

# A PLACE CALLED DIGNITY



by Matías Rojas Valencia

## Synopsis

Pablo, a 12-year-old boy, receives a scholarship to attend school in the mysterious and isolated Colonia Dignidad, established in Chile by German settlers. He quickly becomes the favorite of the leader of the colony, Uncle Paul. Over time, Pablo witnesses the strangest things that happen there: abuse, disappearances and demon-like creatures used to scare children. But in this wicked world, a revolution is brewing, and it may be the only way for Pablo to get out.





## Interview with Matías Rojas Valencia

By Marta Bałaga

**What made you want to talk about Chilean “Colonia Dignidad”? Founded by former Nazi soldier Paul Schäfer, it has become infamous as a cult.**

As a child, I had a specific interest in this place. When I was 12, we went to the restaurant that Colonia Dignidad opened to the Chilean public. The place caught my attention right away. I was shocked by the faces of some of the settlers who worked there: they evoked a profound sense of sadness and resignation. Many years later, when I began my research for the film, I found out that many of these people were forced to work there as a punishment, they were tortured and under the effect of tranquilizers they had to take every day.



I am part of a generation that grew up hearing stories about Colonia Dignidad. When their leader, Paul Schäfer, escaped to Argentina in the late 1990s, he was still supported by the politicians, the military and the police. I would say that this place remains a mystery in so many ways. It represents a country that used to sweep secrets under a “rug” of alleged progress. Even today, there are active members of the government and influential civilians who were a part of this “Colonia Dignidad circle of friends”. They are the ones who used to protect Paul Schäfer. Reflecting upon this place may help us review our recent history. Not just in my country but in other places where similar situations took place.

**You show that its members were kept in complete ignorance, also when it comes to their sexuality, which made it easier for “Uncle Paul” to control them.**

I was very interested in the daily life at Colonia Dignidad – the private life. From the beginning of the project, it was very important to try to transmit what happened there. Not just plot-wise, but also on a deeper, sensorial level. These situations feel like they are a part of theatrical staging because every day, the settlers experienced this unique world. That's all they had – they couldn't compare it to what was happening outside. I wanted to show the degree of control practiced by their leader, who wanted to get rid of any normal human behavior through this constant indoctrination based on fear, punishment and torture. When they reached adulthood, many settlers born in this place knew nothing about a lot of subjects, including sexuality.



It's always difficult to understand why people stay in cults. So many aspects are just absurd to any outsider – here, the leader checks if he can “smell the devil” on the person he suspects of lying. Are any of these scenes based on real testimonies?


Even though this is a fictional film, most of the scenes are based on reality. Paul Schäfer would tell the settlers that the devil entered their bodies and they believed him: they would literally shake their bodies to push it out. Based on some testimonies, he really wanted the children to see Santa Claus “die”, in order not to celebrate Christmas anymore. We have to bear in mind that this was a very particular sect: most of the settlers arrived there when they were children or they were born into it, which obviously made it easier to control them. On the other hand, the place was protected by the Chilean civil-military dictatorship and shaped as a “state within a state”: a micro-country protected by Pinochet. Once the dictatorship was over, it continued to operate. Many settlers tried to escape, however, and the police would just bring them right back. They had to face brutal punishment: electric shocks, solitary confinement for years and even death. It was a real hellhole, impossible to flee. Up to this day, everyone always asks me the same thing: How could something like this happen for such a long time and no one did anything about it?





The character played by Hanns Zischler keeps filming his flock, adding appropriate soundtrack to the images seen on screen – he literally creates his own reality.

For me, it's a very important aspect. He became a conductor, a theatre and movie director, he built a reality based on fiction. He created real movie productions inside Colonia Dignidad too, where the settlers were forced to portray themselves as hard-working, tidy and happy people living in this place, privileged to follow the path of benevolence. For this reason, and for many years, this place was called "the German miracle in the south of Chile". However, while these videos were seen by the Chilean authorities and by the German embassy, the life inside of the Colonia was based on slavery.



**Why did you want to have a child protagonist? Pablo is a smart kid, but it takes time before he starts to question the adults who are also trapped there.**


It was important to have this story told through the eyes of a Chilean child and to discover, alongside him, what actually happens there. Pablo is a visitor, someone who enters the settlement when it has already operated for more than 30 years, right at the end of the civil-military dictatorship in Chile.

It was a time when many failed adoptions were carried out and actual kidnappings of children in vulnerable conditions also took place. According to many researchers, Schäfer's main objective was to "supply" himself with children in order to abuse them. Pablo is a smart boy but he trusts Uncle Paul. He represents the father figure he lacks, someone who gives him attention. It takes time for him to grasp what is happening: there is confusion, weirdness and pain. I was very interested in this subtle shift in Pablo's perspective.



He isn't able to verbalise what is happening to him – he just knows it's not right. How did you want to show his transformation?

It's very difficult for many boys and girls to verbalize that is happening to them when they are caught up in situations as shocking as this: everything reveals itself in a slow and gradual manner, many times through completely different channels, such as dreams and nightmares. That's why it was crucial to show some of Pablo's dreams. It's through them that you can finally understand what cannot be explained with words.

A group of young boys in school uniforms standing in a hallway. They are wearing white shirts, dark ties, and dark suspenders with decorative patterns. The background is a blurred hallway with windows and doors.

The people you show are stuck in a state of arrested development. Was it a challenge, to get the performances that would reflect it?

It took a lot of work to find the right tone. When most people hear about what happened there, it seems unreal. I realized that the acting will have to reflect that as well. I tried to move towards the kind of performance that would express this constant surveillance, fear, pain, the loss of autonomy and personality. For example, I heard that one of the ways of communicating was through whispers and for this reason whispering became not only an aspect of acting, but an important part of the movie's aesthetic.

I am very pleased with the work of my actors because I wasn't interested in creating this classic narrative based on a clear division between good and evil. Many of the settlers were victims and perpetrators as well, and there were many gray areas in their lives.



Over the years, it became public knowledge that not only children were abused there, but that the colony served as a clandestine detention centre where the opponents of the Pinochet regime were tortured and killed. But you don't reveal all its secrets in the film.

The fact that the main character is a child has to do with the movie's general viewpoint. I wasn't interested in creating a narrative based on all the historical facts. For this reason, each scene seeks to raise questions, just like a child questioning something that caught their attention. I wanted to delve into the bond between Colonia Dignidad and the detained people who ended up there during the dictatorship by giving out hints that would lead to more questions – take the scene with the sister of a missing detainee, masquerading as a hospital patient, or the visit of the first lady of the dictatorship and the colonel. There are some elements of the daily routine of this place that generate further inquiries. Movies based on real events – or inspired by them, like in this case – are often expected to encompass all the facts. Preferably in a chronological order, as if they were an audiovisual transfer of the truth. I am not interested in depicting “the truth” but in expressing intimate worlds and feelings.

It's a film based on a terrifying true story, but also a place that came out of someone's twisted fantasy, his longing for "little Germany". How did you want to capture this duality?

This duality was an important part of this movie, but also of the Colonia Dignidad's reality. You have this charming and manipulative figure that creates his own "micro-country" with its own rules, laws and even a language. There has always been this contradiction between torture and kindness, community and slavery, forced labor and joy, shown in Schäfer's "movies". In the film, Uncle Paul creates a place that many people seem to be looking for, including Pablo and his mother: an oasis of opportunity. That's why this clean, tidy and allegedly orderly "little Germany" managed to be so appealing. This question reminded me of a text I found during my research, written by the Chilean journalist Hugo Manuel Rodríguez in 1968, after the first escape attempt of a settler, in the first years of Colonia Dignidad's existence: „Sometimes you think it's an episode of that TV serial called The Invaders; there's a nightmarish atmosphere, a nerve-racking tension, a series of atrocities and contradictions, with no outcome or sanction”.

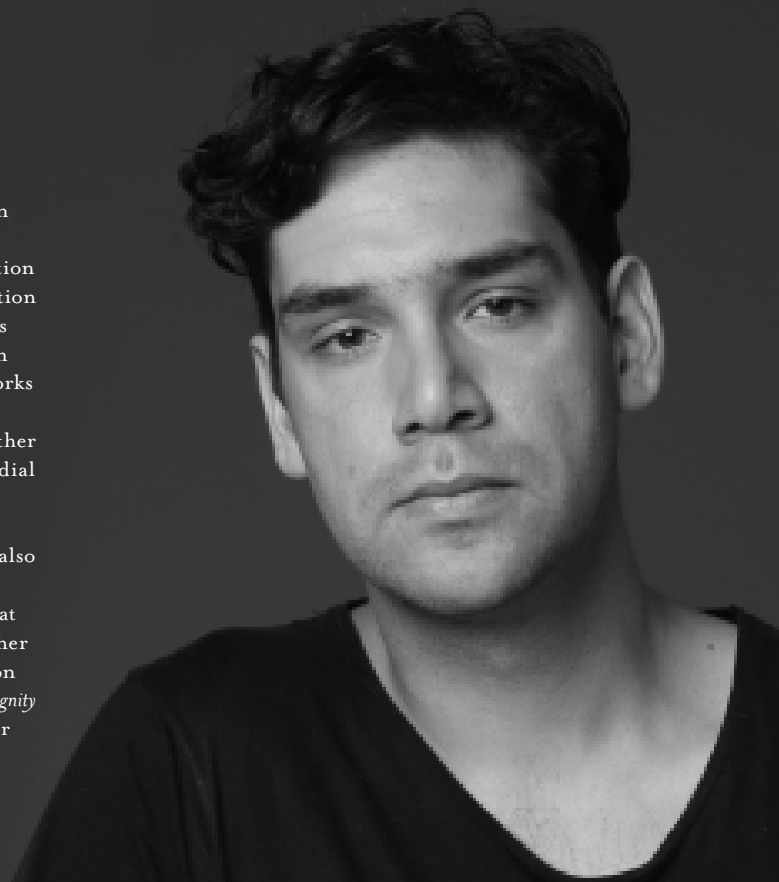


## DIRECTOR

### MATÍAS ROJAS VALENCIA

His first feature film, *Root* (2013), made originally as his graduation film, premiered in San Sebastian International Film Festival, was awarded Best National Film in Valdivia International Film Festival and was selected in many international film festivals as La Habana, Cartagena de Indias, BAFICI, Palm Springs, Nuovo Cinema de Pessaro, TUBinguen, Málaga, Latin Beat New York and others. Matias also co-wrote and directed *I need to know* (2015), short film made by the Program Factory, organized by the Director's Fortnight of Cannes Film Festival. The short film premiered in the Director's Fortnight and was selected to be part of the Official Competition in Warsaw's International Film Festival in Poland. His film projects have been selected in many international development events

like the Coproduction Encounter of San Sebastian International Film Festival, Produire au Sud residence, Co-Production Market of the Berlinale, Venice Production Gap, Cinéfondation L'Atelier of Cannes Film Festival, among others. Along with visual artist Alejandro Leonhardt he works in the development and realization of video art projects. Their first work together *When the forests shine* was selected in the Medial Arts Biennale in Chile, ARCO Madrid and in the official selection of Getty Center in Los Angeles, California. He also works as a director in many audiovisual productions and publicity spots for TV at the same time he works as a college teacher in the subjects of scriptwriting, direction and cinema appreciation. *A Place Called Dignity* is his second feature film as screenwriter and director.





## CAST

### HANNS ZISCHLER – UNCLE PAUL

Hanns has worked in over 200 international and national films, including films directed by acclaimed directors as Jean-Luc Godard, Wim Wenders and Steven Spielberg. In 2019 he participated in Lars Kraume's ZDF / arte series *Die Neue Zeit*, which tells about the founding years of the Bauhaus. In addition to his work as an actor, he has worked as an author, speaker, photographer and editor. His debut novel *The Torn Letter* was published by Galiani in February 2020.

Directed by Friederike Heller, Hanns will be on stage as soon as possible with Matthias Brandt, Barbara Sukowa and Eva Löbau in the world premiere of Peter Handke's *Ždėnek Adamec* at the Salzburg Festival.

## CAST

### SALVADOR INSUNZA – PABLO

Salvador Emiliano Insunza López, born in Santiago de Chile, 2007. He has worked as an actor in experimental plays, video clips and the children's television series *Investigamigos*. He was also part of the Citizen Choirs in the musical play *Pateando piedras* – a tribute to Jorge González and directed by the brothers Gopal and Visnu Ibarra. *A Place Called Dignity* is his first leading role in film.





## CAST

### AMALIA KASSAI – GISELA

Amalia Kassai is a bilingual (Spanish / German) theater, cinema and TV actress. She has developed a career in Chile and Germany. Her first leading role in a TV series: *Helga Flora*, has earned her the approval of both; critics and audience. The films *La casa lobo* by Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cocina, *Isidora* by Nicolás Superby, *Drama* by Matias Lira, *A twelve meters per second* by Nicolás Lara, *A Place Called Dignity* by Matias Rojas and *Las Demás* by Alexandra Hyland, also stand out. As well as the tv series: *Los ochenta* by Andrés Wood, *Vida por vida* by Sebastián Araya, *Isabel* by Rodrigo Bazaez, *Grandes Pillos* by Sebastián Araya, *Los Espookys* HBO, among others.

## PRODUCERS

### QUIJOTE FILMS (Chile)

Founded in 2009 as an independent production company dedicated to film and content. Over time, it has gained a lot of experience, which reflects the growing number of productions it brings to light, collaborating with local and foreign entities and obtaining international recognition. Its latest projects include *The Man of the Future (El hombre del futuro)* by Felipe Ríos, premiered in the Official Selection at 2019 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival; *Lina from Lima (Lina de Lima)* by María Paz González, premiered at Discovery of Toronto Film Festival; and *White on White (Blanco en blanco)* by Theo Court, winner of the Orizzonti Award for Best Director and the FIPRESCI Prize in the Venice Film Festival that is Chile's submission for Best International Film at 94th Academy Awards®.

### AUTOCROMA (Argentina)

Founded by Iván Granovsky, Argentinian producer and director who also was the director of LoboLab from Mar del Plata International Film Festival. Among the company's projects are *Los Territorios*, directed by Iván Granovsky himself, premiered in Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2017.

### KLINKERFILM (Germany)

Production company based in Hamburg-Altona, right in the middle of Hamburg's film centre. Linus Günther is producer and CEO of the company. He studied at Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf and at Hamburg Media School. Klinkerfilm co-produced *Wajib* by Annemarie Jacir, premiered in the Contemporary World Cinema section of Toronto Film Festival, won a Don Quixote Prize at Locarno Film Festival and the Golden Astor at Mar del Plata Film Festival. Also, the film was awarded with the Arab Critics Award for Best Film, Best Screenplay and Best Actor at Cannes Film Festival. In 2019 the company co-produced *Noah Land* by Cenk Erturk, selected at prestigious film festivals like Tribeca, Tallinn Black Nights and Thessaloniki. In 2021 Klinkerfilm produced *COPS*, a German movie which premiered at Hof International Film Festival in October.

### MANDRA FILMS (France)

French company created to produce and co-produce author films and creative documentaries. Its founder, Denis Vaslin, has been running VOLYA FILMS in the Netherlands for 15 years. He has produced around 40 films and most have been selected in A-festivals and released internationally. He was recently joined by producer Carine Chichkowsky.

### SÉPTIMA FILMS (Colombia)

Founded in 2006 Séptima Films has been awarded several times grants and prizes in film festivals. Their first feature film *La playa D.C.* (2012) by Juan Andrés Arango was selected at Un Certain Regard in Cannes. Séptima produced Arango's *X-500* (2016) premiered in Toronto and San Sebastian. Séptima is associate producer of Franco Lolli's *Gente de bien* (2014) and coproducer of *NN* (2014) by Héctor Gálvez. In 2020 Séptima premiered *Después de norma* (2019) and produced the TV series *Las Iguanas* by Frank Benitez.

## FESTIVALS

International Premiere: Tallinn Black Nights –  
Official Competition

## FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Un lugar llamado dignidad

English Title: A Place Called Dignity

Genre: Drama

Country: Chile,

France,

Germany,

Argentina,

Colombia

Language: Spanish

Year: 2021

Duration: 99 min.

Picture: Color

Aspect Ratio: 2.39 : 1

Sound: 5.1

Available Format: DCP

## CAST

Salvador Insunza as Pablo  
Hanns Zischler as Uncle Paul  
Amalia Kassai as Gisela  
Noa Westermeyer as Rudolph  
David Gaete as Johannes

## CREW

Director: Matías Rojas Valencia

Screenplay: Matías Rojas Valencia

Cinematography: Benjamín Echazarreta

Editing: Andrea Chignoli,  
Matías Rojas Valencia

Production Design: Laura Caliguri

Costume Design: Paola Mendoza,  
Michaela Rinker,  
Heidrun Schwantge

Sound Design: Roberto Espinoza

Music: Eryck Abecassis

Production company: Quijote Films

Co-production companies: Mandra Films, Kinkerfilm,

Autocroma, Séptima Films

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las Artes y el Patrimonio,

Gobierno de Chile, CNC,

Schleswig-Holstein,

INCAA – Instituto Nacional

de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales,

Programa Ibermedia

Producer: Giancarlo Nasi

Co-producers: Denis Vaslin,

Titus Kreyenberg,

Linus Günther,

Sophia Ayissi Nsegue,

Iván Granovsky,

Luciana Calcagno,

Jorge Botero

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QUIJOTE

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