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‘Cassandra’ Review: Gael García Bernal in a Tender and Uplifting Real-Life Luchador Portrait

Documentary maker Roger Ross Williams shifts into narrative features with this affectionate tribute to “exótico” wrestler Saúl Armendáriz, who turned homophobic mockery into victory cheers.

BY DAVID ROONEY  JANUARY 20, 2023 7:30PM



Gael Garcia Bernal in 'Cassandra' COURTESY OF SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

Gael García Bernal nails his best role in years, giving a performance steeped in cheeky humor, resilience and radical self-belief — not to mention some amazingly nimble moves — as groundbreaking lucha libre wrestler Saúl Armendáriz in [Cassandra](#). Seasoned documentarian [Roger Ross Williams](#), who profiled Armendáriz in 2016 for the Amazon series *The New Yorker Presents*, makes an assured transition into narrative features with this entertaining biopic, which doubles as a gorgeous depiction of mother-son love and an exhilarating exploration of fearless queer identity in a macho environment.

While Williams (*Life, Animated*) and co-screenwriter David Teague (who adapted Ta-Nehesi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* for HBO) slightly fumble the ending, this is a film with enormous heart, vivid immersion into its culturally specific milieu and celebratory admiration

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for its flamboyant subject, images of whom both in and out of the ring grace the end credits. It should prove popular with both LGBTQ viewers and general audiences when it begins streaming worldwide on Amazon early this year.

Cassandra

THE BOTTOM LINE
A punchy little knockout.

Venue: Sundance Film Festival (Premieres)

Cast: Gael García Bernal, Roberta Colindrez, Perla de la Rosa, Joaquín Cosío, Raúl Castillo, El Hijo del Santo, Benito Antonio Martinez Ocasio

Director: Roger Ross Williams

Screenwriters: David Teague, Roger Ross Williams

1 hour 49 minutes

Right off the bat, the director, cinematographer Matías Penachino, production designer J.C. Molina and costumer Mariestela Fernández provide an alluring glimpse into this very particular world of sport as theatrical spectacle, attended by rowdy crowds that think nothing of yelling homophobic taunts at the luchadors.

That makes Bernal's Saúl a figure of defiant pride as the American-born Mexican swaggers down the streets of border town Ciudad Juárez, where he regularly crosses from El Paso to participate in lucha libre, or freestyle wrestling, bouts. He shows no concern for hiding his sexuality, unlike his married boyfriend and fellow luchador Gerardo (Raúl Castillo), who fights as El Comandante. We learn that Saúl came out at 15, causing the estrangement of his religious father Eduardo (Robert Salas), who had maintained a semi-clandestine relationship with his mother Yocasta (Perla de la Rosa) despite being married.

Seemingly because of his diminutive size compared to the hulking brutes he goes up against, Saúl wrestles as El Topo (the mouse). But he's frustrated by the lack of poetry in his heavyweight opponents and the rote expectation that he will lose each fight, reconfirming the physical supremacy of the hyper-masculine neanderthal. That changes when he forges a connection with a new trainer, Sabrina (Roberta Colindrez), known on the lucha circuit as "Lady Anarquía." She suggests there's more than one way to fight without being the runt, suggesting he try competing as an "exótico," or drag wrestler.

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Saúl doesn't take much convincing. Drawing inspiration from Mexican actress Verónica Castro, as well as from his mother's taste for industrial-strength makeup and flashy animal-print outfits, he creates Cassandro, taking his new professional name from a favorite telenovela.

From the moment Cassandro enters the ring to Celia Cruz's Spanish-language "I Will Survive" cover, it's clear that a star is born. Unlike some of the more flouncy-looking exóticos, who are strictly figures of fun, Cassandro remains an unapologetically gay man, milking power from the audience's slurs as his ability in the ring turns catcalls into cheers.

Cassandro loses his first fight against the aptly named Gigantico (one of a handful of real-life lucha stars in the film), but his skill at going several highly competitive rounds with an opponent twice his size earns him respect. It also gets the attention of shady promoter Lorenzo (Joaquín Cosío), who assigns his handsome young henchman Felipe (Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny) to see to Saúl's needs. This yields some enjoyable flirtation.

What gives the movie — and Bernal's wonderful performance — such an infectious kick is the way Cassandro's confidence grows, along with his jubilant theatricality and the elaborate glitz of his wrestling outfits, but also the way it informs how Saúl presents himself out in the world. In one bit of typically mischievous dialogue during some post-coital pillow talk with Gerardo, he describes Cassandro as someone quite different from himself: "I think Cassandro might be a top."

While that relationship is constrained by its secrecy, the scenes between Bernal and the always-terrific Castillo are smolderingly sexy as well as melancholy. Saúl desperately wants an official boyfriend, but Gerardo refuses to break up his family, though not without regret and longing. The other key relationship that gives Cassandro its luminous warmth is between Saúl and Yocasta, who's almost more of a drag sister than a mother. Their closeness is evident in every intimate moment they share, happy or sad. While she has always avoided going to his lucha fights for fear of seeing him hurt, she starts attending once Cassandro is born, joy spreading across her lovely face as he wraps the crowd around his little finger. The camaraderie between Saúl and Sabrina, who reads as queer even if her sexuality is never stated, gives their allegiance another layer of solidarity.

It's notable that Bernal's chemistry with all three of these significant figures in Saúl's life — beautifully played by Castillo, De la Rosa and Colindrez — is easy, natural and drawn with love. The emotional depth of his performance is equaled by its transformative physicality. The actor is in fantastic shape, compact and stocky, full of speedy moves as he bounces off the ropes or

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the mat like a human pinball. Bernal also captures a fundamental part of the Cassandro persona in the radiant joie de vivre he finds as a performer.

Teague and Williams' script is slightly weaker in exploring a central conflict, once Cassandro becomes a subversive force, flipping the carved-in-stone lucha bylaw that says the effeminate exótico always has to lose to the "real man." This aspect made Armendáriz a revolutionary figure in the sport — and in queer athletic empowerment — but it ruffled feathers among the traditionally macho competitors. As depicted here, it amounts to a bit of murmured resentment, foreshadowing drama that doesn't arrive.

This is also one of those films in which there are two or three different points that seem like ideal endings, somewhat diluting the poignancy of all of them. But that doesn't make the overall takeaway any less satisfying.

The climactic fight takes place in a packed Mexico City stadium, with Saúl facing off against El Hijo del Santo (Son of Santo), a celebrated champion whose father was a legendary lucha star before him. There's personal significance also in Saúl's memories of watching matches featuring the original Santo on TV with his father as a young boy. A scene late in the film in which Saúl is a guest on Son of Santo's talk show and a teenage audience member reveals that the wrestler's courage inspired him to come out to his father is a little obvious but moving nonetheless.

Williams' documentary background breathes grit and authenticity into the environment, as do the rich textures of Penachino's images, particularly the frequent night scenes. And fabulous vintage bangers like Blondie's "Call Me" and Baccara's "Yes Sir, I Can Boogie" turn Cassandro's grand entrances into moments of triumph even before the fights begin. Armendáriz served as a consultant on the film; its makers have done him proud.