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Part of Sundance's Spotlight program, L'Immensità stars Penelopé Cruz as a mother whose love for her children never wavers in the face of adversity.

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We have been graced with many autobiographical movies from major filmmakers throughout the course of cinema history. Just last year, for instance, we saw *Empire of Light* from Sam Mendes and Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*. While the former fizzled with critics and audiences, the latter has become a force to be reckoned with this awards season. Whether good or bad, there's nonetheless something immediately interesting whenever a director decides to turn the camera towards themselves. This is precisely what Italian filmmaker Emanuele Crialese has done with *L'Immensità*.

Part of the Spotlight program at this year's **Sundance Film Festival**, *L'Immensità* stars Penélope Cruz as Clara, a woman living an unfulfilled life in 1970s Rome. She is trapped in a loveless marriage to a man who abuses and cheats on her, and her only saving grace — or

graces, more correctly — are her three children: Adriana (or "Adri"), Gino, and Diana. Indeed, Clara throws herself fully into being the best mother for her kids, which often involves tapping into her own inner child, much to the chagrin of her authoritative husband and their judgmental friends. Clara's profound relationship with her oldest, 13-year-old Adri, enters new waters as Adri traverses feelings of gender dysphoria, beginning to identify as a boy and going by the name of Andrea. More than that, Adri fosters a connection with Sara, one of the children in their neighborhood, their relationship gradually moving from friendship to something more.

Crialesse, [who is trans](#), based *L'Immensità* on his own childhood experiences of navigating gender identity, particularly during a time when the understanding and vocabulary — and access to both — related to transgender expression wasn't as expansive as it is today. In this way, his film sits firmly at the intersection of the pain of adolescence, the sliding scale of strength and fragility that is family, and the epiphanic moment of self-actualization, effectively offering a poignant love story between a [mother and her child](#).

A Magnetic Performance from Penélope Cruz



To great effect, *L'Immensità* is told through the eyes of Clara's children, specifically Adri's. There's a certain playfulness to Gergely Pohárnok's cinematography here, the camera moving through Adri's world, zipping across the space like a child unbridled and excited about the freedom of play. Combined with vibrant costume design from Massimo Cantini Parrini, popping out among the more muted earth tones of the sets, there's an overall feeling of joy. Indeed, at the beginning of the film, Clara and her children lip sync and dance along to the radio as they set the table for dinner in a meticulous choreographed sequence that is thrilling to watch because of how undeniable Clara's happiness is at this moment (and, by extension, how that happiness spreads to the children). Here, the camera never stops orbiting around the family — this is their world, and we are just guests.

That said, what's most interesting about Crialesè's positioning of the narrative in Adri's view is that, in addition to the joy we bear witness to whenever they're with or around Clara, there's an inherent unreliability to it as well. After all, they are only 13 years old. Of course, this ultimately makes for a riveting watch where Clara is concerned. Through Adri's eyes, we can see that the darker shades of their mother's character are forcefully kept just beneath the surface, even if, at times, we don't fully understand why. It helps that Cruz is magnetic as ever, deftly weaving through the different roles Clara occupies — the ever-present mother, the unhappy wife, the outsider, the woman desperately seeking something else — and presenting to us someone who is both familiar and a mystery. Just as Adri wants to know more about their mother, we, too, find her irresistible.

As perfect as Cruz is, however, *L'Immensità* truly belongs to Luana Giuliani, who plays Adri. She turns in one of the most exciting performances by a young actor in recent years, commanding every scene with just a glance. Giuliani's ability to convey a lot while doing very little defies her years, and is essentially the perfect vessel for Adri's emotional metamorphosis. At the end of the film, Adri imagines themselves onstage performing "Love Story" as their true self in a televised broadcast, slicked-back hair, tailor tux and all. On the one hand, it's a poetic callback to a

similar sequence they imagine earlier in the film, except it was Clara onstage. But on the other, and more importantly, this is a hard-earned moment for Adri, signifying their choice to finally live their truth.

Luana Giuliani Is a Breakout Star



Throughout the entirety of the film, everyone chastises, ridicules, and stifles Adri's true gender identity. Although Clara is accepting of how Adri identifies (to a degree), she also still sees them as Adriana, especially when around other people. There's a suggestion, here, that she wants to protect Adri from derision from others, as any mother would. However, seeing how unhappy their mother ultimately became from playing by traditional rules, Adri makes the decision of self-love, which is radical for a queer person who exists in a world that seeks to hide them. And as the camera closes in on them at the end, it's like the sun breaking through the clouds.