

# Sensual morality play

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue



Latino cinema has a long tradition of tweaking the Catholic Church for its supposed hypocrisy, involvement in secular politics and manhandling of sexual issues. Thirty-nine-year-old Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel now joins in with her own rants on the rigidity and absoluteness of Catholic doctrine, especially as it pertains to children.

Martel's latest film, *The Holy Girl* (*La Niña Santa*), takes place in the fictitious Argentine town of La Cienaga (which translates as "The Swamp," and is also the name of Martel's first film). It plays out in and around the decaying Hotel Termas, which is owned and operated by the once-glamorous but rapidly aging Helena (Mercedes Moran, in a tragic, multilayered performance), her exasperated brother, Freddy (Alejandro Urdapilleta), and her 14-year-old daughter, Amalia (the enigmatic Maria Alche). As the film begins, they are all having relationship problems: Helena with her former husband, who has just fathered twins with his young new wife; Freddy with his former wife, who has run off to Chile with his children; and Amalia with God, as she tries to figure out what God wants from her and what she is supposed to make of the lessons she is learning at her daily Bible classes.

The hotel is hosting a convention of ear, nose and throat doctors. One of these is the soft-spoken Dr. Jano (Carlos Belloso), a married man with children who is known to

his fellow physicians as dedicated and hard-working. What they don't know about their colleague is that he likes to rub up against young teenage girls in public places, which he does one afternoon during an outdoor street concert. Little does he know that the target of his tawdry attack is Amalia (he has never met her), who immediately recognizes him from the hotel.

Although Amalia could ignore Dr. Jano's assault, confront him or tell her mother about it, Amalia sees the violation as a "vocation," an opportunity to answer the many questions she has about her spiritual mission. In that convoluted—and very teenage—way, she can experience the sexual charge she has clearly gotten from her encounter with the handsome doctor, while also figuring out how she can save him from his sinful lifestyle.

The rest of *The Holy Girl* is like a complex suspense novel, with more complications tossed in every few minutes. Helena finds herself attracted to the suddenly frisky Dr. Jano, who seems willing to play around during his hotel stay. Once he realizes that the girl he has accosted is Helena's daughter, his passion rapidly cools. Meanwhile, Amalia tells her best friend, Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg), about Dr. Jano, making her promise not to say anything, a vow of friendship that gets tested once Josefina gets caught in a sexual quandary of her own.

*The Holy Girl* is a demanding piece of cinema. Unlike most mainstream filmmakers, Martel doesn't help viewers early on by providing key information about relationships or a back-story. As a result, we are still trying to figure out who is who and how they relate to each other even as Martel is moving forward with her rapidly shifting morality play, which she claims is about "a secret relationship with the divine." Even the key dramatic point, where Amalia convinces herself that Dr. Jano has been sent to her as a spiritual test, is kept covered up for awhile, buried beneath the whisperings of teenage girls who are just now discovering their sexual longings.

Adding spice to the mix is the photographic style—heavy on tight close-ups—that Martel employs in tandem with her cinematographer, Felix Monti. It is not uncommon for heads to be cut off in medium shots or the framing of a shot to be way off-center. This marriage of style and content is just as radical as her fragmented storytelling technique.

*The Holy Girl* has no interest in presenting a neatly wrapped ending in which the difficult questions are answered. Though we can pretty much guess what will happen to Dr. Jano if and when his crime is revealed, the mystery of Amalia's

ultimate motivation remains as ambiguous as the lessons that she learns at her Bible classes—lessons that can be used for good if they are understood, or for serious mischief when viewed through the prism of a 14-year-old mind.