

# Abel

## Production Notes

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### **Short Synopsis**

Abel is a nine-year-old boy whose confounding behavior and refusal to speak has landed him in a mental health facility near his home. His single mother, convinced that a reunion with his brother and sister might help his condition, persuades Abel's doctor to release the boy for a single week. With his father absent, Abel becomes the unorthodox paternal figure who brings the family together.

## Long Synopsis

Abel is a nine-year-old boy, the only male patient in a psychiatric ward for women in provincial Aguascalientes, Mexico for the past two years. He often experiences violent episodes and refuses to speak, though his doctors are unable to diagnose or treat his apparent mental illness.

Due to hospital rules, Abel must be transferred to a children's hospital in Mexico City for permanent residency. A week before he is set to depart, his mother Cecilia convinces the hospital director, Doctor Monárrez, to let Abel stay with her for a week. If Abel behaves and Cecilia can handle his care during this time, he will be allowed to stay with his family. If not, he must go to the hospital in distant Mexico City.

Abel arrives home to be greeted by his siblings, Selene, 16, and Paul, 5. Abel is uncomfortable in his own home, and his brother and sister are equally wary of his presence, creating tension in the household.

One morning, out of the blue, Abel begins to speak. His mother is delighted and considers it a sign of improvement. However, rather than acting like a boy his own age, Abel starts to act like the man of the house – a husband to his mother and a father to his siblings.

Despite their confusion and irritation, Abel's family tries their best to accept his actions and keep him happy. Selene makes peace with her brother's assumed role by inviting him to participate in the Fathers' Day celebration at Paul's school. Abel and Paul grow closer during their daily homework sessions, and the two boys often play together. Things start to look up for the small family, as everyone begins to adjust to their new lifestyle.

Then, one morning, Abel wakes up to find a strange man sitting at the table. Anselmo, the children's real father, has returned from working in the United States. Abel does not seem to recognize him and becomes alarmed by the presence of a stranger in his house. Cecilia lies and tells Abel that Anselmo is her cousin. Abel is relieved by her explanation and begins to speak to his father as a peer.

Anselmo, however, is much more disturbed by Abel's behavior. He decides to take matters into his own hands and drags Abel to the bathroom, where he forces his son to look in the mirror and recognize himself as a child. Abel panics as his confusion mounts and reality intrudes. Cecilia rushes into the bathroom, just in time to administer his medication. Beside herself, she kicks Anselmo out of the house.

Early the next morning, Abel takes Paul out of the house without telling Cecilia. Later that morning, Cecilia realizes her children are missing. Frantically, she, Anselmo, Doctor Monárrez, Selene, and Selene's boyfriend head out to search for Abel and Paul.

Meanwhile, the boys arrive at the community pool. Once inside, Abel is determined to teach Paul how to swim. Paul follows his brother into the water despite his fears. As soon as they reach deeper water, both boys struggle to stay afloat.

In the car, Selene remembers Abel's promise to Paul, and his mother reveals that Abel does not know how to swim either. When they arrive at the pool, they find both boys face down in the water. After several agonizing minutes, Paul and Abel are resuscitated. Cecilia, having come very close to losing both her sons, concedes that she must let Abel travel to Mexico City for treatment.

### **About Abel...**

Finding the actor to play Abel was of paramount importance. The character must simultaneously project innocence and worldliness – a difficult nuance to explain to a small child. It was important to Luna to find a fresh face for the role, so he held acting workshops for children to scout out new talent. After a year of workshops, Diego met Christopher Ruiz-Esparza, a young boy who was naturally “intuitive and impressive.” He had never acted before the workshop, and he had never traveled outside of the small town in which he was raised. After spending 5 months working with him, Christopher was cast as Abel, and his younger brother, Gerardo, was cast as his “movie brother”, Paul. Rather than giving the children a script to memorize lines, Luna would explain what they were going to shoot each day and work from there. Explains Luna, “Christopher really understood what we were doing, but we made everything a game. It was almost like playing make-believe every day. On set, I described the scenes and what was going to happen, but did not give them a lot of dialogue. Since he had never read the full script, each day he would learn something new about Abel.” As a director, Luna eased the boys into the roles first shooting scenes which were more reactive than dialogue driven. As the shoot progressed, Luna would explain where the scene was going and discuss possible lines that would be said in the situation.

The casting of Cecilia was equally important to Luna. “In order to tell Abel's story, I also had to tell Cecilia's,” said Luna. As a balance to his new star, he turned to veteran film and television actress Karina Gidi. “Karina was perfect for the role. In Mexican culture, the mother is the most important person in the family. They set the tone of a household, the rules and are set on a pedestal by the children, in particular. Culturally speaking, when something is great you say “ESTA DE POCA MADRE,” when you swear you say “CHINGA TO MADRE.” For children in Mexico, the mother is the end all be all.” Luna was inspired by the blinding love a parent can have for a child and the idea that if you love someone enough, you can cure them of their problems. “She thinks her love can save him, but sometimes it's not enough, and that's the difficult reality. I wanted her to be as complex as we all are, as life is.”

## Q & A With Diego Luna

For his directorial debut actor, Diego Luna takes a penetrating look at a child struggling to cope with things beyond his understanding. Co-written by Luna and Augusto Mendoza, *Abel* explores the fantasy world of a nine-year-old child whose father has abandoned the family, and left him confused as to his role as the eldest son. The film takes us into the disturbing, surreal, and occasionally darkly funny corners of Abel's mind as he fabricates a new identity he's more comfortable with. Taking the long view, the film is a meditation on the complexities of the father/son relationship, the role of the mother in Mexican culture, and the impulse that male children feel to protect their mothers.

Shot in 2009, over eight weeks on locations in Aguascalientes, Mexico, and on a Mexico City soundstage, *Abel* stars Christopher Ruiz-Esparza, a non-actor who makes his feature debut here. The film also features Jose Maria Yazpik and Karina Gidi as bewildered parents unable to pull their son from his alternate reality.

*The story in Abel is quite unusual; what was the seed of the idea for the film?*

My father is a set designer, and six years ago he and I went to see Trevor Nunn's production of *Hamlet* in London, and it included a scene with Hamlet and his mother that struck me as very sexual. After the play I said to my father, 'what if we've been wrong about the play all this time, and that Hamlet actually killed his father because he's in love with his mother, then put the blame on his uncle?'

I read a book that a friend wrote that has a child character who believes he's an adult, and that reminded me of what my psychologist used to say when I was twelve and I was seeing her for a strong case of insomnia. She said to me that for a few hours of the day, I had the personality of a twenty-year-old, but at night, I was becoming a five-year-old, and that we needed to find the twelve-year-old that was inside me hiding somewhere.

In a way, that's what happens to Abel in the film. I also waited for a long time to do something with "Edipo", and this seemed like a good opportunity. So that's how Abel was born; I decided to develop a story about a boy who's in love with his mother and pretends to play the role of the father.

*What's the cause of Abel's inappropriate feelings about his mother?*

The mother is hugely important in Mexican culture, and that's partly because for decades fathers have been leaving their families to go to the U.S. and find jobs. I'm using this story to talk about something much bigger that affects the entire society -- there are towns in Mexico where you just don't see any men between the ages of twenty and fifty, because they all left to look for work. You don't have to physically leave in order to abandon your family, either. There's emotional abandonment, too, and this occurs not just in Mexico. Fathers leave all the emotional work of raising children to the mother, and children can feel that. If you're not there the day your child says his first word, or takes his first step, I call that abandonment. When I had a child, my life stopped being about me, and it happened in a moment.

So, Abel sees that his mother is in need of a husband, and he's willing to sacrifice his childhood in order to be there for her. He takes on the role of fathering his brother and sister, too. A hugely important part of being a good parent is being able to listen to your children, and in several scenes, Abel's character doesn't speak, but listens intently to his brother and sister. In many ways, it's the first time they've ever been heard.

Abel's a child, but he takes on another identity that feels less pain and is in control. He no longer has a missing father, or a dysfunctional family, and he's no longer ill -- it's an easier role for him to live. We all do this to varying degrees, too. We try to escape who we are in various ways because it's tough to accept who we are. We have to be ready to accept pain, tragedy and loss – many things it would be easier to live without.

*A central theme in the story is the trauma of the absent parent. You lost your mother in a car accident when you were two years old; how do you relate to this story personally?*

Obviously, it's really personal. When you direct your first film, you may think you're telling a story that has nothing to do with you, but that first film is always autobiographical. My mother died when I was two, and I don't have a memory of her, so it's not like I had something and I lost it – I lived without a mother from the beginning. My father was always there for me, and he treated me like an adult from the time that I was a small child. I started working when I was six, so I kind of had to become a grown-up at a really young age. I was a grown-up in some areas, and in other areas I'm still a child. All aspects of our personality don't develop at the same rate.

*This is very much your story; why did you feel you needed a co-writer on the script?*

I began by writing a two-page treatment that was very simple, then I realized I wanted to work with a co-writer because I needed some structure to the writing process. I didn't want this to just be one of the little ideas I get and think about for a few weeks and then forget -- I wanted to go all the way with this, and I wanted it to be serious. Augusto Mendoza has a very special sense of humor that I thought was perfect for the film, and we found that we worked well together. The credit list would be really long, by the way, if I listed everyone who helped me with the writing of this script.

*Why did you set the story in Aguascalientes?*

My father was married to a woman from Aguascalientes for five years when I was growing up, and I spent a lot of time there between the ages of four and ten. And, when I met Augusto, I discovered that he lived there for four years of his life. We set the story there because it was a place we knew as kids and thought that setting it there would help us think like kids. As soon as I wrote the script, we went straight to Aguascalientes to see if it was possible to shoot there, and we found a lot of support and help from the government and the cultural institute there. Shooting in Aguascalientes was the best that could happen to us. The state became a character of the film.

*How did you go about casting the film?*

I wanted to cast a non-professional as Abel, partly because I think all kids are professional actors regardless of whether they've ever been on a stage. So we put an ad on television in Aguascalientes, and ended up seeing four-hundred kids -- almost every kid in the area who was the right age showed up. We selected three of them, and those three did a two month theater workshop that I would go watch. One of the reasons we ended up casting Christopher is because he's really smart, and he understood that he was playing a character -- Abel -- who was also playing a role.

Our set was completely designed to make the kids comfortable. We tried to make a perfect playground for them, and the crew was instructed not to talk to the kids about the story we were telling. You couldn't swear on the set either. I had a rule that you had to pay five pesos every time you swore -- I paid a lot, too! It's tough not to swear when you're under pressure!

*What sort of look did you want Abel to have?*

I wanted it to have the look of a dream. As for the format, we choose 235. I wanted the film to tell the story of how Abel affects the people around him, and, as is the case with theater, I wanted the viewer to be able to choose what they want to look at in the frame.

*Who are some of the directors who inspired you in terms of how you wanted to approach the job?*

Alfonso Cuarón, of course -- in many ways I think I decided to direct because of him. *Y tu mamá también* came at a moment in my life when I was starting to settle in and get comfortable, and that's a dangerous place to be. That film really pushed me in terms of how far I was willing to go as an actor, and I started to travel around the world with my work. There was no way I could've grown if I'd stayed in Mexico. It's a special film -- and it, too, is about kids trying to learn to be men, and to understand women. I also admire Paul Thomas Anderson and the Coen Brothers -- *Barton Fink*, especially. *The Royal Tenenbaums* is a kind of reference for this film, too, in that it's about a family living in their own little bubble. We wanted to situate our story in a similar reality that's kind of twisted and a little bit unreal.

*You've been on sets for most of your life so you've observed the directing process; what surprised you about directing when you actually did it? What did you discover?*

It was the most amazing ride ever, and I discovered that I enjoy directing more than I enjoy acting. It's a huge responsibility, but then, as an actor, I've always worried about what everybody else on the set is doing anyway and basically want to be in control. As an actor, I care a bit too much. On the set of *Y tu mamá también*, I was constantly running over to [Cinematographer] Emmanuel Lubezki with some problem I thought we were going to have with the upcoming shot, and he'd say, "don't help me so much, Diego, we don't want that kind of help from actors." Film is a director's medium, and an actor is just a tool to help him tell his story. I want to continue to be part of other directors' stories, but I want to tell my own stories, too.

## Cast

### **Christopher Ruíz-Esparza (ABEL)**

*Abel* is Christopher's first film. He was selected from over one hundred kids who participated in the acting workshops organized by Diego Luna in Mexico City and Aguascalientes.

### **Gerardo Ruíz-Esparza (PAUL)**

*Abel* is Gerardo's first film. He is also the little brother of co-star Christopher Ruíz-Esparza. Gerardo gave a spectacular performance during the acting workshops organized by Diego Luna, and following the decision to cast Christopher as Abel, it was a natural choice to have him join his brother in the movie.

### **José María Yazpik (ANSELMO)**

Jose Maria Yazpik most recently was seen starring opposite Charlize Theron in *The Burning Plain*, written and directed by Guillermo Arriaga for 2929/Magnolia Pictures.

Next, he is set to star in the Jorge Fons-directed Mexican feature *El Atentado* - based on the historical novel "El Expediente del Atentado" - which tells the true story of Arnulfo Arroyo (played by Yazpik), a young terrorist who, in 1897, attempts to assassinate Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz.

Yazpik received a Best Supporting Actor nomination for Spain's Goya Awards 2009 (Spain's equivalent of the Oscars) for his performance starring with Diego Luna in *Solo Quiero Caminar* produced by Gael Garcia Bernal and Diego Luna for Canana Films. Yazpik also won the 2006 Silver Ariel Award (Mexico's equivalent of the Oscar) for Best-Supporting actor in *Las Vueltas de Citrillo*.

Feature credits include starring with John Leguizamo in *Cronicas*, directed by Sebastian Cordero, the dark comedy *Nicotina* with Diego Luna, and the Luis Mandoki-directed film *Innocent Voices*.

### **Karina Gidi (CECILIA)**

Karina has worked alongside some of the best directors in Mexico and the world including: Ludwik Margules, Raul Quintanilla, Georges Lavaudant, Daniele Finzi Pasca, Jose Caballero, Yoshi Oida and Keith Johnstone. She possesses a wide range of experience, and has acted in theater, television and film projects.

In 2000, she starred in the film *Demasiado Amor* (Too Much Love) by Ernesto Rimoch, for which she earned the Best Female Lead Actress award at the 2001 Guadalajara International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Actress at the 2002 Arieles (the Mexican equivalent of the Oscars).

Her theatre experience includes "Festen", "Sueño de una noche de verano," "Dolores o la felicidad," and "Don Juan"—for which she won the Best Performance by a Young Female



Actress of 1997-1998 Award by the Mexican Theatre Critics Association. She has worked under the direction of Ludwik Margules, David Olguín, Lorena Maza, Alberto Lomnitz, and Martin Acosta, among others.

In 1999, she took on the new role of writing and starring in "Instrucciones para volar" (Instructions for Flying), a play that was a part of the Fringe Festival of Edmonton, Canada and participated in XXI Muestra Nacional de Teatro, among other festivals. She has twice earned the "Interpretes" grant, which is awarded by the National Culture and Arts Fund (1998-1999 and 2004-2005)

This year, she starred in the series *Estado de Gracia* (State of Grace), produced by Corazón Films for Canal 11. She also participated in the play "Fresas en Invierno" (Strawberries in Winter) directed by Raúl Quintanilla and starred in *Abel*, written and directed by Diego Luna.

### **Geraldine Alejandra (SELENE)**

Geraldine Alejandra was born in Mexico City in 1993. At a very early age, she showed interest in the arts including acting, singing and dancing. At age four, she enrolled at C.E.A. Infantil, a prestigious acting school in Mexico City. At five, she acted in her first telenovela (Mexican Soap Opera) ""El 9º mandamiento." This opened many doors for her, and she was immediately asked to take additional roles in other soap operas such as "Carita de Angel," "María Belen," "Complices al Rescate," "Amy la niña de la mochila azul" and "Pablo y Andrea." As a child, she also starred in over 30 commercials that aired in Mexico and the U.S.

Geraldine has also acted in the well-known soap opera dramas "Mujer casos de la vida real" and "La rosa de guadalupe." Most recently, she acted in the series "Alegría del hogar" (produced by Eugenio Derbez) and the very popular series "Terminales," where she starred opposite Mexican star Ana Claudia Talancon. In 2009, she took on her first full-length feature *Abel*, further emphasizing her passion for acting. She is currently in her final year of high school and plans to continue her acting career upon graduation.

## **Filmmakers**

### **Diego Luna (Director)**

Diego Luna was introduced to worldwide audiences with his starring role in the award-winning *Y tu mamá también*, alongside life-long friend Gael García Bernal, by director Alfonso Cuarón.

Beginning his professional acting career on stage at the age of seven, and making his television debut at age twelve in *El Abuelo Y Yo*, Luna has appeared in theater productions such as *De Pelicula*, *La Tarea* (based on Jame Hurnberto Hermosillo's movie of the same name), *Comedia Clandestina*, and *El Cantaro Roto*, for which he accepted the 1996-1997 "Best Male Newcomer Award Award" from the Association of Theatre Reviewers. Under the direction of Antonio Serrano (*Sexo, Pudor y Lagrimas*), he performed Sabina Berman's *Moliere*. He also produced *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* in Mexico, for which

he won the 2001-2002 “Best Comic Actor” award from the Association of Theatre Reviewers.

Luna’s feature films include Harmony Korine’s *Mister Lonely*, *Before Night Falls* by director Julian Schnabel, Luis Estrada’s *Ambar*, Erwin Neumaier’s *Un Hilito De Sangre*, Gabriel Retes’ *Un Dulce Olor A Meute*, Marisa Sistach’s *El Cometa*, Fernando Sarinana’s *Todo El Poder, Criminal* by Stephen Soderbergh, *The Terminal* by director Steven Spielberg, *Solo Dios Sabe* (What God Knows), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*, *Open Range* alongside director and star Kevin Costner, *Frida* opposite Salma Hayek by director Julie Taymor, *Carambola*, *Fidel* (for Showtime), *Ciudades Oscuras*, and *Soldados de Salamina* by director David Trueba. Additionally, Luna has starred in a number of short films made by students at CUEC and CCC, including Javier Bourges’ *El Ultimo Fin Del Ano*, the Oscar-winning short film.

Luna most recently reunited with friend Gael Garcia Bernal as an actor in Carlos Cuarón’s *Rudo y Cursi*. Last year, he starred in award-winning *Milk* opposite Sean Penn by director Gus Van Sant.

Luna went behind the camera as a director for a second time with *Abel*, his dramatic directorial debut.

Previously, he directed the documentary *J.C. Chavez* that premiered at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival. The film explores the life of legendary boxer Julio Cesar Chavez, whose rise from humble circumstances to thirty-seven world title fights mirrored the struggle of his people and allowed him to win the hearts of the world. *J.C. Chavez* was created under the banner of Canana, an international film and television production company based in Mexico City that Luna founded with Gabriel Garcia-Bernal and Pablo Cruz. The company focuses on story-based projects of Latin American origin with a worldwide market perspective. Canana’s also seeks to open doors for new talent and to produce film and television projects with a contemporary vision. Canana recently produced Luna’s film *Abel*, as well as Bernal’s directorial debut *Deficit* which premiered at the Cannes film festival in 2007.

Luna currently resides in Mexico City.

### **Augusto Mendoza (Writer)**

Augusto Mendoza was born in 1979 in Mexico City. He studied film at one of Mexico’s most prestigious universities, Universidad Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). He developed his first short “Cirrosis” in 1999. Shortly after he began working on multiple television projects. *Abel* is his first full-length script.

### **Pablo Cruz (Producer)**

In 2007, *Variety* cited Pablo Cruz as one of its “10 Producers to Watch.” Mr. Cruz studied film theory at the London College of Printing, and then worked in film production across Africa and Europe. In 2001, he founded the advertising agency The Lift in Barcelona.

In 2005, Cruz returned to his native Mexico to start the production company Canana with

partners Gael Garcia Bernal and Diego Luna.

Canana has produced seven films in the span of four years, including: Gerardo Naranjo's *Drama/Mex* and *Voy A Explotar* [*I'm Gonna Explode*]; Diego Luna's directorial debut, documentary *J.C. Chávez*; Gael Garcia Bernal's directorial debut, *Déficit*; Agustín Díaz Yanes' *Sólo Quiero Caminar*; Israel Cárdenas and Laura Amelia Guzmán's *Cochochi*; and Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*, a co-production with Focus Features. Canana's most recent projects include *Cefalópodo*, Ruben Imaz's second feature film; *Abel*, Luna's second film; and *SOY TU FAN*, a television series starring Ana Claudia Talancon.

Along with Diego Luna, Gael Garcia Bernal, and Elena Fortes, Pablo Cruz also founded Documental Ambulante (2005), a non-profit organization that produces a traveling documentary film festival in Mexico. The festival has brought over 200 documentaries to communities across the country in just five years.

### **Gael García Bernal (Executive Producer)**

An actor nearly all his life, Gael García Bernal began performing in stage productions with his parents in Mexico. He later studied at the Central School for Speech and Drama in London.

Bernal appeared in several plays and short films before his major feature film debut, Alejandro Gonzalez's *Amores Perros*—which was nominated for the Best Foreign Film Oscar in 2000. He gained more attention for Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También*, where he starred opposite his close friend, Diego Luna.

He subsequently starred in the title role of Carlos Carrera's Academy-Award-nominated *El Crimen del Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*). Later, Bernal was cast to play the revolutionary leader Che Guevara in Walter Salles's *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

Gael Garcia Bernal also starred in Pedro Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación* [*Bad Education*]. He worked on James Marsh's independent feature *The King*, as well as Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep*. He also stars in Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's *Babel* and in Hector Babenco's *El Pasado*. After his work in Carlos Cuarón's *Rudo y Cursi*, he also starred in Fernando Meirelles' *Blindness*.

He acted in *Mammoth*, directed by Lukas Moodysson, and in *The Limits of Control*, directed by Jim Jarmusch. This past year, he worked on Gary Winick's *Letters to Juliet* and on Iciar Bollain's *Even the Rain*, presently in post-production.

In 2005, he founded the film production company Canana with Diego Luna and Pablo Cruz. Since then, they have produced *J.C. Chavez*, *Deficit*, *Cochochi*, *Voy a explotar*, *Solo quiero caminar*, *Rudo y Cursi*, *Cefalópodo*, *Sin Nombre*, and *Abel*. Together, they also run the Ambulante documentary film festival, which travels around many cities in Mexico.

Gael García is also an accomplished theater actor. In 2005, he participated in Lorca's play *Blood Wedding* in The Almeida Theatre in London. In 2008, he also acted in the play *Together* with the Vesturport Theatre Group in Iceland and México.

García Bernal made his directorial debut with *Deficit* in 2007, a low-budget feature film shot in Mexico. He also directed the short film *The Letter* for the full-length film *8* and the short film *Lucio* for the collective Mexican film *Revolucion*.

### **John Malkovich (Executive Producer)**

Actor, director and producer John Malkovich is a leading figure of both stage and screen. He has had a profound impact on American theatre as a guiding member of Chicago's groundbreaking Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and he has intrigued filmgoers with his screen performances for over twenty-five years in more than seventy motion pictures. His film credits include *Death of a Salesman*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *In the Line of Fire*, *Con Air*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *Of Mice And Men*, *Rounders*, *Changeling*, *Being John Malkovich*, and *Burn After Reading*.

In 1976, Malkovich, along with Joan Allen, Gary Sinise, and Glenn Headly, became a charter member of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. He moved to New York City in 1982 to appear in a Steppenwolf production of the Sam Shepard play, *True West*, for which he won an Obie Award. Malkovich then directed a Steppenwolf co-production, the 1984 revival of Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*, for which he received a second Obie Award and a Drama Desk Award. His Broadway debut was that year as Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, alongside Dustin Hoffman as Willy. Malkovich won an Emmy Award for this role when the play was adapted for television by CBS in 1985.

One of the actor's first forays into film was as an extra alongside Allen, Terry Kinney, George Wendt, and Laurie Metcalf in Robert Altman's 1978 film *A Wedding*. He made his feature film debut in 1984, as Sally Field's blind boarder, Mr. Will, in *Places in the Heart*. For his portrayal of Mr. Will, Malkovich received an Oscar nomination. That year, Malkovich also portrayed Al Rockoff in Roland Joffé's film, *The Killing Fields*. He continued with steady work in films like *Empire of the Sun*, directed by Steven Spielberg, and the 1987 film adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward.

A few years later, Malkovich became a star when he portrayed the sinister and sensual Valmont in the 1988 film, *Dangerous Liaisons*. In 1994, he was nominated for another Oscar for *In the Line of Fire*. In 1999, he played the title role in the Charlie Kaufman-penned and Spike Jonze-directed *Being John Malkovich*, portraying a variation of himself, as indicated by the character's middle name of "Horatio".

In April of 1998, Malkovich joined partners Russell Smith and Lianne Halfon in forming the company Mr. Mudd. In 2001, Mr. Mudd produced *Ghost World*, a live action feature based on Dan Clowes' comic, directed by Terry Zwigoff (Crumb) and starring Thora Birch and Steve Buscemi. *Ghost World* was released to critical acclaim and earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. *The Dancer Upstairs* directed by Malkovich and

starring Academy Award nominee Javier Bardem was released in May 2003 by Fox Searchlight.

Along with his partners, Malkovich served as Executive Producer on the documentary *How to Draw a Bunny*, a portrait of artist Ray Johnson. *How to Draw a Bunny* won the Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and the Prix de Public at the famed Recontre Film Festival in Paris. The film was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for best documentary in 2003.

Set in 17<sup>th</sup>-Century London, *The Libertine*, starring Malkovich, Johnny Depp, and Samantha Morton was produced in 2004, and tells the true story of the Earl of Rochester (Depp), famed poet, sexual provocateur and wit. The film garnered seven British Independent Film Award nominations and one win. In the same year, Malkovich and partners wrapped production on the eagerly anticipated *Art School Confidential*, reuniting the *Ghost World* team of Zwigoff and Clowes. The film stars ingénues Max Minghella and Sophia Myles along with veteran actors Malkovich, Angelica Huston, and Jim Broadbent. Both *The Libertine* and *Art School Confidential* were released domestically in the spring of 2004.

In 2008, Fox Searchlight released the Mandate/Mr. Mudd produced picture *Juno*. Directed by Jason Reitman and written by Diablo Cody, Malkovich, Smith, and Halfon produced along with Mason Novick. *Juno* became the third biggest indie release of all-time. It received Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay.

In late 2008, Mr. Mudd, along with Mexican outfit, Canana, finished a 15-week sold-out run of Zach Helm's play, *The Good Canary*. Directed by Malkovich and starring Diego Luna, *The Good Canary* toured through several major Mexican cities including: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Aguascalientes, Monterrey, Leon. Its critical acclaim and financial success set a new precedent in Mexican theater.

Most recently with Mr. Mudd, Malkovich executive produced *Which Way Home*, a documentary by Sundance award winner Rebecca Cammisa. *Which Way Home* tells the story of children crossing the border from Mexico into the United States and was developed with HBO. Shot in Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala and the American southwest, *Which Way Home* premiered on HBO in August of 2009.

Recent screen credits include the Coen Brothers' *Burn After Reading*, Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*, and Sean McGinly's *The Great Buck Howard*. Malkovich can be seen alongside Josh Brolin and Megan Fox in the upcoming Western, *Jonah Hex*.

### **Russell Smith (Executive Producer)**

Russell Smith began his career producing plays for Steppenwolf Theatre Company. In a five-year period, he produced fifty plays, notable among them: *True West* and *Balm in Gilead*. During that time, Steppenwolf became known as one of America's finest theatres. The notable alumni of Steppenwolf include Academy Award nominees John Malkovich, Gary Sinise and Joan Allen.

For three summers, Smith worked as an arts consultant producing the First National Bank of Chicago's famed summer concert series. He produced the hit play *Orphans* Off-Broadway. In 1987, Sinise and Smith made their first film together, *Miles From Home*. In 1988, he produced the film *Queen's Logic*.

In 1989, Smith became the head of production for New Visions Pictures and oversaw the production of five films, among them: *The Long Walk Home* and *Mortal Thoughts*. His other film credits include the award winning short film *The Witness* and the acclaimed *Of Mice and Men*. In 1994, Smith formed the company, Smith/Malkovich, with longtime friend John Malkovich. In 1997, he produced the blockbuster United Artists film *The Man in the Iron Mask*, starring Malkovich, Leonardo Di Caprio, Gerard Depardieu, Gabriel Byrne and Jeremy Irons.

In April of 1998, Smith joined partners Malkovich and Lianne Halfon in forming the company Mr. Mudd. In 2001, Mr. Mudd produced *Ghost World*, a live action feature based on Dan Clowes' comic, directed by Terry Zwigoff (Crumb) and starring Thora Birch and Steve Buscemi. *Ghost World* was released to critical acclaim and earned an Academy Award® nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. *The Dancer Upstairs* directed by Malkovich and starring Academy Award® nominee Javier Bardem was released in May 2003 by Fox Searchlight.

Along with his partners, Smith served as Executive Producer on the documentary *How to Draw a Bunny*, a portrait of artist Ray Johnson. *How to Draw a Bunny* won the Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and the Prix de Public at the famed Recontre Film Festival in Paris. The film was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for best documentary in 2003.

Set in 17th Century London, *The Libertine*, starring Malkovich, Johnny Depp, and Samantha Morton was produced in 2004, and tells the true story of the Earl of Rochester (Depp), famed poet, sexual provocateur and wit. The film garnered seven British Independent Film Award nominations and one win. In the same year, Smith and partners wrapped production on the eagerly anticipated *Art School Confidential*, reuniting the *Ghost World* team of Zwigoff and Clowes. The film stars ingénues Max Minghella and Sophia Myles along with veteran actors Malkovich, Angelica Huston, and Jim Broadbent. Both *The Libertine* and *Art School Confidential* were released domestically in the spring of 2004.

In 2008, Fox Searchlight released the Mandate/Mr. Mudd produced picture *Juno*. Directed by Jason Reitman and written by Diablo Cody, Smith, Halfon and Malkovich produced along with Mason Novick. *Juno* became the third biggest indie release of all-time. It received Oscar nomination for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay.

In late 2008, Mr. Mudd, along with Mexican outfit, Canana, finished a 15-week sold-out run of Zach Helm's play, *The Good Canary*. Directed by Malkovich and starring Diego Luna, *The Good Canary* toured through several major Mexican cities including: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Aguascalientes, Monterrey, Leon. Its critical acclaim and financial success set a new precedent in Mexican theater.

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### **Lianne Halfon (Executive Producer)**

Producer Lianne Halfon joined A&M Films as the Sr. Vice President of Production in 1989. The film arm of A&M Records, the largest independent record label in the U.S., she oversaw seven films in her tenure, leaving in 1994 when the company was acquired by Polygram.

Working independently for the next two years, she developed and produced the HBO film *A Good Baby*, directed by Katherine Dieckmann and starring Henry Thomas and David Strathairn. She also executive produced Terry Zwigoff's documentary, *Crumb*, which won the Grand Jury Award at Sundance and was released by Sony Classics, landing on more "10 Best" lists than any other film in 1995. In 1995 she also produced the play *Libra* with Russell Smith at the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago. *Libra* was directed by John Malkovich and based on the highly acclaimed novel by Don DeLillo.

The following year, Halfon joined partners Smith and Malkovich in forming the company Mr. Mudd. In 2000, Mr. Mudd produced *Ghost World*, a live action feature based on Dan Clowes' comic, directed by Terry Zwigoff (*Crumb*) and starring Thora Birch, Scarlet Johansson and Steve Buscemi. *Ghost World* was released to critical acclaim and earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. It was followed by *The Dancer Upstairs*, Malkovich's debut feature starring Javier Bardem, released in May 2003 by Fox Searchlight.

Along with her partners, Halfon served as Executive Producer on the documentary *How to Draw a Bunny*, a portrait of artist Ray Johnson. *How to Draw a Bunny* won the Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and the Prix de Public at the famed Recontre Film Festival in Paris. The film was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for best documentary in 2003.

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In 2007, Fox Searchlight released the Mandate/Mr. Mudd produced picture *Juno*. Directed by Jason Reitman and written by Diablo Cody, Halfon, Smith and Malkovich produced along with Mason Novick. *Juno* became the third biggest indie release of all-time. It received Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress, and a win for Best

Screenplay.

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Most recently, Halfon executive produced *Which Way Home*, a documentary by Sundance award winner Rebecca Cammisa. *Which Way Home* tells the story of children crossing the border from Mexico into the United States and was developed with HBO over a five year span. Shot in Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala and the American southwest, *Which Way Home* premiered on HBO in August of 2009. It has earned a Spirit Award nomination and has been short-listed for an Academy Award.

Brigitte Broch (Production Designer)

Brigitte Broch, German born, has lived most of her life in Mexico where she started her film career. She has worked with Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo Del Toro, and has designed all of Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's movies. She was nominated for an Oscar next to Catherine Martin for her work in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* and won an Oscar together with Catherine Martin for *Moulin Rouge*. Her latest production design was for *The Reader*, directed by Stephen Daldry.

Patrick Murguía (Cinematographer):

Patrick Murguía began his career in film after graduating from the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in Mexico City. He shot such films as *Fuera Del Cielo (Beyond de Sky)* directed by Javier Patron, *Un Mundo Maravilloso (A Wonderful World)* directed by Luis Estrada and "Al Otro Lado" (On the Other Side) directed by Gustavo Loza. For these last two films, Patrick received *La Diosa De Plata* (Mexican Film Journalists Award for Best Cinematography). Most recently he worked on Antoine Fuqua's *Brooklyn's Finest*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009 which will be released theatrically in the US in March 2010. He collaborated with Diego Luna on *Abel*.

### **About CANANA**

CANANA is a film and television production company based in Mexico City whose fundamental vision is to develop projects of the highest caliber that offer varied points of view in dynamic settings.

CANANA defines itself as an innovative company through its material selection, production style, distribution, and marketing by focusing on projects that are of Latin American origin or themes but have a worldwide perspective. CANANA was founded in 2005 by Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna and Pablo Cruz. Their main objective is not only to develop projects that pertain to their needs as actors and producers, but also to open doors for Latin



American talent (actors, writers, directors). Over the past four years, CANANA has produced and distributed over 12 films including:

Drama/Mex, 2006 -Dir. Gerardo Naranjo

A mid-summer afternoon in Acapulco; Fernanda claims rape by her ex-boyfriend Chano, a rebellious teenager while from the soccer field her snobby boyfriend finds out the ex has returned. In Mexico DF, Jaime flees to Acapulco with money he embezzled from his company and meets Trigillo, an under-aged erotic masseuse.

Zerkalo International Film Festival, Rusia, 2007, Best Film, /Cannes, Semaine de la Critique 2006 / Toronto Film Festival, 2006 / AFI Los Angeles, 2006 / Thessaloniki, Greece, 2006 / Festival Internacional de Morelia, 2006 / Gothenburg Film Festival, 2007 / Rotterdam Film Festival, 2007 / BAFICI, Argentina, 2007 /Vancouver Latin Film Festival, 2007 Hola Mexico, Australia Film Festival, 2007

Cochochi, 2007 - Dir. Laura Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas

Evaristo and Tony are two indigenous brothers from northern Mexico who at the start of their vacation are entrusted by their grandfather with the task of delivering medicine across the majestic Sierra Tarahumara. In an effort to shorten their trip, the boys decide to take the family horse without prior permission from their grandfather. However, they embark on journey that ends up being much longer than they ever imagined.

Venice Film Festival, 2007: Orizonti; World Premiere / Toronto Film Festival 2007, Discovery Award / Paris International Children & Teenagers Film Festival, 2007, "Passeurs d'Images" Prize /Gijon Film Festival, FIPRESCI Award / Miami Film Festival, 2007, Best Ibero-American Dramatic Feature / Toulouse Film Festival, France, 2007, Grand Prix Coup de Cœur and FIPRESCI Award / Havana Film Festival, 2007 / Rotterdam Film Festival, 2008 / Oslo Film Festival, 2008 / Gothenburg Film Festival, 2008 / Valdivia International Film Festival, 2008, Special Jury Prize

Déficit, 2007 - Dir. Gael García Bernal

It is through Cristobal, a self-centered twenty something year old, that we get closer to the realities of the affluent Mexican society and their relationship with other social classes. Underneath the setting of a party at Cristobal's summer home, a story of lost innocence and social tension brews leading to the acceptance that a social and political system is about to collapse.

Cannes Film Festival, Semaine de la Critique, 2007 / Toronto Film Festival, 2007 / NY Latin Beat, 2007 / AFI Fest, 2007 / Rio de Janeiro Film Festival, Brazil, 2007 / Gothenburg Film Festival 2008 / Singapore International Film Festival, 2008

J.C. Chávez, 2007 - Dir. Diego Luna

A documentary about the legendary Mexican boxer Julio César Chávez. The film traces his humble beginnings as a pugilist, his glory years and the bitter end to his career. J.C. Chavez also captures the political history in Mexico during the time Chávez was World Champion and his interludes with those in power.

Festival de Expresión en Corto, Guanajuato 2007, Best Documentary / Tribeca Film Festival, NY, 2007/ Latin Beat, Tokio, 2007/ Rio de Janeiro Film Festival, Brasil, 2007 / Discovering Latin America Film Festival, London, 2007 / F! Fest, Istanbul, 2008

Voy A Explotar [I'm Gonna Explode], 2008 - Dir. Gerardo Naranjo

Set in Guanajuato, Mexico, *Voy A Explotar* tells the story of Roman and Maru, two troubled teenagers who attempt an impossible rebellion against the adult world. Thinking only of the immediate future, they runaway and set up a makeshift camp in a place where no one will think to look.

Venice Film Festival, 2008: Orizonti; World Premiere / Toronto Internacional Films Festival, 2008 / New York Film Festival, 2008 / Mar del Plata, 2008 / Berlin International Film Festival, 2009 / Guadalajara International Film Festival 2009, Best Cinematography - Mayahuel Prize, Press Award for Best First time or Second time Feature, Premio Mezcal / Istanbul Film Festival, 2009 / Hong Kong Internacional Film Festival, 2009

Sólo Quiero Caminar [Just Walking], 2008 -Dir. Agustín Díaz Yanes

Three women set out to seek revenge against their friend's husband, a ringleader and gigolo, who brutally attacked her. As they put their plan in motion, unexpected love affairs surge between them and the group of thugs.

Berlin International Film Festival, 2009 / International Thriller Film Festival de Beaune, 2009. Grand Prix du Jury

Sin Nombre, 2008 - Dir. Cary Fukunaga

A story about immigration and the ultimate journey. SIN NOMBRE introduces us to Sayra, a migrant from Honduras and Willy, a gangster. Both are train-bound to the United States; Sayra in search for a better life while Willy flees from his ex-gang who is out to kill him.

Sundance Film Festival, U.S. Dramatic Film Competition, Best Director, Best Cinematography, 2009

Currently, CANANA is in post production of *Cefalópodo*, Rubén Imaz's second film and *Abel*, written and directed by Diego Luna. Additionally CANANA will dive into the television world with *SOY TU FAN* starring Ana Claudia Talancón.

CANANA continues to expand and innovate in areas such as distribution.

Following the successful release of the independent film, *Let The Right One In*, a Swedish horror film directed by Thomas Alfredson CANANA seeks to grow their distribution operations. In 2010 CANANA launches TANGENTE, a new division within CANANA Distribution. The label aims to releasing films of the horror genre with an intellectual appeal. TANGENTE will focus on captivating audiences with independent and intellectual films that have a unique point of view within the horror genre. TANGENTE aims at supporting independent cinema that presents innovative and original horror themes.

Also, in 2009, CANANA launched CANANA ON DEMAND, a partnership with Mexico's largest cable company CABLEVISIÓN. This marks a stepping stone for CANANA as they are the first Latin American production company to spearhead an ON DEMAND project that includes Day and Date releases of films that are both produced and distributed by CANANA. Through this innovative distribution channel CANANA ON DEMAND aims at growing and solidifying the ON DEMAND technology in Mexico. Also, through this new

distribution channel, CANANA hopes to help combat piracy of films by making films more accessible to the general public and offering other a different option for viewing films.

### **About Mr. Mudd**

Producing partners Lianne Halfon, John Malkovich and Russell Smith first worked together in 1994 when they decided to adapt and produce Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago, where the play opened to a sold-out run.

In 1998, Halfon, Malkovich and Smith created the production company Mr. Mudd, whose first film was the notable *Ghost World*, directed by Terry Zwigoff. In 2003, Malkovich followed this up with his own feature directorial debut, *The Dancer Upstairs*, starring Academy Award® winner Javier Bardem. Other Mr. Mudd credits include *The Libertine*, starring Johnny Depp and Samantha Morton and *Art School Confidential*, also directed by Zwigoff and written by screenwriter/cartoonist Dan Clowes.

Mr. Mudd landed its biggest box office and critical success with *Juno*, starring Ellen Page, Jennifer Garner and Jason Bateman. The film, distributed through Fox Searchlight, received an Academy Award® for Best Original Screenplay (Diablo Cody) and three other nominations, for Best Motion Picture, Best Actress (Ellen Page) and Best Director (Jason Reitman). Most recently, Halfon, Malkovich, and Smith joined Bristol Baughan, Jack Turner, and Bette Cerf Hill to executive produce *Which Way Home*, which premiered on HBO in August 2009.