



Mama Bears

*a documentary by
Daresha Kyi*





Produced & Directed by Daresha Kyi
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Mama Bears is the new, feature-length documentary work-in-progress by Daresha Kyi, the co-director and co-producer of the award-winning film, *Chavela*, which chronicles the life of iconic, gender-bending singer Chavela Vargas; who became notorious when she went onstage wearing pants, carrying a pistol, drinking tequila, and singing love songs to women in the 1940s macho, mostly Roman Catholic Mexico.

Mama Bears explores how the lives of conservative, Christian mothers are utterly transformed when they decide to love, support, and advocate on behalf of their LGBTQ children. They may have grown up as fundamentalist, evangelical Christians, but when given the choice between their religious beliefs and the lives of their children, mama bears put their kids first. Even though it may challenge everything they've been taught, shatter their belief systems, and rip their worlds apart, these courageous, unsung heroines are willing to risk losing friends, family, and faith to keep their children safe.

Connected through private Facebook support groups, the women call each other "mama bears" because of the ferocity with which they fight to protect their children. Galvanized by love, they agitate and advocate for LGBTQ rights by signing petitions, turning up at town hall meetings, holding press conferences, fighting discriminatory laws, marching in protests and pride parades, and meeting with civic and faith leaders to foster more inclusion and acceptance.

Mama Bears will profile mama bears from diverse backgrounds and at different stages on the journey toward acceptance. Shot in an intimate, poetic visual style, using home movies, photographs, personal journals and blogs, interviews, and vérité footage, *Mama Bears* will uplift, enlighten, challenge, and engage viewers and jumpstart crucial dialogues between conservative Christian and LGBTQ communities across America. Through this vitally important film these amazing mothers, their children, members of the LGBTQ community (who have suffered the devastating effects of familial rejection), and affirming clergy and communities will touch the hearts of viewers regardless of their religious beliefs.



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Character Bios



ultimately cost.

Whitney (Florida) a new mom to the "mama bears" group, had the wind knocked out of her when her transgender son came out. Gabe had hidden his trans status for three years—during which he had researched it from every angle, including biblically. "My mind swirled and swirled. I saw spots," she writes. But when Gabe told her he had finally come out because, "My choice was either to tell you or die," she rallied to support her child. Whitney's story illustrates what the early stages and process of acceptance look like—and what they can



Sara (Oklahoma) lay in bed weeping for months after her son, Parker, came out as gay because she believed he was doomed to eternal damnation. But after five months, Parker said, "You know, Mom, I had to suck it up for twenty-one years to be your son. Now I need you to suck it up and be my mom." That did it. Once she examined the Bible and could find no justification for the condemnation of homosexuality, she left her church, officially "came out" in support of her son (losing friends and family members), and joined a "mama bears" group. When she saw the stats about how many LGBTQ people were rejected by their families, she and a posse of like-minded mama bears started marching in pride parades with a "Free Mom Hugs" banner. After Trump's election, she took the banner on the road in a nine-city "Free Mom Hugs Tour." Sara has become a fierce advocate for LGBTQ rights and is a shining example of what a mama bear can accomplish.



Robbin (North Carolina) was born to a white mother and an African American father. Raised in a predominantly white community in Florida, she grew up in a politically conservative, evangelical church where homosexuality was considered "the ultimate sin." When her son, Chris, came out to her as a gay man, her response was simple, "I love you, but we don't believe in that." Today her heart breaks when she remembers the look on his face. When he turned eighteen, Chris joined the military, did a tour in Iraq, and came home and tried to hang himself. That's when Robbin realized that if she didn't accept her son she would lose him forever. Robbin's story highlights the potentially disastrous consequence of following the current conservative Christian teachings on LGBTQ children—and how to overcome them.



Kimberly (Texas) says she was "born a Republican" who believed it was her duty as a Christian Southern woman to show up and vote for the conservative party ticket. She also bought wholesale into the church's teachings that the "lifestyles" of LGBTQ people were a choice and that Satan "had ahold of them." But everything changed the day she overheard her four-year-old son, who she had been punishing for insisting that he was a girl since the age of three, praying to die. When she learned about gender dysphoria and read that 41 percent of transgender children attempt suicide due to bullying, social rejection, and depression, she became determined to accept and support her child at any cost. It's been a long, sometimes painful journey, but Kimberly has become such a fierce advocate for LGBTQ rights that she recently won an "Activist of the Year" award from a Houston-based LGBTQ organization.

Director's Bio



Daresha Kyi is an award-winning filmmaker who writes, produces, and directs for film and television in Spanish and English. A natural born storyteller, she made her first short experimental film, *Schism*, at the age of sixteen. At nineteen she was hired as a PA on a documentary film and fell in love with the medium.

She enrolled in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where she was awarded a Tisch Scholars fellowship, and graduated with a degree in Film & TV. Her award-winning student film, *The Thinnest Line*, helped her receive grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and other foundations to fund her second film, *Land Where My Fathers Died*, which she wrote, produced, directed,

and co-starred in with Isaiah Washington in his on-camera debut. Based upon this multiple award-winning short, she was chosen in a nationwide search to receive a full fellowship from TriStar Pictures to attend the Directors Program at The American Film Institute (AFI). She also produced a documentary short about violence against lesbians called *Just Because of Who We Are* as part of a women's collective called Heramedia. Her projects have received funding from NEA, NBPC, NYSCA, NYFA, Frameline, Arch & Bruce Brown Foundation, Jerome Foundation, and the Women in Film Finishing Fund, among others.

Most recently Daresha co-directed and co-produced her first feature documentary, *Chavela*, with Emmy-nominated filmmaker Catherine Gund. *Chavela* celebrates the wild, rollercoaster life of badass singer Chavela Vargas, who jumped onstage wearing pants, a poncho, and a pistol, smoked cigars, and drank tequila while she boldly sang love songs to women in the early 1950s in a very conservation, muy macho Mexico. The film was nominated for the **Teddy** award and won the 2nd place **Panorama Audience Award** at the 2017 Berlinale, as well as **Best Documentary** and **Audience Awards** at Outfest and the San Francisco LGBTQ Film Festival. *Chavela* secured theatrical distribution domestically and internationally and was screened on 160 screens in 42 countries. It is currently streaming on Amazon Prime, GooglePlay, iTunes, YouTube, and Vudu. Daresha and Catherine also co-produced *Dispatches from Cleveland* in 2017 for Aubin Pictures.

In addition to her film work, Daresha has produced award-winning television for WE, AMC, Oxygen, E!, Telemundo, Bravo, and FUSE, among many other channels. Most recently she served as head writer for the weekend morning talk show, *Arise & Shine*, hosted by Richard Pryor's daughter, Rain Pryor; as a story producer on *La Voz Kids* (Telemundo's *The Voice* for children); and as a field producer on FXX's *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*.

She is currently a fellow in the Firelight Media Documentary Lab.

Production Team

LAURA TATHAM: CO-PRODUCER



Since making the move to film production in 2015, Laura has worked on a number of social justice projects. She is currently co-producing *Mama Bears* and has previously served as the associate producer for two feature-length documentaries—*Chavela* (which had its world premiere at the 2017 Berlinale) and *Dispatches from Cleveland* (which partnered with Color of Change for their #Voting WhileBlack viral campaign). Laura also acted as the NYC production office manager for *American Rhapsody*, a series of narrative shorts currently in post-production.

Originally hailing from the world of book publishing, Laura has spent nearly ten years in both the corporate (Simon & Schuster) and nonprofit (Feminist Press) publishing sectors, working on countless *New York Times* bestsellers, as well as Lambda Literary and Pulitzer Prize-winning works.

Laura holds a master's degree in American Literature from Drew University. She lives in Jersey City with her loving partner and her cat.

AMY BENCH: CINEMATOGRAPHER



Amy Bench is a cinematographer and filmmaker based in Austin, Texas. She has been twice nominated for the Kodak Excellence in Cinematography Award and has won grants from the Texas Filmmaker's Production Fund, Women in Film/Dallas, and the Department of Education's Jacob K. Davits Fellowship, and is a member of the Austin Contemporary's multidisciplinary artist group The Crit Group. She lensed the feature films *Loves Her Gun*, which premiered at SXSW in 2013, and *The Golden Rut*, which premiered at the Austin Film Festival in 2016, and the short *Bad at Dancing*, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2015. Amy is currently in pre-production on her third feature film, and was recently named a "DP

on the Rise" by *Paste* magazine.

Amy's work has screened at festivals worldwide, including Sundance, Berlin, New York, and MOMA/PS1. Most recently *An Uncertain Future*, on which she served as DP, won the SXSW 2018 award for Best Texas Short.

Selected Press

VARIETY

Berlin Film Review: 'Chavela'

Jay Weissberg FEBRUARY 11, 2017 | 11:47AM PT

Legendary Mexican singer Chavela Vargas receives justifiably laudatory treatment in this documentary celebrating her refusal to compromise together with her musical brilliance.

In 1992, [Catherine Gund](#) met legendary Mexican singer [Chavela](#) Vargas and filmed her with



a simple video camera; after Chavela's death at the age of 93 in 2012, she unearthed the footage and discovered she had an invaluable record of the

great artist candidly responding to questions ranging from career details to her philosophy on life. This fuzzy material forms the core of "Chavela," a justifiably laudatory love letter to a woman whose voice drew forth a song's every emotion, and whose life as a trouser-wearing lesbian celebrity became an inspiration throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Loaded with concert footage, interviews with friends, and terrific photos, this well-balanced documentary directed by Gund and [Daresha Kyi](#) celebrates the woman and the legend, and if the stock archival material doesn't always fit, few will mind. Festival play is assured, but pubcasters and specialty art houses should also take note.

After watching the film, it's hard to separate the image of the woman from the sounds she made. She had two zeniths: During the first, she already wore her scandalous pants and signature poncho, her hair pulled back to emphasize her smooth, confident face. This was the time when she was the lover of Frida Kahlo, among many others. Decades later,

following a 12-year hiatus spent in an alcoholic spiral, she returned with short white hair and lined features, even more determined than before to conquer the world.

Gund's method of conquest was her voice. Fellow singer Eugenia León talks about how Chavela tossed aside the trappings and embellishments of traditional Mexican song (and presentation), zeroing in on the wounded soul called forth by "ranchera" music. Gund ("Born to Fly") and Kyi open with a 1991 Mexico City concert in which the 72-year-old sings with an emotion that, despite the exaggeration of performance, draws forth the wellspring of pain that comes from "soledad," or "solitude." Even as her voice became less supple, she was able to pour into her songs the intensity of loves that caused unwelcome anguish yet unrenounceable sorrow.

Chavela's pain began early in life, when her parents withheld affection and everyone denigrated her boyish manner. Full of rage and realizing that her birthplace, Costa Rica, was too provincial for her tastes, she went to Mexico where she was taken up by the cabaret world. At first she played the game, wearing gowns and high heels, but her career properly took off when she found her true style and became the bohemian darling of the café crowd. That's also when the drinking began, well-partnered by master ranchera singer-songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez.

When the alcoholism became chronic, her career took a nosedive. Broke and alone, she seems to have lived in a haze, rescued by her relationship with lawyer Alicia Pérez Duarte. When that ended, nursing a major new sorrow, she resurrected herself, this time in Spain where Pedro Almodóvar did much to spread the word. Filled with a new hunger and lapping up the adulatory audiences, Chavela finally transitioned from cabaret houses to leading concert halls, performing until practically her last breath.

The documentary packs in a lot of information but doesn't feel crowded, and the concert footage will help recruit legions of new fans. Many undoubtedly will first be drawn to the woman's bravery, her insistence on living life her way, and though she didn't publicly acknowledge her sexuality until she was 81, she presented herself in a manner that left little ambiguity on that score. What makes Chavela so special though is the way she exposed her soul in song: as a lesbian unwilling and unable to hide, and also as a wounded woman who recalls lost loves with pain but without regret.

Gund and Kyi load up on evocative photos and insightful interviews, though Gund's own recordings from 1992 are the most revelatory in demonstrating Chavela's mix of confidence with injured pride and a flirtatious desire to control her own legend. The only place the directors trip up is in the generic archive footage used to set each place in time and space: The period is often wrong, and the blandness of the images never really illustrates the cities where Chavela's outsized presence was felt.

SCREENDAILY

Documentary about the extraordinary life of Mexican singer Chavela Vargas, adopted by Almodóvar in her late-life revival

Dirs: Catherine Gund, Daresha Kyi. US, 2017. 90 mins

'Solitude', 'pain' and 'desolation' are key words in the repertoire of Mexican singing legend Chavela Vargas but – as an admirer comments in documentary *Chavela* – dark feelings can be hugely cathartic. And indeed this depiction of the singer's chequered life turns out intensely celebratory, and will send fans and newcomers alike rushing to the back catalogue of a great vocalist whose international reputation received a boost when Pedro Almodóvar started featuring her songs in his work.

Certainly, films about the expression of agony rarely feel this uplifting

Comprised of interviews, archive footage and stills, plus footage of Vargas herself, both in interview and in full flight on stage, *Chavela* is a vivid portrayal of an artistic, social and sexual rebel whose difficult but finally triumphant life finally proved that there sometimes really are second acts in showbiz lives. A must for festivals with either LGBT or musical focuses, *Chavela* should spread considerably wider.

Formally conventional, but never less than involving, the film – by the Aubin Pictures team behind documentaries including 2014's *Born to Fly: Elizabeth Streb vs. Gravity* - begins with Vargas interviewed in her Mexico home in 1991, aged 71. She insists that she'll talk about "where I'm going, not where I've been" – words that make sense when we realise that, even this late in life, she had a lot of career ahead of her.

The film traces her life from her birth in 1919 as Isabel Vargas Lozano in Costa Rica, beginning with her parents rejecting her because of her boyish demeanour. As a young woman she moved to Mexico City, where she sang in the capital's cabarets, and where her career really took off once she rejected the conventional feminine mannerisms of Mexican female singers, dressing in a more masculine style with trousers and her trademark poncho, and establishing the persona that allowed her to be a deeply moving interpreter of songs of love and loss (the lyrics of her repertoire, translated in English on screen, show a remarkable consistency in theme and intensity).

The film isn't always as informative as it might be about Vargas's dark side – although long-term lover Alicia Elena Pérez talks about a propensity to violence – but it's clear that she had one. The singer, emerging as witty and acute in her self-knowledge, says she sees 'Chavela', her persona that emerged in the early 40s, as "a bull... kicking against life". Vargas's hard living emerges vividly, whether it's the lifelong drinking that began in the bohemia of Mexico City, or her career as a formidable lesbian seducer with a penchant for

the wives of eminent men, as well as celebrities, including – she insists – Ava Gardner. She also had a close friendship, at the very least, with Frida Kahlo.

For quite a stretch, Vargas's story looks set to be a classic showbiz tragedy, as drink and poverty lead her into reclusion in the town of Tepoztlan. But after 12 years' silence, she returned triumphantly to the stage in Mexico, then visited Spain, where she was discovered by, among others, Almodóvar, who is seen calling her "a faithful representation of myself." The Spanish director helped promote the remarkable comeback that Vargas staged in her 70s, and other friends from this period including singer-actor (and sometime Almodóvar star) Miguel Bosé. There are also testimonies from lovers and associates, notably lawyer Perez, who refers to her former partner as 'Senñora' - "with a capital S," she insists – and hints at the singer's intractably difficult personality.

The performances – some seen in rough archive footage, although the sound is always high quality – show just what the qualities were that made Vargas's singing so moving. The sheer intensity of her singing would certainly seem to testify to the life of suffering she experienced, whether from parental rejection or from the difficulty of living in Mexico as a lesbian; but whether that intensity is the result of an agonized soul, or more simply an effect of phrasing and consummate performance skills, is a matter for listeners to decide. By the time she died in 2012, having at last gone public about her lesbian identity, Vargas was a legendary figure – and the film makes a case for her being one of Latin song's true immortals. Certainly, films about the expression of agony rarely feel this uplifting.



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Berlin film festival 2017 roundup: an SOS for a world without walls

Jonathan Romney

Sunday 19 February 2017 03.00 EST

The Berlinale has always had a reputation as a festival that takes its politics seriously, but this year the politics were bound to be a little more urgent than usual. This was, after all, the first A-list European festival to happen since the Trump inauguration. As competition jury member Diego Luna, the Mexican star of *Rogue One*, pointed out: “There’s no better place to send a message than Berlin” – a city that knows its fair share about the futility of walls.

The jury – headed by director Paul Verhoeven and including Maggie Gyllenhaal and artist Olafur Eliasson – may or may not choose the most political films in contention, but they will have noticed how many films seemed to use the metaphor of a social event to make a point about the state of the world.

(clipped) . . .

Finally, an unmissable documentary. *Chavela*, by Catherine Gund and Daresha Kyi, is a portrait of the late Mexican singer Chavela Vargas, a near-forgotten artist whose career underwent a dazzling late-life revival in the 1990s, not least because she became a muse to Pedro Almodóvar. We learn that the young Vargas discovered her performing self when she shocked Mexico City by wearing a masculine combination of trousers and poncho, and her ranchero-style ballads of pain and desolation seem to have made her irresistible as a lover to half the married women in Mexico’s beau monde – as well as, she claimed, to Ava Gardner. The songs are wonderful, testimony to a pioneer who is probably Donald Trump’s ultimate nightmare – a Mexican lesbian diva who can wring your very soul.

Frameline41 Awards Announced

**Jury: First Feature, Outstanding Documentary | Frameline41 AT&T
Audience Awards: Best Short, Best Documentary, & Best Feature**

JUN 27, 2017

Frameline is thrilled to announce the winners of this year's jury and Frameline41 AT&T Audience Awards. In case you want to see this in video form, you can watch the livestream of the announcement on our Facebook page or at the bottom of this post.



Frameline41 Jury Awards

CHAVELA

Honorable Mention, Frameline41 Documentary Jury

Directed by: Catherine Gund & Daresha Kyi

Frameline41 AT&T Audience Awards

CHAVELA

Frameline41 AT&T Audience Award - Best Documentary

Directed by: Catherine Gund & Daresha Kyi

This is a larger-than-life portrait of one of the toughest, most talented singers of her generation, the iconic chanteuse and sexual outlaw Chavela Vargas - a favorite of filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. She was a macha lesbian who forcefully played by her own subversive rules

Jul. 17, 2017 / Movies News Desk



Outfest - the Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization promoting equality by creating, sharing, and protecting LGBT stories on the screen - has announced the award winners of its 2017 Outfest Los Angeles LGBT Film Festival, presented by HBO.

The nation's leading LGBT festival ran from July 6th to July 16th. The 2017 Outfest Los Angeles LGBT Film Festival closes tonight with Trudie Styler's comedic Freak Show, starring Bette Midler, Alex Lawther, AnnaSophia Robb, Abigail Breslin, Ian Nelson, Larry Pine and featuring a cameo from Laverne Cox.

Outfest Los Angeles 2017 Award Winners

Audience Awards

Best Documentary Short Audience Award

Little Potato, Directed by Wes Hurley and Nate Miller

Best Documentary Feature Audience Award

Chavela, Directed by Catherine Gund and Daresha Kyi

Best Narrative Short Audience Award

The Real Thing, Directed by Brandon Kelley

Best Narrative Audience Award

The Chances, Created by Shoshanna Stern and Josh Feldman, Directed by Anna Kerrigan

Best Experimental Short Audience Award

Pussy, Directed by Renata Gasiorowska

Audience Award for Best First U.S. Narrative Feature

A Million Happy Nows, Directed by Albert Alarr

Grand Jury Awards

Documentary Grand Jury Prize

We award Best Documentary Feature to **Chavela**, for its artistic style that elegantly and poetically brings together raw archival footage, animation, editing, and sound design.