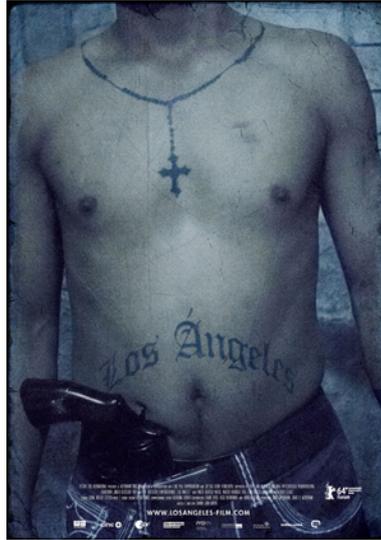


Los Ángeles



Despite what its title might suggest, **Los Ángeles** does not take place in the city of angels but rather in a small Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico. Contrary to most Mexican movies dealing with emigrating to the US, Damian John Harper's film isn't about the journey but about the destination. For the locals, LA is seen like an almost dreamlike city and the only hope for a better life. Most families send a son or a father to the Californian town with the goal to get financial support in return.

This is the case of Mateo (Mateo Bautista Matias), a young man who is destined to cross the border. While his grandpa has been saving enough money to pay a coyote, he's preparing for his new life his own way, joining a local gang so that he will get respect when arriving in LA. The paradox here is that it implies that Los Angeles might not be the haven they envision, but since gangs seem to be accepted – if not embraced as they also bring back dollars to the community – the villagers tend to ignore criminal activity as long as it doesn't interfere with their life and dreams. Of course, as the movie unfolds, these dreams will get shattered, this life of crime being more dangerous than it seems, whatever side of the border you might be.

While stories about immigration and gangs are nothing new on our screens, what makes **Los Ángeles** so unique is the fact that it uses this premise to make us experience life in this rural Zapotec community. An American anthropologist who spent a few years living in this town, Mr. Harper is able to convey what it feels like to live there, whether it's daily life, customs or inner struggles.

There is a documentary-like quality about this work, which is emphasized by the fact that all actors here are non-professional locals, most of them playing themselves and using their own first names. More importantly, there is nothing amateurish here, everything looking and sounding natural, which is even more surprising as this is Mr. Harper's debut (he studied film in Germany).

Aspiring Hollywood directors should get a great deal learning from this work: while most first features usually look like clumsy experiments, the key to Mr. Harper's success is simply authenticity, respect and passion for his subject (and protagonists); this respect is actually clearly visible onscreen as all characters, including the bad ones, are treated with dignity, showcasing various degrees of humanity. During the [Q&A following the screening at the LA film festival](#), the filmmaker explains that most central characters were his friends, including some gang bangers, and without embracing criminal actions, he just shows us that not everything is black or white and that sometimes people are victims on their environment.

Featuring poetic, naturalistic tones and some light doses of humor, **Los Ángeles** manages to treat a heavy theme with subtlety and without melodrama, making this promising debut stand out among all those immigration/gang themed films – and trust me, there are plenty of them ...

Director: Damian John Harper – Actors: Mateo Bautista Matias, Marcos Rodriguez Ruiz – Running Time: 1:37 – Year: 2014 – Country: Germany, Mexico