



THE TENTH MAN

(El rey del Once)

A film by Daniel Burman

Official Selection, 2016 Berlinale Film Festival (Panorama Special Opening Film)

Official Selection, 2016 Tribeca Film Festival

2015 / Argentina / 80 min. / Color / In Spanish with English subtitles

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Short Synopsis

Ari, who has built a successful career in New York, thinks he has left his past behind. But his distant father Usher, who runs a Jewish aid foundation in El Once, the close-knit old Jewish neighborhood of Buenos Aires summons him back to his native city. What ensues is a comedy of errors, of missed and found people and connections, and a rumination on the extent to which we can ever really leave our past behind.

Long Synopsis

Ariel has left his past behind. After growing up in the close-knit Jewish community of Buenos Aires he has built a new and to all appearances successful metropolitan life as an economist in New York.

He has come back to his native city to meet his distant father Usher, but for days they miss one another as Usher continues to issue instructions to Ariel for a plethora of errands. Usher's life's mission, often to the detriment of his family, is the running of a Jewish aid foundation in El Once, the old Jewish neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Ariel is drawn back into the community and the very role his father plays in it. Along the way, his New York existence is gradually stripped away. After a few days, literally standing in the clothes that he once wore, he meets Eva, a mute, intriguing woman who works at the foundation.

Not coincidentally, Ariel's visit coincides with Purim, a holiday commemorating the salvation of the Jewish diaspora from annihilation. It is a day of rejoicing in face of the averted disaster, a humorous, carnivalesque occasion that forms the subtext for a comedy of errors of missed and found people and connections, and a rumination on the extent to which we can ever really leave our past behind.

Interview with Director Daniel Burman

In “*The Tenth Man*”, you return to Once, the old Jewish quarter of Buenos Aires. How did you come to make this film?

"*The Tenth Man*" was born when I met Usher, the head of the foundation in my film, who is a real person. I wanted to join a trip that a group of friends from Russia, Ukraine and Poland take every year to visit the graves of Sadikin, Jewish mystics who lived between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These spiritual leaders, according to tradition, had a direct connection with God. And although Judaism is devoid of any forms of a death cult and neither leaves flowers in cemeteries nor builds monumental tombs, there is an exception in the worship of this army of holy men whose graves began to be seen as doors to the divinity. Direct contact with the stones in which the souls of the Sadikin are embedded is thought to put you in immediate contact with God by followers of certain Orthodox movements. And when I heard there was a group of Argentines who were undertaking a kind of pilgrimage to these tombs I wanted to do a documentary ("*Tzadikim - Los 36 Justos*", 2011). The group traveled about 4,000 kilometers by bus, through villages where Jewish life endures, paradoxically, through those abandoned cemeteries.

Was it difficult to be accepted by the group? How did you manage to do that?

They told me that the gatekeeper was Usher, who basically had to like the idea. So we got together one day in the food court of Shopping Abasto, in what was a kind of a summit. Both of us ordered kosher pizza and initially Usher examined me, let me speak, almost ignoring me. After a while, we exchanged a few words and for some reason that even today is not clear to me, he finally accepted me. And I began to be so fascinated to get to know him that the actual journey through the Russian steppes took a back seat. During the trip, I shared with them a Jewish life that for me is unusual. And in that intimacy I met this amazing person, and I began to establish a first closeness that was not yet a friendship.

How did you keep contact after that experience? When did this relation evolve into a real friendship?

I stopped seeing him for a while, until one day he called me in New York and without giving much explanation he asked me to get him a velcro sneakers in size 47, for a man who was half out of his mind in a public hospital. They were about to operate and he had no shoes in case he survived the intervention. And I was honored to help and started looking for velcro shoes in a 47, but did not find them anywhere. I ended up buying very good moccasins. I thought it would be important for this person to have some nice, good quality shoes, but when he saw them, the first thing Usher said was that they lacked the velcro. And the second was that I had to take them to the hospital myself. Then he hung up.

This actually ended up in the film...

Yes what followed is told in the film, I went to Argerich Hospital to the man before he was operated on, he took the shoes and some cookies and I understood why the velcro: the man did not have good motor coordination, and he could not tie his shoelaces. Some time later Usher called me and we went out for coffee, and suddenly he threw a shoe at my head. I looked at the shoe and I realized it was the one I had bought. Usher then told me that the man had survived the operation but one of his legs had to be amputated, so he only needed a single shoe. And since it was the only one he had, he used it all the time, and now it was broken and he needed another one, so he returned the old shoe to me. I have kept the shoe, because it represents the beginning of that connection.

What did strike you mostly about this person?

There was something about Usher that I found fascinating, and this feeling only grew when I learned more about his kingdom, his army of volunteers, that mysterious world of people giving without a special satisfaction beyond. Something provided by the fact of doing what needs to be done, as part of a particular logic of aid. In the Foundation the others who are being helped are not an undifferentiated mass that needs just anything. The help there is about the uniqueness of each individual. In order to give somebody exactly what he needs, there has to be an intention to understand why he needs this and nothing else. That world captivated me and motivated me to write the story. Because I had always been rather suspicious of those who gave their lives for others, I thought that most of these people wanted to get away from themselves or escape from something. And Usher made me change this outlook.

What happened when you realized that you wanted to make a fiction film?

We did not recreate anything but assembled a fiction within an existing world, in a fairly documentary register. Making a film to tell this story was a fact in itself so extraordinary that it did not matter how it was acted, or lit, or whatever. The figure of Usher haunted me, and at some point I began to wonder what the life of the son of a father who gives so generously would be like. Somebody who gives all his love to others when children always want to monopolize the love of their parents. I wondered what would be the link between the father and the son, and from that completely fictional construction I started writing the script.

How did you work in the real environment of the Foundation? How difficult was it to enter into their lives?

I really enjoyed invading their reality as little as possible. Reducing the fictional elements to the minimum needed to sustain the story, articulated as a documentary as much as possible. And it was a huge challenge, because it involved contact with people who had nothing to do with the dynamics of a shooting but with the dynamics of life, and accept that this dynamic was more important than ours, and that we had to adapt to it. I approached the film as a process and ended up establishing a deep emotional bond. I do not know how it is for other directors, but for me, my films are more and more processes

than results. Of course I always want audiences to like my films and give me a hug after seeing them, but I increasingly experience them as processes that are shaped by and occur at certain times of my life, and the imprint of life for me is stronger than the story, however wonderful the result may turn out to be.

Could you tell us something about your approach to the shoot?

I wanted to make a light film capable of incorporating the moment, and, for example, when we met a group of guys who were going to a party and wanted to participate we included them in the scene. I wanted to have that freedom of movement. And I wanted to shoot in Once, even though at the time I wasn't consciously aware that I was referring to "El abrazo partido". There is a dialogue between "El rey del Once" and my first film. At a minimum there are issues that are touched upon in one and taken up again in the other. The truth is that I am the same person, even if ten years have passed. But the dialogue that occurs is more internal, between who I was - and who no longer exists - and who I still remain.

How did you come to cast the real Usher in the film?

Because he is a great character and only he could play himself. Thinking of an actor for the role depressed me, I felt that it would not really work and I never doubted that Usher could do much better. The same is true for Hercules, the lieutenant in the humble and mighty army of Usher. An indispensable sidekick, carrying frozen chicken and beef back and forth through Once with his Citroen in the scorching heat without concern for alimentary rules and attentive only to the strictures of necessity and urgency, I thought he was an incredible character. Overall I was deciding who to work with in a fairly intuitive way. Many of the beneficiaries of the foundation I got to know also ended up in the film. What made it all work was that I felt comfortable with each person I was adding, as simple as that.

What about the opposite process: when did you choose to cast real actors instead of the real people for certain roles? The characters I imbued with higher dose of fiction are those who come from the outside, and I tried to make sure that they fit naturally into the environment. I wanted to work with Alan Sabbagh for some time. I thought he had a special gift for this role, because he was someone who could perfectly have left that universe only to return in the end. He could have taken this journey away and back. For the character of Julieta Zylberberg it never occurred to me to work with an Orthodox woman because it would have been impossible. Julieta did a great job of observing and above all managed to go beyond the stereotype. Because at first glance it is very easy to judge, but then if you look more closely, it is important to understand why a woman takes shelter in the way she does. There are people who choose the shelter of religion, as in this case. We try to understand why that woman takes cover, and why this guy played by Alan somehow is able to draw her out, how this match that initially seems highly improbable finally works out. So I thought of a very good actress able to channel this character without being judgmental.

About Daniel Burman:

Director, producer, and screenwriter. Burman is a founding member of the Academy of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts of Argentina. He is considered one of the most important Argentine filmmakers of his time, with great success both at home and internationally.

Burman has directed eleven films and has produced more than seventeen movies. Throughout his work, he consistently utilizes the artistic touch and sophistication needed to explore existential issues with authenticity, always adopting a light yet profound tone at the same time.

He has been awarded the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival; Grand Prix of Public in Biarritz; FIPRESCI Prize at Valladolid; Coral Prize in Havana; Audience Award, Iberoamerican Film and SIGNIS, in Mar del Plata. In recognition of his humanitarian vision, Burman was awarded the Robert Bresson Award at the Venice Film Festival, an honor he shares with Wim Wenders, Alexander Sokurov and Manoel Oliveira. In 2008 he received the Achievement Award from the Israel Cinematheque during the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival. In 2011 he received the Visionary Award, from the Washington Jewish Community Center at Washington International Jewish Film Festival.

Filmography:

The Tenth Man (El Rey del Once) (2015)

The Mystery of Happiness (2014)

All In (2012)

Tzadikim - Los 36 Justos (2011)

Brother and Sister (2010)

Empty Nest (2008)

Family Law (2008)

Lost Embrace (2003)

Every Stewardess Goes to Heaven (2001)

Waiting for the Messiah (2000)

A Chrysanthemum Bursts in Cincoquinas (1998)

Actor Biographies:

Alan Sabbagh (Ariel)

Alan Sabbagh's first major cinematic role was in "Luna de Avellaneda" by Juan José Campanella (2004). Also in 2004, he became part of the TV series "Locas de amor (Crazy in Love)". In 2009, he joined the cast of the play "Los quiero a todos" that was made into a film in 2010 by Luciano Quilici. During late 2009 and 2010, he starred in "Botineras" which aired on Telefe. September 2011 saw the release of the film "Mi primera boda (My First Wedding)" by Ariel Winograd. In 2012, he starred in Diego and Pablo Levy's "Masterplan". In July 2012, he joined the cast of the sitcom "Graduates" and starred in the movie "20,000 besos (20.000 Kisses)" by Sebastián De Caro. In 2013, he worked again with Ariel Winograd in the film "Vino para robar" and was a cast member of the TV comedy show "Vecinos en guerra."

Julieta Zylberberg (Eva)

Julieta Zylberberg's movie debut was in Lucrecia Martel's "La niña santa (The Holy Girl)" in 2004. In 2005, she participated in Albertina Carri's Argentine/French coproduction "Gemini" followed by Ariel Winograd's "Cara de queso (Cheese Head)" in 2006. In 2007, she starred in Diego Lublinsky's "Tres minutos (Three Minutes)"; in 2010, in "The Invisible Eye" by Diego Lerman. On the stage, she participated in the play "August: Osage County". In 2011, she had a role in the film "Ana Katz." In 2012, she starred in Alejandro Montiel's "Extraños en la noche (Strangers in the Night)." A TV engagement in the series "Farsantes (Fakers)" for Canal 13 brought her to the small screen in 2013. In 2014, she added two films to her filmography: "Relatos salvajes (Wild Tales)" by Darío Szifron and "El cinco de talleres" by Adrián Biniez.

Cast:

Ariel...Alan Sabbagh

Eva...Julieta Zylberberg

Usher...Usher

Susy...Elvira Onetto

Mamuñe...Adrian Stoppelman

Hercules...Daniel Droblas

Monica...Elisa Carricajo

Mumi Singer...Dan Britman

Marcelito Cohen...Uriel Rubin

Ariel (11 years)...Dalmiro Burman

Crew:

Director and Writer...Daniel Burman

Producers...Diego Dubcovsky, Daniel Burman, Barbara Francisco

Co Producers...Alejandro Gorodisch, Alfredo Odorisio, Axel Kuschevatzky

Executive Producers... Bárbara Francisco

Director of Photography...Daniel Ortega

Production Designer...Margarita Tambornino

Film Editor...Andrés Tambornino

Sound Designer...Catriel Vildosola

Costume Designer...Roberta Pesci

Make Up...Mariela Hermo

Unit Production Manager...Cecelia Salim

First Assistant Director... Matías Famulari