggressive Coqui (**Danay Garcia**, *Prison Break*) among others. They're horrified that a straight woman has entered their haven, but ease up as soon as Liz wagers she can bed the clueless Eva in a few days. Unsurprisingly, the gang of uniformly gorgeous friends warm up to Eva, in particular Any, who encourages Liz to act on her growing feelings. The problem for Liz is that she has terminal cancer.

Liz in September is the stuff that melodrama is made of, but Torres keeps things at a low simmer rather than letting the material spiral into histrionics and tears. The story unfolds in the sunny, luxurious, sweltering part of Venezuela and cinematographer **Celiana Ceardenas** bathes the postcard-ready physical environment in bright blue, lush green and soft gold, belying the emotional upheaval within it. As Liz deals with her mortality and dread that she'll be forgotten, Eva struggles with the loss of her young son to cancer as well. Watching the pair fill in the gaps each so desperately needs—something life affirming, a salve to feelings of guilt—and not having their relationship hampered by petty jealousies and cattiness (because, girls!) is refreshing even if the material is hoary.

Torres demonstrates the same delicately sensual touch she first revealed in her 1985 debut, *Oriana*, and like that film she remains steadfastly conventional in her filmmaking. In many ways that is *Liz's* charm. The film belongs to the women, most of who are vivid even if they are sketches (and occasionally archetypes now). Velasquez is affecting as a woman so concerned with her own self-sufficiency that she's prohibited herself emotional intimacy, even as she stares down death. But it's not all misery. Arlette Torres and Garcia bring a welcome sense of playfulness to the story and the overall tone of easy camaraderie is undeniable. Torres has once again proven the wheel doesn't always need to be reinvented.

Production company: Ararare Films

Cast: Patricia Velasquez, Eloisa Maturen, Mimi Lazo, Arlette Torres, Danay Garcia, Elba Escobar, Maria Luisa Flores, Luis Geronimo Abreu, Marcos Carreno

Director: Fina Torres

Screenwriter: Fina Torres

Producer: Judy Miller, Laura Oramas, Matt Cooper

Executive producer: Liz Mago

Director of photography: Celiana Ceardenas

Production designer: Rennu Barrios, Roger Vargas

Editor: Aleshka Ferrero

Music: Oleg "Heinali" Shpudeiko, Javier Blanco, Ulises Hadjis, Sharon Smith

Casting director: Luis Castillo

World sales: Cinema Management Group

No rating, 92 minutes