

## Preview: Arianna

We're happy to give our readers an early bird peek at this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival line-up, starting with our partner film, *Arianna*. Writer Hannah Bellamy takes a close look at this poignant and imperative film about youth, independence, and self-realization. Make sure to catch the film at VQFF on August 20!



Film still from Lavagna's *Arianna*

"I was born three times," narrates the title character in Carlo Lavagna's *Arianna*. "As a boy the first time, a few years later as a little girl." Though it is an ambiguous opening to the director's debut film, it is the truth that Arianna (Ondina Quadri) spends the rest of the film figuring out. When the striking, androgynous 19-year-old discovers that she\* is intersex during a summer of adolescent playfulness, she is born a third time as both male and female.

Screening at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival on August 20, *Arianna* is an "issue film" in many ways, despite the cringey-ness of that term. Overall, the film handles adolescence, gender, and sexuality with immense empathy. The brave and tender storytelling is fitting with the brave and tender protagonist.

Gentle dramatic irony riddles the film. It is unclear as to what extent Lavagna expects the audience to deduce that Arianna is intersex early in the film, thus knowing more about her experiences than she does. He has stated that he originally intended the film to be a documentary, and this may be what begets the first hand observational technique. Essentially, the film is a character study of Arianna.

*Arianna* is filmed on location at Lake Bolsena in the central region of Lazio in Italy. Other Italian lakes may be

more prominent, but the little-known Lake Bolsena is a popular summer destination of Romans escaping the city. Arianna and her parents, Adele (Valentina Carnelutti) and Marcello (Massimo Popolizio) live in Rome and visit their lake house after neglecting it for 15 years.

At the lake, Arianna reconnects with her cousin, Celeste (Blu Di Martino). The two cousins are close, both in age and bond, but Arianna becomes concerned with the differences between them quickly. Though Arianna is taller, Celeste has matured over the year since they last saw each other into a woman in every sense from what Arianna can tell. Celeste wears a bikini that shows off her shapely body and tells her cousin about her sexually liberal experiences. Arianna hasn't had her period yet and her breasts have only developed slightly—the result of hormone patches she sticks to her slender hips every day on recommendation from her father who is a doctor and her gynecologist who is also a friend of her father.

Arianna convinces her parents to let her stay at the lake house alone when they return to Rome. What ensues is teenage escapades as well as self exploration. For Arianna, it is all laced with caution. She goes to a sexuality group for girls, where the girls sit in the round with a female leader and discuss their experiences of periods, sex, and orgasms. She invites a boy who likes her up from Rome. She goes skinny dipping. She has a party at the lake house. She attempts to have sex for the first time with the boy who likes her, but it's too painful. She tries it again, and it's still too painful.

Knowing what other girls at the sexuality group experienced, Arianna figures something is wrong with her sexual encounters. She decides to see a new gynecologist without telling her parents, fearing her current gynecologist will share information with her father. She may be aware on some level that her parents are lying to her, given their control over her medical history and in the way most children know when adults are lying to them. She has no idea at this point the extent to which her parents have meddled in her personal story.

When she discovers that she was born intersex and her parents decided that she would have surgery to become female at three years old, she has a few moments of anger towards them, but puts those feelings aside. Instead, in her narration, she considers that her parents were more confused than her.

This could have been more nuanced: where does her frustration with her parents meet her clarity about her identity? Her discovery, anger, and clarity happen within the last few minutes of the 84-minute feature film. The pacing is discordant with the carefulness of the rest of the film. Lavagna chose to focus the majority of the film on the slow drawn weeks at the lake house before Arianna discovers the truth about herself.

The film ends in the setting that it opens. Arianna floats naked in a milky, steaming hot spring. Her pale blue eyes look straight up sparkling. "I could spend my entire life trying to find a solution to this mess, but the reality is it doesn't exist," she narrates. "There is no solution. I'm one plus one, but I equal three, so I either accept that I am a living error or I have to find my own math." With it's stunning cinematography and Italian landscapes, Arianna is worth circling in your Vancouver Queer Film Festival program guide.

\*The pronouns Arianna uses in the film are "she" and "her." It's also worth noting the film is in Italian so pronouns and other gender identifiers are translated to English in the subtitles.

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