

## Tribal Side of Drug Trafficking in 'Birds of Passage'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 17, 2019 - 9:27pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – One of the overriding characteristics in the movies, when it comes to drug traffickers, is the stereotypical image of a fat and corrupt cartel leader who usually have machine gun wielding henchmen and bikini clad groupies. “Birds of Passage” goes back to the business of the drug trade, but it is about the families that controlled the territorial borders during that key era, and the basis of that control in ancient tribalism.

That era was the 1970s and early '80s, when marijuana was the game, and the thirst for this mainstreaming high was at its illegal peak ... these were essentially the folks that controlled the drug trade before some powerful pot heads were able to get big money and legitimacy/legality into the game. The tribes that controlled the territories had their own issues, and was involved in a chess-like power play of their own. The film uses a different approach, showing the old ways of an ancient Columbian tribe members becoming greed heads and capitalist pigs in just one decade. Their guilt over the corruption seems to be their downfall, coupled with a bizarre honor that says war is imminent at any moment, and executions are carried out without tears.

The film begins with a traditional mating dance. Zaida (Natalia Reyes) seduces Rapayet (Jose Acosta) in this ritual, and they immediately become a Romeo and Juliet (different tribes) couple. Rapayet manages to win over the “Wayuu” by gaining a cash flow through marijuana transport to the U.S.– pointedly and cynically shown with American hippie Peace Corp volunteers in partnership.



The Tribe that Couldn't Traffic Straight in 'Birds of Passage'

Photo credit: *The Orchard*



The film is divided into five “chapters” (cantos) ... Wild Grass, The Graves, Prosperity, The War and Limbo. The titles are clues to the action, as a poor-but-united tribe is slowly ripped apart by the influx of new drug money. The higher they fly, the deeper they go into isolation and fear – especially the Wayuu matriarch Ursula (Carmina Martinez) –until it ends up in Limbo.

This film is way more personal and human than most drug cartel stories, but it is not immune to the sameness of imagery – guns, standoffs and murder – that characterize the typical organized crime in that genre of story. The uniqueness lies in the ancient Wayuu tribe and their ritualistic ways. Ritual that occurred in the days of fighting over food and water, and bled into the conflict of newly minted cash in the drug trade. Even as the ceremony seemed ancient, the survival that comes from the practice is essential.

The main figures in the stories – Zaida, Rapayet and Ursula – filter the weird circumstance of going from poverty to extreme wealth with more guilt than true pleasure. Their awesome estate becomes a prison during the war/limbo chapters, and their humility afterward is hardened by having had nothing (as in “when you ain’t got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose”), and their “enemy” gets no pleasure in “victory.”



Let's Do It: The Dance of Destiny in 'Birds of Passage'

Photo credit: The Orchard

As mentioned, there are some of the typical drug cartel stuff – if the subject of drug cartels can be described as “typical” – that has been seen in other films (“Traffic,” “Sicario,” etc.) and those are the weak links in the chapters. Wait a minute, the cousin is crazy with money and power, so when and how will he die? The payoff to that question becomes so obvious that it’s almost a weird choreography. However, the family and tribe’s journey counteracts those moments, I wish the creators could have stayed away from the other stuff, and go even more inward. Maybe that part is not the point, but there always has to be a negative “lesson” for crimes in these films. They were just fulfilling a product need, just like Snickers candy bars.

So much waste, in lives, incarceration and bitter acrimony. And finally, enough people finally end the “weed is dangerous” prohibition and a major tobacco company just invested a billion dollars in cornering the “market.” Expect a film about that in the future, mostly redacted.

*“Birds of Passage” continues in Chicago through March 21st at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport. For more details and tickets, [click here](#). [14] See local listings for theaters and show times in other markets. Featuring Carmina Martinez, Natalia Reyes, Jose Acosta, Jhon Narvaez and Jose Vincente Cotes. Written by Maria Camila Arias and Jacques Toulemonde Vidal. Directed by Cristina Gallega and Ciro Guerra. Rated “R”*



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