

PRESS MATERIAL:



A COLOMBIAN FAMILY

A documentary by
Tanja Wol Sørensen



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INTRODUCTION

Can you be a good parent, if you are fighting for a better world, but compromise the safety of your daughter in the process? This is just one of the many questions raised by Tanja Wol Sørensen's new feature documentary: A Colombian Family.

In 2016, a peace treaty was signed in Colombia, but the violence didn't stop - on the contrary. In 2019 alone, almost 200 human rights activists and local leaders were killed. The majority in the old conflict zones, in the countryside, and the numbers keep rising.

One of these local leaders, who is in constant danger and need of international help, is Ruby. She is one of the two main characters in Tanja Wol Sørensen's new film, A Colombian Family. The movie follows her and her daughter Yira. Today the daughter lives in exile in Cuba and dreams of reuniting her family. But it is hard for Ruby to give up her political fight and her desire to help her countrymen.

It has cost her, her daughter's safety, as well as her own. The film sheds a light on a country mostly known for being one of the largest producers of drugs in the world. This particular story is about people, and the relationship between a mother and a daughter. What consequences have the country's violent history had on a family like Ruby and Yira's? Is Ruby finally ready to be a grandmother to the grandchild she hardly knows? Why does the violence continue in spite of the peace treaty?

Tanja has followed the mother and daughter for over six years, first in each of their countries and later together.

The love the director bears to Colombia started ten years ago when she was working as a peace observer in a conflict-ridden area of Colombia. It was there, as she was following persecuted peasant leaders, that she met Ruby for the first time.

In Tanja's own words (see page 4): "The film portrays a different Colombia than the one an audience is usually shown. It's not a sensationalist film about drugs, beauty queens or violence, but it's about two completely ordinary and yet quite exceptional women ; whose hopes, dreams and disappointments, we get to experience from the inside."

This is a rare film about the human consequences a lifelong armed conflict has on even the closest relationships, and how they can trickle down for generations even after the conflict has ended.

SYNOPSIS

A mother and daughter confront the past after years of civil war, but end in the difficult dilemma between reconciliation and political ideals.

When a peace agreement between the FARC rebel movement and the Colombian government looks like it will put an end to half a century of armed conflict, 30-year-old Yira visits her mother in Colombia after 10 years in exile in Cuba. Yira has herself become a mother and wants to give her daughter the family she never had. She confronts her mother, Ruby, with a neglected childhood in the shadow of her parents' political struggles and persecution. She wants her mother to join her in exile in Canada, so that they can finally be together in safety. But Ruby can't let go of her political ideals to choose her family instead. It is not just Yira's childhood that has been sacrificed. She has also sacrificed her own life and safety to such an extent, that she has to drive around in an armoured car, constantly protected by armed guards. As the peacetime death toll continues to rise, Ruby is faced with a difficult dilemma: If she chooses her daughter, she gives up on her people.

SHORT PITCH

A Colombian Family tells the story of an idealistic mother Ruby, who is fighting for the poorest people in Colombia, and her daughter Yira, who lives in exile in Cuba. In the shadow of the first peace treaty in decades, mother and daughter are trying to forgive the letdowns of the past. Can they become a family again? Can one choose between one's homeland and one's family, is love enough in order to reconcile?

ABOUT THE TWO PROTAGONISTS

RUBY, Colombia

Ruby is 56 years old; she lives alone in a small, run-down apartment in a poor

not afraid to voice them. She's got short, dark hair, and an expressive face with a warm smile. In the morning, she puts on carefully picked out clothes and matching jewellery. Ruby looks like a smartly dressed businesswoman or politician. Ruby is a dedicated human rights defender, she has fought for farmers', women's', displaced peoples' rights in the armed conflict since she was 14 years old and she is a long time member of the political opposition in the country. She has been a target of the paramilitary militia for her political stance and social work since she was young. She has survived several attempts on her life and receives death threats constantly. Her situation is so precarious that for the past 8 years, she has lived under armed protection, which consists of two armed guards who follow her everywhere. Ruby has lived and fought in the armed conflict for so long that this danger and feeling that everything could change at any moment have become her life.

YIRA, Cuba

Yira is 29 years old; she lives in exile in Cuba together with her husband and their 8 year old child. They live in a small two-bedroom apartment in a concrete building from the golden age of communism. As she will soon finish medical school, they will leave Cuba. Yira has long wavy black hair and green, melancholic eyes. Just like her mother and grandfather she is short and of stocky build. Yira is the daughter of two Colombian political activists. Her whole childhood was spent suffering the consequences of her parents' persecution by the state. Yira's father was sent to prison for most of her childhood and when he was released, he joined the FARC. Yira was 14 years old. When she was 18, he was killed by the military and she was sent away from Colombia by her mother. Yira has now been living in Cuba for over 12 years. She is a warm and loving person, who will do anything for her daughter to have a better upbringing than she got. There is a lot of anger and sorrow behind Yira's loving facade. Anger over a childhood tainted by sorrow and loss. Yira will not follow in her parents' footsteps, but instead she wants to be there for her daughter and give her a peaceful childhood away from Colombia. Yira dreams of a good life in Canada together with her mother and daughter.

Director's statement

A Korean living in Denmark making a film about two Colombians. It seems like an odd coupling, I know, but this film has been a deeply personal journey for me as a filmmaker as well as for the protagonists, the mother, Ruby and her daughter, Yira. The film is an intimate look at the complexities of motherhood and exile in the shadows of war. My experience of being a migrant and growing up without my biological family, has bound me together with the two protagonists, Ruby and Yira.

The film takes its starting point, as the country is entering a new era. A peace deal between the FARC guerrillas and the Colombian government is being negotiated after half a century of armed conflict. Yira has lived in exile in Cuba for more than a decade following her parents' deadly political persecution by the Colombian state. Now, 30 years of age and a mother herself, Yira travels back to Colombia to make peace with her past and to convince her mother to leave Colombia to make a fresh start with her. But Ruby, her 55-year old mother, who dedicated her life to fight for the marginalised and poor, is not ready to leave her ideals and commitments to the cause behind. The film unfolds a complex story of political ideals, failed motherhood, trauma and the explosive and tender love between two independent, charismatic and determined women.

Although the war is the main setting of the film, this is not a story about the two opposing sides of a war, but the silent and long-term consequences war can have for generations in a single family.

This is a low-income family, neither dirt poor, nor middle class, like the large majority of the Colombian people. Both mother and daughter are charismatic in their own way, and they are portrayed as complex female characters, full of actions, dreams and disappointments. But they have trouble relating to each other, and it's so hard for them to hear what the other has to say through the deep web of their own experiences, traumas and ideals. They position themselves on stakes in the water, unable to move and unable to reach each other. Yet there is a bond of love between them, which pull them towards each other time and again.

On the surface I might be very different from these two Colombian women, but I can relate to Ruby and Yira, because they share openly all their faults and strengths with me and therefore depict something that is truly universal and human. Their story shows the burden of motherhood in conflicts and war, that has shaped not only their lives and my own, but so many others too.

I met Ruby more than 10 years ago, when I was working as a peace observer in Colombia. I would accompany her into conflict-stricken regions, with my yellow vest on and my Danish passport in hand. My privileges, as a European citizen could help protect Ruby from the armed factions. The ugly consequence of colonialism, I'm afraid, but it made me think, how did I, an Asian woman, end up as the privileged European? And what drew me to the countryside of Colombia? At that time, it was still one of the longest running armed conflicts in the world.

There are many reasons why I ended up making this film. As a transnational adoptee, I grew up in a white family in the countryside of Denmark. I was one of very few racialized people in my village, and I was never given any explanations to why I had

parents had adopted me to Denmark out of love. They said that was all I needed to know and all they needed to know.

I'm a consequence of the Korean War, although it hasn't been active since 1953, it has never ended either. Ultimately meaning the Korean people have never had the opportunity to open up about what was done to them, how to seek justice, demand the truth, forgive and build peace. Ruby, Yira and I found a bond and a common ground, as they are living through the end of a war right now. There are fundamental and existential circumstances of life that we understand in each other, because we struggle with what the war has stolen from us, and how to be good mothers in uncertain contexts. This bond has developed into a 6 yearlong documentary journey.

The film takes inspiration from conversations I could never have with my Korean mother or my Danish mother. I'm a bit of both Ruby and Yira, and so I imagine are both my mothers.

Even though Ruby had to send Yira into exile, she continues to struggle for the people of Colombia. Ruby knew what the war had done to her father, to the community she grew up in, to herself and to save her daughter, she sent her away. A devastating choice, but one Ruby feels she was forced to make.

I was always told my mother gave me up, but I've learned to understand that she never had a choice. Post-war Korea does not accept poor single mothers, so I too was sent away in the hope of a better life. I never had the chance to know what the war did to my biological family. But like Yira, I too want to turn a page and give my own child the life I never had: A family and a history free of traumas and secrets.

This film is specific, yet universal. It's for all the mothers and daughters who have paid the price of colonialism and war, even generations later. The Colombian war is officially over now, and time will tell, how many generations of mothers and daughters will have to live with the consequences of the war.

FACTS

- The rebel group FARC (The revolutionary armed forces of Colombia) was officially formed in 1964.
- FARC was the largest and oldest of several rebel groups in Colombia, whereof ELN (The National Liberation Army) still exists.
- During more than 50 years of armed conflict, FARC, ELN and other left-oriented rebel groups, paramilitary death patrols, state troops and drug cartels have fought over territory, drugs, power and access to resources.
- In November of 2016, the president Juan Manuel Santos and FARC signed a peace treaty in Cuba, thus putting an official end to the armed conflict.

- The armed conflict has claimed the lives of more than 260.000 people, 80.000 more disappeared, 37.000 were kidnapped, almost 18.000 were sexually assaulted, and more than 7 million have fled their homes.
- According to the UN, over 80% of the conflict's atrocities have been committed by paramilitary groups who acted as the extended arm of the army and major companies.
- In October 2016, 50,2% of Colombia's population voted against the peace treaty in a referendum.
- In August 2018 the right-winged Ivan Duque was elected as the new president of Colombia, with a promise to halt the peace treaty.
- Since the peace treaty has been signed, 187 former FARC guerillas and more than 780 local leaders and political activists have been killed.
- Colombia is the biggest cocaine producer in the world and according to the UN, 170.000 hectares of coca bushes were cultivated in 2018 - the highest number ever.
- On August 29th, 2019 former FARC commanders declared that they would start a new, armed guerrilla group.
- The national strike on the 21st of November 2019 triggered the biggest, social protest in Colombia in recent times.
- Several hundred of thousands of Colombians have since November 2019 taken to the streets in protest against Ivan Duque's government.

Officially, the conflict started when FARC armed themselves in 1964. But many Colombians insist that the country's violent conflict broke out already in 1948, when the liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was killed, and one of the most violent periods ever broke out in Colombia. A ten-year period that is just called "La Violencia" aka the violence, and where the conservative and liberal party followers killed each other all over the country. "La Violencia" led to liberal farmers arming themselves and forming FARC.

Today, three years after the peace treaty was signed and FARC put down their arms, the violence in Colombia has not ended - on the contrary. In 2019 alone, almost 200 human-rights-activists and local leaders have been killed - the majority in the old, rural areas of conflict. And the number is rising steadily.

Cocaine, marihuana and heroin production has increased explosively since the peace treaty and is now at its highest ever. Paramilitary groups, criminal gangs, FARC dissidents and other rebel groups are fighting a chaotic battle about power over these territories. At the same time the new right-wing president, Ivan Duque, is militarising the entire country.

Short Bios

Director Tanja Wol Sørensen

Tanja is a filmmaker and visual anthropologist, born in Seoul, South Korea. She holds an MA in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester (2012) and an MA in Anthropology from the University of Copenhagen (2014). As a director she has completed the short documentary *Moving Target* with support from the Filmworkshop, which premiered and was in competition at HOTDOCS 2016. Currently she is developing a documentary on the subject of womanhood in South Korea, produced by Bullitt Film.

Producer Rikke Tambo Andersen

Rikke is a producer and has been working with Bullitt Film since 2009. Rikke works with both fiction and documentary. At Bullitt Film however, she focuses on documentary. One of her most recent titles includes the Nordic:DOX Award Winner “Lykkelænder”. Rikke has a specific love towards cinematic and rebellious films, and love to work with new talent.

Rikke was selected for Emerging Producers at Jihlava Film festival in 2017 and as of 2018 she is a member of the EAVE Network. She holds a BA in Film and Media Studies and MA in Management of Creative Business Processes as well as graduating from Super16 as a producer in 2016

About Bullitt Film

At Bullitt film we are committed to creating truthful, cinematic documentary films with a strong political or social dimension. We are driven by the urge to share and uncover stories that create debate and instigate change with audiences in Denmark and internationally. We are dedicated to supporting directors’ unique viewpoint and visual expression. We see documentary as the most exciting direction in the arts and moving images today. Many of our films have premiered and competed at international festivals such as the Berlinale, IDFA, CPH:DOX, HotDocs and more .
www.bullittfilm.dk

THE FILM IS SUPPORTED BY

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