



# LEAP YEAR ( Año Bisiesto)

Spring  
Season  
2011

## Review by Trevor Johnston, Time Out London:

Trying to get your first film on screen is a challenge for anyone, not least in these financially tough times. Michael Rowe, an expat Aussie who ended up in Mexico City, realised that no fairy godmother was going to appear with a big pile of money for his debut feature, so he tried to work out how to tell a compelling story with a minimum of resources. Restricting the action to a single location and keeping the cast list short were essential – but how to keep an audience interested in a story unfolding in one room? The answer is blindingly obvious – sex. Pervy sex indeed, which would generate controversy, yet also, perhaps, bring its own set of pitfalls.

That Rowe picked up the Camera d'Or for best first feature at Cannes 2010 is one indication of the extent to which he's succeeded in crafting a drama which isn't hamstrung by its challenges and manages not to come across as exploitative in its sexual forthrightness. It shows what you can do when emotional understanding and storytelling craft become the ruling factors in a project, filtered through performers who can truly do the material justice.

Monica Del Carmen is thoroughly believable – a somehow ordinary yet sympathetic screen presence – as lonely freelance journo Laura, stuck working the phones in her compact city apartment, displaced from her family in the provinces, and looking longingly at the lovely old couple in the courtyard below and the twentysomething lovebirds in the flat opposite.

A string of unfulfilling one-night stands barely take the edge off Laura's isolation, but she really begins to connect with the brooding Arturo (Gustavo Sanchez Parra) when his penchant for meting out sexual punishment chimes with her facility for taking it. Afterwards, they share moments of affection and understanding, but their physical relationship seems headed for a very dark place...

Given the actors' unstinting commitment to all that's asked of them, the film is far from easy viewing. Some will certainly be uncomfortable with a male director giving us a female heroine so compliant in her own sexual subjugation. What's telling, however, is the time Rowe allows for us to grasp the poignant psychological imperatives guiding Laura's challenging choices. *Leap Year* impresses in the way its economy of detail – admittedly with an occasional suggestion of contrivance – still fully conveys this troubled woman's underlying pain and how it connects with the consensual extremes unfolding before us.

In that respect, you can read it as a female equivalent of *Last Tango in Paris*: here's a similarly courageous, soul-baring piece of cinema whose troubling eroticism is ultimately a vehicle for humane compassion.

## From the review by Rich Kline, Shadow on the Wall:

From Mexico, this bold and yet subtle film is so bracingly realistic that at times we begin worrying about the central actress. Without ever making things easy for us, it also has a lot to say about modern life in a big city.

Laura (del Carmen) is a freelance journalist who lives in quiet isolation, barely spending time with anyone else. But she tells her little brother (Zapata) that her life is full of friends. And she lies to everyone else as well. When her loneliness gets too much, she dresses up and heads out to pick up another one night stand for soulless sex. Then one man (Parra) becomes a regular visitor and, as their encounters get more twisted and obsessive, Laura's demands get increasingly intense.

The story takes place over the month of February in a leap year, and Laura counts down the days to the 29th with a mix of expectation and dread. We learn later on what this day means for her, but the film's main strength is in the way it captures the details of her mundane life. It's so dull and sometimes seedy that it's uncomfortable to watch, and yet the raw honesty holds our attention, anchored by a staggeringly authentic performance from del Carmen.

The camera rarely leaves Laura's flat, so what we see of her life is extremely limited, which gives the film a claustrophobic quality. This vividly conveys the sometimes overpowering feeling of seclusion of living in a crowded place. Laura's compulsive lying doesn't help her situation, although it may make her feel better about her monotonous life. And in a way we can see why she tries to spice up her sex life with danger and even violence.

We also get subtle glimpses of her family situation, the pain of grief after the death of her father and a pang of betrayal from her mother. None of this is defined in great detail, but we see the emotions flicker across Laura's face in a way that lets us understand her actions. And despite some slightly pushy plotting, we can vividly see ourselves in her shoes. Which is no mean feat.

