

Tótem [12]

2023 Mexico/France/Denmark/Netherlands

95 mins

UK released	1 December 2023
Director	Lila Avilés
Screenplay	Lila Avilés
Cinematography	Diego Tenorio
Music	Thomas Becka
Cast	Naíma Senties (Sol); Montserrat Marañón (Nuri) ; Marisol Gasé (Alejandra) ; Saori Gurza (Esther) ; Teresita Sánchez (Cruz) ; Mateo García Elizondo (Tonatiuh); Juan Francisco Maldonado (Napo); Iazua Larios (Lucía); Alberto Amador (Roberto)

No one grows up in one day; on the other hand, maybe it happens in an instant. Towards the end of Lila Avilés's exuberantly lovely *Tótem*, there's an unearthly moment – made all the eerier in a film otherwise raucous with the rattle of real life – that suggests as much. Seven-year-old Sol (a wonderful Naíma Senties) looks up from her father's blazing birthday cake, suddenly sombre, suddenly still. There are many ways to read it, but Sol's gaze has a strange and profound effect on our very sense of the film, telescoping all the vitality of this crowded, clattering day into a held breath, like the one you take just before you blow out the candles and discover that not all wishes come true.

The occasion is a party being thrown for Tona (Mateo García Elizondo), Sol's artist father, who is dying. On the morning of the gathering Sol's theatrical-performer mother Lucia (Iazua Larios) drops her off at the family home where Tona is in the care of his sisters Nuria (Montserrat Marañón) and Alejandra (Marisol Gasé). Also present are Tona's elderly father Roberto (Alberto Amador) and Tona's nurse Cruz (a superb Teresita Sánchez, so good in Avilés's celebrated 2018 debut *The Chambermaid* and in last year's *Dos Estaciones*).

At first, all is clamour and chaos. Meanwhile, in a quiet, off-limits part of the house, Tona tries to muster his strength for the evening's festivities, confiding

only to the kind, patient, practical Cruz just how much of a toll the effort is taking.

The choral impression is of liveliness and good humour, but there's an undertow of sorrow: the collective helplessness of all the people who love Tona knowing they cannot love him back to life. Tona's siblings speak in a code to prevent Sol hearing ugly words like 'chemotherapy'. But they are also often distracted, and Sol has ample time to herself, waiting patiently at dad's door only to be gently turned away again and, after one rebuff too many, retreating under a counter where she can cry quietly and ask Siri all the questions no one else will answer. Sol only cries that once; viewers might not be capable of such restraint. And yet Avilés's exceptional direction keeping sentimentality at bay while still, almost magically, sampling the different flavours of grief that run like currents and crosscurrents between the members of this close-knit, bickering family. Much of this comes from the singular shooting style, with Diego Tenorio's warm, dynamic camera set deep within the hubbub, but pulling from it dozens of painterly close-ups that have the depth of portraiture. It's an extraordinarily effective way of communicating Tótem's unusual take on a family drama in which every character is in close proximity but is also a discrete world – one that will go on turning even after another stops. Perhaps this is the moment that Sol grows up, when she realises, as we all must, that however strong your bonds of affection, there are some ways we will always be alone: everyone's battered hearts beat and break at different speeds.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, 7 March 2023 (abridged)

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