



Presents

# José

**A Film by Li Cheng**

**Directed by Li Cheng**

**Written & Produced by George F. Roberson & Li Cheng**  
**A YQ Studio Production**

**Country: Guatemala/U.S.**

**Language: Spanish with English subtitles**

**Venice Film Festival Official Selection & Queer Lion Award Winner**



Release Date: Theatrical run starts 1/31/20 at New York City's Quad Cinema

Running Time: 85 minutes, 1:1.85 5.1 Sound, Color  
Rating: Unrated, some sexual situations and images

Website: [www.outsiderpictures.us/movie/jose](http://www.outsiderpictures.us/movie/jose)  
Facebook: @JoseTheMovie

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*Winner of multiple awards, including the Queer Lion from the 75th Annual Venice Film Festival, JOSÉ is a gripping, layered and beautifully honest story about one working class young man's struggle to find himself. Made in the neorealist filmmaking tradition, the film is a nuanced and vivid look at being gay in Central America. It opens on January 31, 2020 at New York City's Quad Cinema and expands to other North American cities starting in February.*

## **SYNOPSIS**

José (magnetic newcomer Enrique Salanic) lives with his mother (Ana Cecilia Mota) in Guatemala City, where they survive on her selling sandwiches at bus stops and with him working at a local restaurant. It is a poor and sometimes dangerous country where, dominated by conservative Catholic and Evangelical Christian religion, living one's life as an openly gay man is hard for José to imagine. His mother has never had a husband, and as her youngest and favorite child, though at the edge of manhood at 19-years old, she is determined to hold on to him. Reserved and private, José fills his free moments playing with his phone and random sex with other men arranged on street corners and dating apps. When he meets attractive and gentle Luis (Manolo Herrera), a migrant from the rural Caribbean coast, they pursue an unexpected relationship with more emotion than José has ever felt. He is thrust into new passion and pain, and self-reflection, that push him to rethink his life even as he is reluctant to take a leap of faith.

## THE CAST

**Enrique Salanic (Jose)** – A graduate of the prestigious and unique Pearson College UWC in Victoria, BC, Canada, Enrique is ethnic Mayan, and speaks fluent English, Spanish and Maya Ki'che. He is pursuing his career as an actor, and lives with his family in a small rural agricultural village five hours away from Guatemala City. He also appeared in the pan-Central American film, DIAS DE LUZ (DAYS OF LIGHT). This is his first lead role in a feature film.

**Manolo Herrera (Luis)** – Manolo studies art at Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, and performs in local theatre productions. He lives with his family in a modest neighborhood in Mixco, near Guatemala City. JOSÉ is his first feature film.

**Ana Cecilia Mota (Jose's mother)** – A psychologist by training and profession, Ana lives with her three daughters in Guatemala City. Her oldest daughter, Jennifer, also plays her daughter in the film. JOSÉ is her first feature film debut.

## THE FILMMAKERS

**Li Cheng (Director/Co-Writer/Co-Producer)** – Born in China and now a U.S. citizen, Cheng quit biotech cancer research in 2007 to make films. He moved to Guatemala in 2016 to make his second feature film JOSÉ. It premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2018 and won the Queer Lion award. His first feature film JOSHUA TREE is about the crisis of the American dream, and a critique of the dominant culture. Cheng holds a PhD from Rutgers University, and currently lives in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

**George F Roberson (Co-Writer/Co-Producer)** – JOSÉ is Roberson's second film. He spent two years living in Guatemala to research and make it. A broadly trained and experienced academic and advocate, he was a Fulbright Scholar in Morocco, holds a PhD from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and has lived and worked in over sixty countries. He once hitchhiked across the Sahara desert to have a look. Roberson currently lives in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT – LI CHENG

I specifically made JOSÉ as an art-house style film, in Spanish, grounded in the social, political and cultural context of Guatemala, where the story is set and it was shot. I paired my “realist” visual language and aesthetics with an all Guatemalan cast and crew. I chose to fund the project from my own pocket in order to work quickly (film funds take time, and “friends” that I don't have) and to maintain artistic control. With a story that really grabbed peoples' hearts and minds we easily attracted world-class artists willing to work within our budget. I feel an affinity especially with the Italian neorealists and Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-Hsien, since, like them, I want to work in the heat of the crisis and participate in the moments of change. JOSÉ is about family, work, struggle, love and loss - and finally it's about one man's search for “self” and the search for Guatemala's future.

JOSÉ is really a page ripped from today's news headlines. The crises of young people, single mothers and dark-skinned peoples in Guatemala frames the film's story. Guatemala has become an increasingly violent and dangerous place, where more than half the people live in poverty. Indeed most of the children separated from their parents and locked in dog-like cages in Texas (shocking people around the world) are Guatemalan, not Mexican, as is often claimed.

I'm intrigued by Latino culture: the structure of the family and especially the close relationships between mothers and sons, brothers, and cousins. With a society centered on traditional morality, it is all surprisingly similar to Asia and familiar to me having grown up in China. Yet there is closeness, passion and romance that somehow co-exist with extreme machismo, violence, corruption and religious fervor.

One thing that I learned firsthand in Latin America is that the region's films and television are misleading since they usually feature white, middle and upper class people, with stories set in idyllic places. And yet the absolute majority of people are urbanized, poor, and dark-skinned (in Guatemala about 40% are pure Mayan and another 40% *mestizo* or mixed). I wanted to address this imbalance, and I wanted to speak especially about the honest emotions and struggles and hopes and dreams of young working-class people in Latin American cities, for they are the majority and the future.

We performed extensive onsite research and hundreds of interviews in 12 Latin American countries before deciding to set our story in Guatemala. It is the largest country in Central America (a region long overlooked internationally), the population is growing fast, and half are under the age of 19, hence the character of José in the film is 19-years old. It is a country of extreme climates and dramatic landscapes and diversity, a land of volcanoes and the constant threat of earthquakes. It is also rife with political corruption and inequality, and at the same time it's a very religious country with evangelical churches and Catholics openly competing. Furthermore, the 35-year civil war, though officially ended in 1996, left violence normalized: it's the second most dangerous country in the world, with some of the highest rates of violence against women and child murder in the world.

JOSÉ is the story of one young man's trying to come to terms with being gay amidst this challenging situation. The research interviews we did gave dramatic voice to this tough reality: a young gay man was threatened with a knife at his neck by his own mother after she found out that he is gay; another was physically beaten and severely injured by his mother for the same reason; a mother cursed her 17-year old son – “you will never know what true love is” – after he came out as gay to her.

We also found that in Guatemala, as in much of the world, the phone dating and hook-up apps heavily influence the younger generation. It is easy to find somebody online and arrange to have sex. The ease and randomness of this undermines any sort of lasting and caring relationship. An interviewee said, “Guys want me to sleep over, but who is going to take care of me when I am in the shit? My mom! Of course I don't want any sort of relationship.” I asked my actors, “Who would you choose if you had to, your lover or your mom?” Everybody answered, “Of course my mom!”

In our interviews we learned that most families are headed by single mothers. Conversely, heterosexual men are the “top class” and do as they please. They are raised with more love and attention than their sisters and are spoiled and taught that they are entitled. Machismo encourages them to have multiple relationships and even multiple families, and the more you have the more respect you receive. Even prostitution is well protected by the officials for their advantage. One of our film locations, “the Line”, is a famous street of female prostitutes who openly offer themselves at the doors of a long line of tiny rooms ready to fill these men’s desires.

What about all the young gay men who don't fit in, who make only 5 dollars per day, with 2 to 3 hour commutes just to get to work, and never even knew a father? How are they going to make a life for themselves in Guatemala? As one interviewee said, “to find a love here is an impossible dream” – this is what JOSÉ is about.

With the fervent anti-Latin American sentiment in the United States and anti-immigrant views in general, we felt a great responsibility to leave the country to live and work from the “outside.” We wanted to better understand what these dynamics were all about and to use the power of film to tell stories from the “edges,” the most revealing location to us. In 2016 I sold my apartment and moved to Guatemala with my producing and writing partner George F. Roberson. Every day we visited and researched a new place. In 2017, we started to get in touch with the Guatemalan film industry to assemble a local crew. There were many tough days. For example, once we were told, “It is impossible to make this movie here – no actors will kiss another man on screen.” Yet as we built up our team and word spread about the project, interest in the film was overwhelming, with 600+ people attending castings from all over the country. Young people want things to change and open up and they put their hopes in JOSÉ.

## **AWARDS**

- Queer Lion at Venice Film Festival, Italy
- Special Jury Prize at Nantes 3 Continents Film Festival, France
- Special Jury Prize at Bratislava International Film Festival, Slovakia
- Best Narrative Feature & Best Script at Kashish Mumbai Queer Int'l Film Festival, India
- Best Narrative Feature at Boston LGBTQ Film Festival, U.S.
- Best Narrative Feature at Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival, U.S.
- Best Artistic Achievement at Kaleidoscope Film Festival, Little Rock, U.S.

## **SELECT ADDITONAL FESTIVAL SCREENINGS**

São Paulo International Film Festival  
Miami Film Festival  
Santa Barbara International Film Festival  
El Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, Havana, Cuba  
Outfest Los Angeles  
Hong Kong international Film Festival  
Festival de Cine de Bogotá  
Festival do Rio | Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival  
Thessaloniki International Film Festival

Göteborg Film Festival  
Queer Screen Mardi Gras Film Festival, Australia  
International Film Festival, Belgrade  
Glasgow Film Festival  
Dublin International Film Festival  
San Diego Latino Film Festival  
British Film Institute Flare - London LGBT Film Festival  
Amnesty International's Movies That Matter Film Festival, Holland  
Hong Kong International Film  
Chicago Latino Film Festival  
International Film Festival Panama  
Istanbul Film Festival  
Toronto Inside Out Film Festival  
Tel Aviv LGBT Film Festival  
Shanghai Pride Film Festival  
Taiwan International Queer Film Festival  
Vancouver Queer Film Festival, Centerpiece Gala  
American Film Institute Latino Film Festival

## **FULL CREDITS**

### *Crew:*

Director: Li Cheng  
Producer: George F Roberson, Li Cheng  
Writer: Li Cheng, George F Roberson  
Cinematographer: Paolo Giron  
Editor: Lenz Claire

Associate Producer: Willy De Leon  
Production Manager: Luis Andres Schwartz  
Assistant Director: Allisson Mazariegos

Location Manager: Juan Perez Keller  
Sound Mixer: Jacob Jimenez Borrilla  
Composer: Yao Chen

Assistant Producer: Mytian Ticas  
Casting Assistant: Erick Aldana, Pimiento Pimentel  
Wardrobe/Hair: Beatriz Lantan  
Property Master: Sofia Lantan  
Assistant Editor: Andres Delgado  
Composer assistant: Ao Xiang  
Spanish script translated by Erick Aldana  
Italian subtitle translated by Richard Pioli

Post-production sound:  
Audio Post-production: Sounder (CDMX)  
Sound Designer: Omar Juárez Espino  
Production coordinator: Tanya H. Vásquez  
SFX editor: Milton Aceves  
Dialogue editor: Omar Juárez Espino

Sound editor: Miguel Ángel Beltrán Arauz  
Foley: Sound Media Recording Studios  
1st. Foley Artists: Horacio Arreola Kuchenbecker  
2nd. Foley Assistant: Pedro Martínez del Paso  
Foley Recordist: Carlos Andrés Arellano Pichardo  
Rosales Foley Editor: Alejandra Ríos Rosales  
Re-recording Mixer: Alejandro Mayorquin

Music recording session: Juan Garcia Alvarez  
Recording engineer: Ignacio Sotelo  
Recording assistant: Carlos González  
Juan José Duarte López: FLUTE  
Oswaldo Cruz Contreras: VIOLA  
Omar Alvarez Martinez: VIOLIN  
Rodrigo Martin Duarte López: CELLO  
Diego Cajas Torres: CLARINET  
Eugenia Espinales Correa: HARP

Coloring, and finishing, etc (CDMX)  
Cinema Maquina - Natalia Mercado

*Cast:*

José - Enrique Salanic  
Luis - Manolo Herrera  
Mom - Ana Cecilia Mota  
Carlos - Esteban Lopez Ramirez  
Monica - Jhakelyn Waleska Gonzalez  
Manager - Cesar Lorenzo Yojcom Candido  
Juan - Juan Andres Molina Cardona  
Grandma - Alba Irene Lemus  
Dancing teacher - Carlos Humberto Fuentes Maldonado  
Step-sister - Jennifer Cecilia Amoia Mota  
Luis's mom - Evelyn Celinda Bautista Torres  
Bus boy - Rony Andres Saavedra  
Bus girl - Tania Guevara  
Guy on the motorcycle - Humberto Martinez  
Paolo - Jashua Belvino Arguesta Mejia  
Emma - Valeria Maribel Xutuc Reyes  
Unattractive guy - Mytian Ticas  
Dancer #1- Miguel Alfredo Granados Pivaral  
Dancer #2 - Luis Jonathan Santandrea Barrios  
Bus thief #1 - Luis Guzman  
Bus thief #2 - William Segura  
Bus victim - Guillermo Baechli  
Street thief #1 - Emanuel Díaz  
Street thief #2 - René Guirola Patzán  
Street thief #3 - Javier Ochoa Lopez