



La Zona asks what price are we willing to pay for security?

La Zona – Mexican talent, Spanish resources, and a warning to us all

“You could say that *La Zona* is the story of an armed robbery gone wrong. In truth though, it is a story about a broken and divided society, a story of two worlds that fear and hate each other. What is to be done when the inefficiency and corruption of those who are supposed to tender justice leave us having to fend for ourselves?”

Rodrigo Plá, the young first time director and co-writer of the Spanish-Mexican film *La Zona*, doesn't believe in talking down the deeper undercurrents of this taut and pessimistic thriller. As a member of a generation of Latin American youth increasingly disillusioned by the failed promises of successive regimes, he believes instead in making films as provocative political statements. This is polemical cinema at its best, aimed squarely at the hypocrisies of an unjust and divided society.

Superficially, *La Zona* (*The Zone*), tells the story of two youths from opposite ends of a fractured social spectrum. Teenage schoolboy Alejandro lives with his affluent family inside la Zona, a high security enclave of privilege and wealth inside a big city where dire poverty prevails. After their robbery attempt goes wrong, three young thieves who cheated their way inside the gated community, attempt to escape. Only one of them, Miguel, manages to evade the brutal clutches of the Zone's security guards and vengeful vigilantes. In hiding, he is helped by the fresh-faced Alejandro, reluctantly at first, then with increasing conviction as the young child of privilege becomes aware of the violence and lies that have made his family's comfort and security possible.



Hunted – Alan Chávez as young thief Miguel

The making of *La Zona* is also about the relationship between two worlds, albeit a happier one. It typifies the growing creative connections between Spain and Latin America in the medium of film. With a budget of \$3 million, it is more costly than the majority of Mexican movies. “*La Zona* needed the international budget in order for Rodrigo to fulfil his cinematic vision of a world gone sourly wrong,” says the film’s Spanish co-producer Alvaro Longoria, of Morena Films. “If it had had to rely on Mexican funding alone, the film could never have had the impact it had. Access to international financing is strategic for Latin filmmakers and we in Spain can make a big difference in supporting the ambitions of their filmmakers”, he adds.

By the average standard of the Anglo-American independent film business, \$3 million may not be a lot of money to pay for a feature-length film. By the standards of most Latin-American cinema however, it is big budget and Rodrigo showed great discipline in ensuring that the money was on the screen. The sets are convincing, the action sequences staged with brio and realism and the cinematography by Emiliano Villanueva, is crisp and evocative.

To put together the budget, Alvaro and his Mexican partners required no less than six major sources of finance in Mexico, Spain and the rest of the world. The Mexican contribution came from a combination of a tax break (for film), a private investor and the funding agency Fidecine (Fondo de Inversión y Estímulos al Cine). Spain contributed by means of a bank loan granted in favourable conditions by a financial institution attached to the Agreement subscribed between the ICAA (Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales) and ICO (Instituto de Crédito Oficial) and whose interests were partially subsidised by the ICAA; besides, the film will be entitled to receive automatic support from the ICAA, depending on the number of cinema admissions in Spain.

Additional funding came from Ibermedia, a Madrid-based programme dedicated entirely to funding Latin American co-production projects where Spain, Portugal or 15 other Latin American countries are involved. On the strength of the story and script, the Paris-based sales agent Wild Bunch, an experienced international packager of non-English language films, offered a minimum guarantee against the value of sales to the territories as yet unsold. The balance of the budget was found through pre-sales to Spanish broadcasters and a small advance against cinema distribution in Spain.



[Rough justice – Citizens of La Zona take matter in their own hands](#)

A prime example of intercultural cooperation this may have been, but has *La Zona* delivered on its ambition to find an audience outside of Mexico? A few months after

completion, the film had secured distribution in 11 European countries. While it performed disappointingly in Spain, it had garnered 150,000 admissions three weeks into its release in France and made a strong start in Italy despite a limited release on 20 screens only. A test will be the film's release in the US, where a large Latino community represents a strong potential market for a quality Spanish language thriller. More importantly perhaps, on its release in Mexico, the film generated a robust critical debate about social inequalities and the politics of urban planning and policing.

For Alvaro, the gamble has clearly paid off. The international visibility of the film and the critical acclaim it's received will help launch Rodrigo's career as a new director with an original vision. "In future, I want to stay focused on Latin America. The talent pool there is so much bigger than Spain's and conditions of life are such that strong, cutting-edge stories are everywhere," he reflects. "I see my role as leveraging Spanish and European resources to enable Latino talent to project itself on a bigger canvas and reach an international audience."