



## 108 (CUCHILLO DE PALO)

An Icarus Films Release

A film by Renate Costa Perdomo

*"Critic's Pick! The style is simple but the emotions highly sophisticated in "108 (Cuchillo de Palo)," Renate Costa's starting point is Rodolfo's mysterious death, but her quest opens a window onto a time of homophobia, torture and persecution." —The New York Times*

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## SYNOPSIS

When Rodolfo Costa was found naked on the floor of his home in Paraguay, he had been dead for days. Though ostensibly jobless, he had mysteriously amassed a small fortune. He also had a secret alias—Héctor Torres—and a secret life.

At the time, Renate Costa Perdomo was a young girl. Asked to select her uncle's burial garb, she found his closet empty. Surely the lively, colorfully-dressed Rodolfo she knew could not, as those around her claimed, have died of sadness.

In her powerful debut feature, which unfolds like a mystery novel, Costa Perdomo investigates the shadowy circumstances of Rodolfo's death. Witnesses and clues gently reveal Rodolfo's true identity as a persecuted gay man and the terrifying "108" homosexual blacklists that ruined lives, careers, and families.

The film is also a fascinating portrait of the relationship between the filmmaker, who has left Paraguay and now lives in Spain, and her now-divorced father, Pedro Costa, who remains in the family blacksmithing shop (pictured below). 108 is a moving illustration of the impact that the right-wing dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay from 1954 to 1989, had on the so-called "108"s living in the country as experienced by a single Paraguayan gay man and his family.



## SELECTED FESTIVALS

World Premiere, 2010 Berlin Film Festival  
Winner, Best Film, Buenos Aires Human Rights Film Festival  
Winner, Best Film, 2010 One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, Prague  
Official Selection, 2010 Documenta Madrid  
Official Selection, 2010 Festival de Cannes  
Winner, Best Ibero-American Documentary, 2010 Guadalajara Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2010 Espoo Ciné International Festival, Finland  
Official Selection, 2010 États Généraux du Film Documentaire, Lussas  
Official Selection, 2010 Latin Beat Film Festival, The Film Society of Lincoln Center  
Official Selection, 2010 Viennale  
Official Selection, 2010 Vancouver Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2010 Two Riverside Film Festival, Poland  
Official Selection, 2010 Bergen International Film Festival, Norway  
Official Selection, 2010 Miradas Doc, Spain  
Official Selection, 2010 CPH:DOX, Copenhagen  
Official Selection, 2010 IDFA Amsterdam  
Official Selection, 2010 Festival International du Film de Belfort  
Official Selection, 2010 Mostra de Cinema e Direitos Humanos na América do Sul  
Official Selection, 2010 BOZAR, Palais des Beaux Arts de Bruxelles, Belgium  
Official Selection, 2011 Zinegoak Bilabao  
Official Selection, 2011 Göteborg International Film Festival, Sweden  
Official Selection, 2011 Docs Barcelona  
Official Selection, 2011 IF Istanbul Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2011 Black Movie Geneva Film Festival, Switzerland  
Official Selection, 2011 Muestra de Cine Realizado por Mujeres de Zaragoza y Huesca  
Official Selection, 2011 San Diego Latino Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2011 Los Angeles Film Festival



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It was winter. My father called us urgently. My uncle's naked body had been found lying on the floor. A crowd had gathered at his corner. The police dispersed onlookers. My relatives were there. They asked me to go inside and choose the clothes in which he would be buried. I opened his wardrobe: It was empty. When I asked them what he died of they told me: "Of sadness". That answer contradicted all my memories of his life.

Rodolfo was the only one among my father's brothers who didn't want to be a blacksmith like my grandfather. In the Paraguay of the eighties, under Stroessner's dictatorship, he wanted to be a dancer.

This is the search for traces of his life and the discovery that he had been included in one of the "108 homosexual lists", arrested and tortured. Still today in Paraguay when someone calls you "108" they mean "faggot." For more than one generation, the duration of Stroessner's dictatorship, men who came under suspicion of being homosexual or against the regime were the favorite target of collaborators.

Rodolfo's story reveals a part of the hidden and silenced history of my country. A film where two generations come face to face: the generation that lived under the dictatorship and is keeping silent and the generation that, living in democracy, doesn't have anything to say because nobody remembers the real meaning of "108".

In the family and in the country, the same photographs have been hidden. As if nobody had the courage to question anything: the same way of looking down, the same prejudices, the same secrets under the carpet, the same silences. There is no film about this period. To keep silent in order to forget. To hide in order to erase memories.

A personal quest made of few certainties and many questions often without an answer. Questions that will allow us to discover the relationship we construct with the past, and how this relationship defines our own present. A film that is ultimately about each one of us.

"108" was born out of a reaction and the necessity of confronting the anger and pain that comes from seeing people's willful ignorance in the face of clear evidence. It arises from the need to film in order to bring to light that which is hidden, as a base from which to establish a commitment to reality.

In the blacksmith's workshop, Rodolfo was a "Cuchillo de Palo", "a useless knife", during the dictatorship, when anybody who thought or acted differently was subject to repression. A life condemned to silence, even within the family. "108" is an intense inner process in search of acceptance and reconciliation: the acceptance of Rodolfo, the father, society, and history, in order to reconcile with our past.

In front of the camera, people remember, contrasting their memories with the confused, associative memories of childhood. An attempt to reconstruct an image of the persecuted, the hidden, the "abnormal" in the words of the people who speak or avoid speaking, and by doing so, to capture the image of a society which was and still is imprisoned in a certain intolerance, silence and passivity.

Filming the present in order to recover a past that allows us to gain a better

understanding of where we come from and to recognize who we are. Life turns out to be made of shadows too. This is what gives it meaning.

Confronting what we haven't lived through means accepting that we carry the burden of history, family and society, whether we are aware of it or not. The film makes part of the "unofficial history" visible through a personal story, which proves to be universal. This issue is not only related to the past and to Paraguay. It can make us think about how society's and individual's acceptance of identity can be crucial to the construction of a community's way of thinking. The film is an immersion into the difference of the "other" and in this way, a reconciliation with what each of us is made of. In the end, we all have to learn how to live with our ghosts.

--Renate Costa Perdomo

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY



Born in Asunción, Paraguay in 1981, Renate Costa Perdomo graduated in Audiovisual Direction and Production from the Paraguayan Professional Institute. She studied Documentary Filmmaking at the International Film School of San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba. Since 2006 she has lived in Barcelona, where she obtained her Master in Creative Documentary from Pompeu Fabra University and developed "108".

In the field of documentary production, she worked in Paraguay as producer of "Cándido López – Los campos de batalla" (José Luis García, 2005; Audience Award at BAFICI; Best Film, Best Script and Best Documentary at Cándor Awards 2006) and as a member of the production staff of "Os caroneiros", a TV documentary co-produced by Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and

Paraguay. In fiction films she has collaborated in "Paraguayan Hammock" (Paz Encina, 2006; Fipresci Award at Cannes – Un Certain Regard).

As a director, she debuted in 2007 with the short documentary film "Che yvotyimi - Mi pequeña flor" which she also produced. She directed 13 episodes of the TV documentary series "Histories of the way", created by Jorge Rubiani and produced by Canal 4, Telefuturo. "108" is her first feature film.

## FILM REVIEWS

### **The New York Times**

By Jeannette Catsoulis

March 17, 2013 – Critic's Pick!

The style is simple but the emotions highly sophisticated in "108 (Cuchillo de Palo)," Renate Costa's insistently prodding documentary about the secret life of her gay uncle, Rodolfo Costa, under the oppressive government of the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner.

Her starting point is Rodolfo's mysterious death, but her quest opens a window onto a time of homophobia, torture and persecution. Found naked in his home in 1999, Rodolfo left a substantial bank balance yet no apparent source of income. Told he had died of sadness, Ms. Costa (who was 18 at the time) was bewildered, recalling her uncle as a joyful man who danced to Elvis records and loved colorful clothes. Determined to reconcile her memories with the evasions of her pious father, Pedro — Rodolfo's brother and his self-appointed moral guardian — Ms. Costa exposes a life of concealment and subterfuge, one that required the adoption of an alias to pursue.

"A homosexual is not a man," Pedro tells her (the film's Spanish title translates as "a useless knife"), recounting his violence toward his brother's friends with unwavering righteousness. In the company of some of those friends, however — still skittish more than a decade after Stroessner's departure — Ms. Costa discovers an uncle who sold hormones to transsexuals and dreamed of being an "artistic adviser." These voices from the shadows, supplemented by the warm candor of Rodolfo's dance teacher and his former neighbor, also reveal the still-lingering terror of gay blacklists (referred to as the 108) and horrifying punishments.

Patiently photographed by Carlos Vásquez, who bestows the same gentle attention on grainy snapshots and the beautifully ruined face of an aging drag queen, "108" peels back layers of delusion and dishonesty. In one emblematic scene the camera watches motionless as father and daughter fail to communicate, their silence becoming that of an entire generation.

### **PopMatters**

By Cynthia Fuchs

March 20, 2013 -- 9/10 Stars!

"What do you imagine?", Renate Costa asks her father. Pedro stands with his hand on his broom, in front of his workshop, where he and his brothers have labored since they inherited the business from their father. That is, all the brothers save for one, the one Renate here asks about. What did Rodolfo do, she wonders. Her father hesitates: "He wanted to be an artist."

As you come to see in Renate's extraordinary documentary, *108 (Cuchillo de Palo)*, screening this week at Maysles Cinema, both Renate's question and Pedro's answer are complicated by the fact Rodolfo was found dead and naked in his home in 1999, a loss that deeply affects the family to this day, but has never been quite explained. At the time of his death, Rodolfo had accumulated a bank account of some 32 million Paraguayan guaraní, an astounding amount: "I've worked hard all my life," says Pedro, "But even now, I don't have savings." Standing before the dark, wide door to his shop, Pedro has his hand on a broom in front of him, his arm forming a long diagonal across the screen as he leans his head back into shadows. "I don't want to imagine anything," he says.

And yet, as *108* reveals, Pedro and many other people who knew Rodolfo have and continue to imagine what he did and how he lived. Renate recalls that when she was a little girl, her father forbade her to spend time with her uncle; she saw Rodolfo anyway, sometimes following him, sometime peeping in at him through his window. She was intrigued, but had no understanding why. As the film reveals, her interest had to do with the fact that he was "forbidden", that he was homosexual at a time when this identity was punishable by arrest, torture, and death, in Paraguay during Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship.

Renate remembers her uncle as a treat, as an adult who was fun. Her father does his best not to remember him at all. As she tries to recover Rodolfo's past, she speaks with col. Several of them greet her, much like her father in this early scene, from a doorway or from behind a gate. This repetition of image is a function of the neighborhood housing in Asunción, but it also establishes a visual motif, shadows and gates, doors opening into darkness, and people standing in a literal thresholds, not quite in or out. Again and again, her interview subjects smile and share photos and stories with Renate, remembering her uncle and the difficulties he faced as a gay man.

As Renate peers into her uncle's lost life, she discovers what she hadn't quite imagined, that he was a vibrant, beloved personality, that he was a dancer and a dance instructor, that he was, one neighbor underlines, very attentive to his appearance and the state of his apartment. This is especially striking to Renate, for she remembers that when he died, she was assigned the task of finding an outfit for his corpse at the wake. When she walked into his home, however, she found nothing. "I walked to his wardrobe, to his memories," she narrates, "but it was empty."

As she speaks, you see the room, dimly lit, and the closet door, another threshold, so resonant with meaning, so daunting. Renate goes on to discover that Rodolfo suffered a particular kind of difficulty, both personal and widespread. She finds his name on a "108" list, the designation for homosexuals, and learns that he was arrested, imprisoned and tortured. When he emerged from prison, his friends say vaguely, he wasn't the same, that "He started to keep himself locked up." If we might find it hard to imagine what he was, or how he changed, Renate asks her father, who insists that this couldn't have happened to his brother. "I don't think they ever beat him up," he says.

As Renate and her father clash over what they are able or willing to imagine about Rodolfo, about the regime's practices or Stroesser's orders, the film reveals how such history comes to be repressed. It's frightening to contemplate, certainly, and also shapes your understanding of the world, your place in it, and your capacity to affect it.

Renate collects images of her uncle, family photos and a birthday party home movie, as well as a picture taken with his friends, a photo that shows a young, vibrant Rodolfo in a flamboyant dance costume. He was an artist, a dancer and instructor. He had friends, who here remember him tearfully, and with regrets. Pedro remains unable to answer many of her questions. "If you loved him," Pedro says of Rodolfo, "you have to set him straight, because you think what he's doing is wrong." And when that setting doesn't take, it appears that forgetting suffices—at least until Renate begins asking questions, looking back into the past, peeping over a threshold, to begin to piece together how her uncle came to be so alone.

Renate opens the film with another sort of threshold, a boat on the river that flows by Asunción. This is the city, she says, where her father and his brothers grew up, where she grew up as well. "I come to the river often," Renate says as you see distant lights

reflected on lapping water, "to turn my back on the city and look at what she doesn't see." Her film helps you to see and even as it helps her to remember.

### **Variety**

By Jay Weissberg

March 18, 2010

A personal docu with a broad scope, "108" is Renate Costa's gently probing exploration of her late gay uncle's life under the Paraguayan dictatorship. Alternately straightforward and impressionistic, Costa's moving take on homosexuality in a tyrannical country encompasses the aftermath of such repression on society at large, and thanks to a symbiotic relationship with d.p. Carlos Vasquez, the quietly inquisitive lensing picks up textures and details that reveal as much as the spoken word. This is an ideal candidate for fests looking to show that docus can be as full of quiet artistry as any feature.

"108" is the derogatory moniker Paraguayans use for homosexuals, a term stemming from the first of many lists of arrested (and frequently tortured) gay men that political strongman Alfredo Stroessner had posted in public places as a way of intensifying their humiliation. The docu's original-language title, "Cuchillo de palo," translates as "useless knife," an insulting phrase directed at Costa's uncle Rodolfo and, presumably, other gay men considered ineffectual members of society.

The helmer's ambivalent relationship to her home country (she now lives in Spain) is clear from the start, when she speaks of her penchant for going down to the Paraguay River and turning her back on the city of Asuncion to "look at what she doesn't see." She's returned to learn more about her father's brother Rodolfo, the black sheep of the family, found dead 15 years earlier. Ambiguity cloaks Rodolfo's life, and while Costa allows hints to surface, she maintains a confluence of facts and rumors left unsupported or unexplored.

The reasons for this are clear: In Paraguay, 21 years after Stroessner's fall, silence is still the default mode, and self-censorship remains ingrained. The shadow world in which Rodolfo and other gay men lived in Paraguay still exists, and while there's a glimmer of hope as more men and women come out, theirs is still a parallel universe. Entrenched in a blinkered evangelism, Costa's father Pedro speaks proudly of beating up his brother's friends in the belief he could keep Rodolfo from acting on his desires -- the helmer isn't squeamish about revealing her anger toward her father, who evasively returns her questions with talk of God.

Costa understands the power of awkward silences, holding the camera to explore discomfort and her own accusatory gaze. Even when discussing the horrors of the dictatorship, she maintains an unwavering calm that cuts through the hedging and the calculated avoidance of larger issues -- hers is a selfless righteousness that nevertheless confronts her personal history.

Via a felicitous partnership with lenser Vasquez, the docu plays with grainy textures and unexpected focal points to heighten a sense of melancholy loss, fully contained in artfully composed images without resorting to artificially manipulative music.

## **The House Next Door**

By Oscar Moralde

June 22, 2011

The story told in the opening moments of the documentary *108* is structured like a whodunit: In Paraguay's capital of Asunción, Rodolfo Costa was found dead and naked on the floor, his closets empty. He had an alias, Hector Torres, and his bank account contained a small, unexplained fortune. But what interests Renate Costa, niece of Rodolfo and director of the film, is not so much the circumstances of the man's death, but of his life. Costa uses her uncle as a way into exploring the weight of oppression and silence that lingers not only in her family, but in Paraguayan society, which through Costa's lens still labors under the mentality of a police state.

Costa was a gay man under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner Matiauda, which brutally persecuted gays; the *108* refers to the number of names on the first of many infamous "homosexuals lists," a number which has become a slur and effacement. Costa shows us that the number has become so charged that many rooms in Asunción hotels go from 107 to 109. Even after the transition to democracy and end of official persecution, the homophobic legacy remains, personified in Renate's father Pedro. The man is utterly sincere in his Catholic condescension, telling us he truly believes he was protecting and saving his brother when they were younger by beating up his gay friends.

Costa's conversations with her father form one strand of the story, as they embark on father-daughter fishing trips and kite flights that seem quite sad in the muddy pixelated twilight captured by her camera. They're interspersed with debates that always end up with a father citing dogma and a daughter reluctant to engage, a wall of silence rising up between the two.

The other strand of the film comes as Costa finds the list of names that her uncle was on and she tries to speak to the people who were part of his shadow life, the ones who knew him as Hector Torres. They tell their own stories of marginalization and persecution, and even in the present, some of them want to remain in the shadows. They know that Costa's father speaks the truth in saying there is a difference between politics and mentality. One may have changed, but the other hasn't. Yet when presented with the list of names, these compatriots of Rodolfo's ask for copies; to them it's a badge of courage, of having made it through the worst.

Even though Costa's film delves deep into the political psychology of a police state (the homosexual roundups often came as a response to and distraction from brutal crimes, for they served as convenient scapegoats), her story is ultimately a personal one. She knows that she's a character, however peripheral, in a family drama, and she structures and shoots the piece to accentuate that. She examines old photographs and films of her uncle, trying to deconstruct the front the man put up to survive. She tries to connect to her father, to unpack the enigma through the bonds of family. But they always hit an impasse. One moment is emblematic of the father-daughter relationship: They sit across from each other, without making eye contact, and their silence stretches for what seems like an eternity until Renate breaks it with a simple observation ("It's so hard to talk to you").

## Hammer to Nail

By Paul Sbrizzi

June 17, 2011

Rodolfo Costa, a middle-aged Paraguayan man, was found naked and dead on the floor of the apartment where he lived alone. His closet was empty of clothes and people said he died “of a broken heart.” In her documentary *108 Cuchillo de Palo*, filmmaker Renate Costa, his niece, undertakes a fascinating and painful investigation into who Rodolfo really was, a process that leads her into the cold black heart of the brutal dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay from 1954 to 1989.

The film's leitmotif is Costa's series of interviews with her father, Pedro, Rodolfo's brother. He's a tangle of contradictions: warm, engaging, and somewhat childlike, but also maddeningly evasive, wielding a great arsenal of rationalizations and smokescreens, and using Catholic non-sequiturs as his final line of defense. To a question about why Rodolfo's closet was empty when he died, he replies, “I don't know if he owned many clothes...”

Costa's own memories of Rodolfo are sketchy but intriguing—he was the only one of her uncles who refused to work in the family blacksmith shop, and was therefore considered a “cuchillo de palo” (translation: “a wooden knife”—i.e., a useless object). She was forbidden from going into his home.

The film jolts into action when Costa questions her father on a rooftop, the late afternoon sun at her back and her disbelieving face on camera as he drops the bomb: he used to follow Rodolfo around and beat up his gay friends in order to “protect” him. He assures her that homosexuality is a very serious matter, and attempts to end the discussion with the words “that's how it is.”

In the continuation of this shot, the psychological aftermath of the Stroessner years seems to unfold on Pedro's face: he affects a strange series of expressions, starts to say something but stops himself, looks down and smiles, then walks off camera, busying himself with some sweeping. He seems to suffer from a kind of PTSD with equal parts paranoia and embarrassment. The moral justifications of another time no longer carry much weight, and his internal struggle with his sense of guilt is apparent and disturbing.

Through interviews with gay friends of her uncle, some of whom are afraid to appear on camera, Costa is able to piece together aspects of his life: his ambition to be a dancer, his relationships with men. She begins to uncover the specific horrors he endured. He was included in one of the infamous lists of homosexuals, the “108” lists (the first of which included 108 names), and was rounded up and tortured. But new mysteries and intrigues emerge. What did Rodolfo do for money, and how did he amass an enormous savings account?

Again Costa confronts her father, and accuses him of being sick. To this he violently agrees, crying out, “My mind and heart are perverse; I'm a sinner!” and then invokes the Holy Spirit to justify his attitudes, before mincingly spouting a list of Rodolfo's friends, “Enriquito, Josecito, Alfredito...” as if the very sound of their names were a good reason to beat them up.

Costa's investigation hones in on a dark, dirty secret within the Stroessner regime—a horrible, hypocritical miscarriage of justice that led to the “108” roundups. Interestingly, perhaps the most candid witness is a drag queen prostitute who points out that, while drag queens were often abused by police, they were the only

members of society immune to blackmail. They were already out “to the four winds.”

Costa herself cuts a powerful figure, her determined, laser-beam stare demanding nothing short of the full truth. She shows how Paraguay, despite becoming democratic and more accepting, hasn't made a clean break with its violent past like Chile or Argentina; civil rights are still exercised with great caution. She masterfully weaves together the personal and the political, and eventually finds a few simple but powerful words that sum up the need for her father and his generation to come to terms with their personal responsibility for colluding with the government, but also for her own generation's need to find understanding, compassion and forgiveness.



## FILM CREDITS

Director and Writer: RENATE COSTA PERDOMO  
Producers: MARTA ANDREU & SUSANA BENITO  
Cinematographer: CARLOS VÁSQUEZ  
Sound: AMANDA VILLAVIEJA  
Editing: NÚRIA ESQUERRA & CARLOS GARCÍA  
Original music: BERTA ROJAS PLAYS THE ALLEGRO  
FROM "LA CATEDRAL" BY AGUSTÍN BARRIOS  
With: PEDRO COSTA  
RENATE COSTA PERDOMO  
MANUEL CUENCCA  
Produced by: ESTUDI PLAYTIME  
Coproduced by: TVC TELEVISIO DE CATALUNYA  
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