

One of
Chile's
70,000
live-in
maids



The Maid will be released in New York on Oct. 16, followed by Los Angeles and a nationwide rollout.

MAIDS OF HONOR

A NEW, AWARD-WINNING CHILEAN FILM QUESTIONS THE LONG-STANDING LATIN AMERICAN TRADITION OF EMPLOYING DOMESTIC WORKERS. By Elizabeth Méndez Berry

BIRTHDAYS AREN'T always happy, but it's safe to say that the opening scene in Sebastián Silva's new film, *The Maid*, takes the cake for awkwardness. It's not that the wealthy employers of the movie's main character, Raquel, have forgotten to buy her gifts—it's that she's uncomfortable accepting them. She sits alone in the kitchen in her stiff uniform, eating dinner, trying to ignore the family that has employed and housed her for 23 of her 41 years. She pretends she can't hear them ringing the bell and then finally makes a brief cameo in the dining room, blowing out her candles and scurrying back to the kitchen to wash dishes.

The scene captures the mixed emotions Raquel has for her *patrones*: the intimacy that comes from sharing a roof for years, and the constant reminders that she's not family.

The director's own experiences growing up in the posh Los Condes neighborhood of his native Santiago, Chile, provided the basis for the film. "The maid would come to the beach with us in her uniform," Silva says of the woman who inspired Raquel's character. "She was there, but she wasn't there at the same time. That ambiguity always struck me." To protect her privacy, Silva has kept her identity secret.

The Maid (*La Nana* in Spanish) examines the psychological costs of spending one's life cooking, cleaning and caring for another family and rarely having one's own. Though her employers, the Valdes family, treat her kindly, Raquel suffers from migraines and exhaustion and takes this out on the new, younger maids the family hires to help her. The new maids also pose a threat to the bond she's formed with

Director
Sebastián
Silva on set
(top);
Catalina
Saavedra in
a scene from
The Maid



“THERE ARE GOOD EMPLOYERS, BUT IT’S LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY,” SAYS DOMESTIC WORKER ANGÉLICA HERNÁNDEZ.

the family through the years. Most of them quit, fed up with Raquel’s antics—she routinely locks the other women out of the house when the family isn’t looking.

Yet Raquel is neither villain nor hero. She’s much more intriguing. This taut character study, buoyed by a riveting performance by Chilean actress Catalina Saavedra, has collected prize after prize on the international festival circuit, capped by a Grand Jury Prize in World Cinema for Best Film and a Special Jury Prize for Saavedra at Sundance.

Since those accolades, *The Maid* has sparked conversations about working conditions in Latin America. This year, Chilean president Michelle Bachelet passed legislation guaranteeing holidays off for the country’s approximately 70,000 live-in maids, whose job descriptions often include housecleaner, cook and nanny. While Silva’s film focuses on a decent employment situation, advocates for domestic workers—including at least 1.5 million in the United States—see *The Maid* as an opportunity to air out the problems lurking behind closed doors, particularly isolation, potential for abuse and long hours without compensation or days off.

In making *The Maid*, Silva, who is also an artist and musician, portrayed elements of his life in an effort to “deal with my guilt.” The Valdeses’ house in the movie is actually Silva’s own childhood home in Los Condes, and his younger brother, Agustín, plays the family’s eldest son (Raquel’s favorite). “I had to exorcise the unsolved emotions I had toward her,” says Silva, whose parents had several maids, with one constant: the woman who came to his family at 17 and never married or had children of her own. “Our relationship was always difficult because I was a troublemaker,” he said, “and having a second mother was hard for me.”

Raquel is so finely drawn that Saavedra, who has played more than a few maids on Chilean television, jumped at the opportunity to star. “Raquel is like a cat that has been locked up for 20 years,” Saavedra says. “She really believes that this

other family is her own, but she also has an unconscious desire to get out of there.” To the actress, who worked with Silva on his first feature film, *La Vida Me Mata*, domestic workers are an undervalued, essential part of the Chilean economy. “I hope that people who watch the film reflect on how to improve their employees’ situation,” she adds.

Angélica Hernández hopes they do. She has been a domestic worker for 30 years, both in her native Mexico and in the States. Like Raquel, she started young. As a 20-year-old newlywed, she could only find work as a live-in maid, so she saw her husband briefly on Sundays. “I used to go to my room and cry,” she says. Her work was never done: She’d go to bed at midnight and get up at 6 a.m. to make breakfast and then get the children ready for school. After her husband died 11 years ago, she moved to New York City.

“It’s hard for us because there are no rules and no support,” says Hernández, who has had several employers refuse to pay her. “There are good employers, but it’s like winning the lottery.” While live-in domestic work in the States is less common than it once was, it’s not extinct, according to Priscilla González of Domestic Workers United, a nonprofit in New York City. “Domestic workers are not protected by most labor laws in this country,” González says. “Along with farm workers, they’re explicitly excluded from civil rights protections and the right to form unions.”

González’s organization is hoping to change that by helping domestic workers from the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa who are employed as nannies, housekeepers and elderly caregivers, through programs such as computer training and English as a Second Language classes.

In Latin America, where about 15 percent of women in the labor force work in domestic service, workers are also mobilizing for their rights through organizations such as the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers. But like in most Latin countries, Chile’s persistent inequalities ensure a constant supply of rural women (increasingly Peruvians) willing to work for wages that some middle- to upper-class Chileans can afford to pay.

Before the official premiere of *The Maid* in Chile this August, Silva showed the real Raquel the film first. Her only reaction was to note that she hadn’t abused the other maids as extremely as the character. Two weeks later, she gave her notice: She had fallen in love. “She bought a car and dyed her hair and got her own life,” says Silva of his longtime domestic worker, who remains close with his family. As for Silva, who now lives in New York in an admittedly messy East Village apartment, he’s not planning on hiring a maid anytime soon.