

the latter when it comes to Mariel's *Measure for Measure* audition, a dizzyingly stratified sequence that finds her selling herself to her own brother, the play's director, although their relation in that very moment is unremarked upon. Plus, Mariel must answer invasive questions and deliver a "personal" monologue that explores themes of fraternity, all within a one-way mirrored chamber which her brother communicates with her from the other side. [...] Mariel settles on recounting a time in which she asked her brother for money—which is visualized later, but given Piñeiro's propensity for entirely plausible flights of fantasy, its veracity is impossible to deduce—and this family matter reads like a confession, resulting in a certain plangency parceled in with the actress' inescapable reflection. [...] *Viola* and *The Princess of France* coasted along group dynamics within the larger artistic pursuit, but the sudden focus on the individual in *Isabella*, despite the brother-sister linkage, is resoundingly lonely, the room filled with only Mariel's self, facing back at her.

But to think of *Isabella* as claustrophobic, or devoid of Piñeiro's subtle warmth, is to ignore its open-air compositions—Mariel and Luciana occasionally hike together, and the vistas they cross are a distant cry from some of the more cramped rehearsal spaces of films past—as well as the pragmatic growth that Mariel enacts, coaxing out an individual artistic spirit by dint of her solo ventures. Her piece comes increasingly into focus as the film continues, a hyper-personal affirmation of her own qualities achieved through ably dissolving any self-doubt: once the purple hour of evening arrives, you take twelve stones representing any insecurity or reservation to the water, and cast each one, striving to complete the task with absolutely no hesitation. This is obviously a rewarding endeavor for Mariel, but Piñeiro frames Villar on the purple-tinged pier with her costars, and in welcoming others into this particular ritual, the edifying potential of what the former actress has constructed is then rendered universal.

Piñeiro has been compared to headier directors because of his spatial experimentation and perpetually echoed performances, but his last decade of work has teased a foundational classicism, the reigning influence of such figures as Ernst Lubitsch and Leo McCarey, as evidenced by his deft juggling of the innumerable entanglements his characters experience. *Isabella's* finale is one of the director's most conventionally satisfying endings, but it has the responsibility of not just closing out its respective film, but its predecessors as well. Mariel's final performance—or lack thereof—is like the self-actualization Felix Bressart's bit player in Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* consummates when he finally delivers his Shylock monologue, a lone moment that validates an entire career. In *Viola*, Villar dreamt of being an actress; *Isabella* completes the cycle inherent to any sort of fulfilled aspiration, a gradual drift from what previously occupied so much valuable time and energy, without ever losing sight of what came before. ♦

## Acropolis Cinema presents:



September 2, 2021 – Laemmle Royal

 @AcropolisCinema  /AcropolisCinema  @acropoliscinema

[www.acropoliscinema.com](http://www.acropoliscinema.com)

## ABOUT THE FILM

Mariel (María Villar) longs to play the role of Isabella in a local theater troupe's production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, but money problems prevent her from preparing for the audition. She thinks of asking her brother for financial help, but is worried about being too direct. Her solution is to ask her brother's girlfriend, Luciana (Agustina Muñoz), also an actress and a more self-assured one, to convince her brother to give her the money. Luciana agrees on the condition that Mariel will not abandon her acting and continue to prepare for the part of Isabella.

The latest in Matías Piñeiro's series of films inspired by the women of Shakespeare's comedies is his most structurally daring and visually stunning work to date. Through their rich and layered performances, Muñoz and Villar demonstrate a profound intimacy formed over more than a decade of collaboration with their director. *Isabella* is a film about the ongoing battle between doubt and ambition that never discounts the possibility of a new beginning

80 min. | Argentina/France | 2020

### Dress'd in a Little Brief Authority by Patrick Preziosi

*The following article was originally published by MUBI Notebook, August 27, 2021*

Matias Piñeiro's *Isabella* opens with nested rectangles of resplendent color, creeping across the chromatic spectrum, oscillating between darkness and light, and then settling on purple, a visual analogue to equilibrium, as we're informed by a voiceover. This sort of interdisciplinary filmmaking—it's later clear that these geometrically presented hues are part of an installation work—adds a new wrinkle to Piñeiro's already extracurricular filmmaking. For the past decade, the director has transposed (“adapt” is too exact and limiting a term) Shakespeare in contemporary Buenos Aires, where performance is yet another casual layer of obfuscation in films that slip between the crevices of the larger, everyday world of the film, and the play within. In keeping with this playful inscrutability, films like *Viola* (2012) and *The Princess of France* (2014) are enveloped in a hazy color palette, lit with phosphorescent stage lights and punctuated by intimate closeups that emerge from scattered shadows. *Isabella*, on the other hand, opts for sharper tints, repeating accents of brightness that, beyond the installation, are delivered in the form of different articles of clothing, the red drapes of a theater, low-hanging fruit, and more. This newfound clarity of color patterns occurs in tandem with the burgeoning lucidity and responsibility of Isabella's protagonist, who works towards a decisiveness that is just as upfront as the different shocks of color that populate the film.

Just as *Viola* drew on *Twelfth Night*, *The Princess of France* on *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Hermia & Helena* (2016) on *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, *Isabella* refracts

*Measure for Measure* in signature Piñeiro fashion, inviting innumerable inferences on how the play and film are connected, while never truly tipping its hand (the director is an admirer of Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach*, but there's never anything as explicit as that film's concluding curtain call). In *Isabella*, *Measure for Measure* exists only in its embryonic stages; other Piñeiro films have taken place during an ongoing production, allowing the viewer into practice sessions and backstage conversations. The most tenable thespianism is the audition process: Mariel (Piñeiro stock-player María Villar), the central focus of the film's chronologically shuffled two-year span, is a gradually disillusioned actress who is nevertheless encouraged to try out for the part of Isabella, the spiritual and chaste novitiate nun. Luciana (Agustina Muñoz, another Piñeiro regular), a fellow actress, goads her new friend Mariel into auditioning, after she herself quit the particular role of Isabella, though she will audition again, reclaim the role...and then quit, again.

Mariel will later abandon theater altogether, the colorful rectangles only one element of her cross-medium work, as she also utilizes randomly found stones and a short film that is projected at the center of all these accoutrements. Also of note is Mariel's pregnancy, which wends in and out of existence, considering the scattered events, but it's still a potent harbinger of adulthood nevertheless. It's these personal developments—the attendant fatigue of too many professional rejections, the honing of a new creative process, parenthood—that bestow Isabella with the sense of a prolonged, film-length denouement to Piñeiro's career thus far. 2016's *Hermia & Helena*, which spends half of its runtime in New York City, could have been initially accepted as something of a capstone project in its considerable scope, but *Isabella* seems to posit that its predecessor was more of a universe-expander than anything else. In that earlier film, the director's usual players were rounded out with kindred spirits, like Dan Sallitt, Keith Paulson, and Mati Díop. The already malleable “Las Shakespearadas” (as these films have come to be informally named) proved to be adaptable, carving out new iterations of their Buenos Aires-bound niches in a new location, the generally relaxed artistic atmosphere maintaining itself in an entirely different city and continent.

In a 2012 review of *Viola* for *Reverse Shot*, Adam Nayman noted that Piñeiro writes and films Buenos Aires as “a sunny little village populated by cinephiles, performers, and musicians,” a community that is, “affirmative in the extreme.” There were the expected petty squabbles and rivalries that would arise from a young band of restless creatives—the roundelay of in-troupe hookups in *The Princess of France* probably best exemplifies the duelling boredom and desire inherent to such a collapsible work-life ratio. However, these informal spats only furthered the reality of Piñeiro's chosen, malleable milieu, which is constantly reinventing itself to account for the post-college waywardness that oftens bubbles to the surface: characters will abruptly drop out of one another's lives, pilgrimages are made to far-flung cities, estranged relatives are re/connected with.

In *Isabella*, however, there's the sense that this “scene” of artists and co. has slightly calcified—perhaps it's grown to be too unreliable to accommodate all the life changes experienced by Mariel, or maybe the artistic egos that were hinted at (and lightly satirized) in past films have gained a little too much authority. It certainly feels the case of