



Problemista

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Synopsis

Alejandro is an aspiring toy designer from El Salvador, struggling to bring his unusual ideas to life in New York City. As time on his work visa runs out, a job assisting an erratic art-world outcast becomes his only hope to stay in the country and realize his dream. From writer-director Julio Torres comes a surreal adventure through the equally treacherous worlds of New York City and the U.S. Immigration system.

Production Notes

In some ways, Julio Torres explains, the story of his adult life—of striving toward a place where he could truly create work all his own, to perhaps even make a movie in his own singular voice—turned into *Problemista*. "The journey of getting to that goal became the story," he explains from within a nondescript office in New Jersey, where he's working on his next TV show, his hair characteristically dyed a shade of faded pink.

Problemista, Torres's feature film debut that he wrote, directed, and stars in, is, in a sense, about what it means to chase an outlandish dream while also being stuck in the amorphous, unremarkable stretch of your 20s. That is, until an unhinged art world outcast, played by Tilda Swinton, arrives as—depending on your point of view—either a dragon-breathing wrath or an unlikely ally and unflinchingly loyal friend.

The movie begins (perhaps unsurprisingly, as a Julio Torres work) by toggling between the otherworldly and the cheerfully mundane. Alejandro, born and raised in El Salvador, is brought up by his doting artist mother in a world of play and infinite possibility, which naturally leads him to the quintessential template for a young starry-eyed 20s-something: living in a tiny apartment in trash-ridden New York City, trapped in a bizarre, dead-end job. But it was just that gap—between daily life and the life you can imagine for yourself—that interested him, Torres says: "it's about people who are going through these impossible journeys, who have these huge Quixote-like dreams and want to go about them in the most specific, uncompromising ways."

Alejandro has aspirations to work as a toy inventor at Hasbro in their talent incubator program. "Toys these days are wonderful, but they are a little bit too preoccupied with fun," he explains in his application, "which deprives children from the joy of obstacles." But he also desperately needs to get sponsored for a work visa after losing his job at a cryo-freezer company, where people pay to have their living bodies frozen

in the hopes of waking up eventually in a faraway future. His ambitions and the present limitations of his circumstances, in short, are not the best match.

Problemista centers in part on the ludicrous, byzantine nightmare that is the U.S. immigration system. But the story of Alejandro's visa status is just one facet to the film's larger preoccupation of an unconventional, but highly enjoyable, character trying to satisfy a hyper-specific, maybe slightly naïve goal against the longest of odds.

Before creating and starring in his HBO show *Los Espookys*, before writing on *Saturday Night Live* and before his comedy special, Torres was just a college graduate who, without much of a clue of how to go about his ambitions to write movies and television shows, figured he'd do stand-up as a way in—all while the ticking clock of his immigration status bore down on him.

"I didn't really know how to enter that world," he says. "If I write a movie—what do I do with this document? Who do I show it to? School came and went, and that question was never really answered." Open mics were a free ("except for commuting") way to showcase his writing, eventually leading him to finding a manager and submitting to TV writing jobs. On *Saturday Night Live*, he received much of the education he needed to become an auteur. "That allowed me to write, and in many ways, create little vignettes. And that gave me a voice and credibility to then make this movie," he recalls.

But *Problemista* is situated within that initial period of uncertainty after college, one that, in Torres's case, "comes with the added uncertainty of figuring out your immigration status." All of that, though, propels the hero's journey at the film's core, and Alejandro's obsession with becoming the thing he stubbornly insists he's meant to become.

"Alejandro wants to be in the States," Torres explains. "But he doesn't just want to be in the States, he wants to be a toy designer. He doesn't just want to be a toy designer, he wants to be a toy designer at this one company. And he doesn't want to make just any toys, he wants to make these incredibly niche, unsellable toys."

After losing his job, Alejandro meets Elizabeth, a perpetually aggrieved art critic and wife of Bobby (played by RZA), an eccentric painter whose frozen body Alejandro was previously tasked to oversee. Almost unwittingly, she drags him down a rabbit hole in the city, and together they embark on two different quests, side-by-side—sometimes at odds, and sometimes in tandem.

"Tilda's character is laser-focused on keeping Bobby frozen, and she wants to keep Bobby frozen, until she can get him a show at a respectable, big place," Torres says. "And she wants order in her life, but she wants it only with this software. She won't take it any other way."

What binds these very different people, Torres notes, is "this unwavering commitment to achieving their hopes and dreams via the ways that are acceptable to them." They are what you might call *problemistas*, Torres's own term that strikes at the strange, absurdist, and ultimately humanist core of his film.

The title encompasses the idea that "your problems and your aspirations are entangled, how they feed each other, how your dreams and your nightmares are in a constant loop. And one of them informs the other, and they both become bigger and better," Torres says. "All these people make problems for themselves or thrive in problems. Had Alejandro not been faced with all these problems, he wouldn't have grown, but also subconsciously, he sought these problems out. Elizabeth is a walking creator of problems."

More than anything, the giddily idiosyncratic joy of the film is in the pair's improbable love story: Elizabeth, the ultimate problemista and the antagonist of every person she encounters, teaming up with Alejandro, the hopeless dreamer whose very existence in the country is a problem to be solved. Soon after meeting, Alejandro offers to serve as an assistant of sorts to Elizabeth, who claims she will sponsor him for his visa. And yet, with every bizarre setback, the likelihood of her keeping that promises grows dimmer. If Alejandro is the underdog with his back against the wall, Elizabeth, who Swinton embodies with an at once free-wheeling and perfectly calibrated chaos, is both his skeleton key and the final boss that towers over him and the film.

The paradoxical nature of their relationship is a microcosm of the many unwieldy parts that Torres deftly blends into what Swinton calls a "harmonious and beautiful" whole: a satire of American bureaucracy that favors playful parody over self-seriousness; an often anxiety-inducing fever dream that is also imbued with a tender, magical realist wink; and a story about harried people mired in problems that also manages to view life, in all its obstacle-ridden arcs, as an adventure, full of possibility.

It is, in other words, the biggest canvas yet for Torres's trademark vision, a mélange of the surreal and the wide-eyed, the sweet and the pointedly funny. It's a film that only he could make, even if he wasn't meant to in the beginning. As Tilda Swinton recalled of their early conversations about the film, "at a certain point—I'm sure I wasn't the only one, but—I started to say, you know, Julio, you really have to direct this yourself." At the time, Torres had written the script and was set to star, but had not intended to direct the film, something the producers were fully onboard with. It was while working at *Saturday Night Live* that he met the people who would help

bring the film to screen: Dave McCary, who directed material Torres wrote for the show as well as his stand-up special, "My Favorite Shapes," and Emma Stone, who acted in his work on *SNL*, along with their producing partner at Fruit Tree, Ali Herting.

"The world that he creates on the page and in his work in general is so particular that I wanted to see the film that he made," Swinton says. "He has such an original mind and the design, the tone, the rhythm—not just the actual performances but also the rhythm of the cut—everything needed to all be of a piece. He just knew his universe."

The American Hasbro Dream

Though *Problemista* is partly about the barriers that Alejandro faces in trying to create his dream life in New York, it would be a mistake to see him as an avatar of the striving immigrant, running up against the many coldly unjust barricades of the immigration system in America.

"It's not just a person's journey of navigating the immigration system—it's this specific person's journey navigating the immigration system, this specific person who is multiple things at the same time," Torres notes. "He lacks the access and the resources of his peers in the U.S., but also at the same time has been coddled and spoiled with as much as his mother could give him."

If anything, he's the antithesis of the bootstraps mythology. "He's broke, but he's vegan, which is more expensive," Torres says, laughing. "It's not a movie that intends to communicate the idea: work really hard to achieve your dreams. He was trained by his mom to always want the thing and expect that he was going to get everything he wanted, even if he didn't have the path to it."

And that's the case even if his dream is as unusual and inadvisable as wanting to be a toymaker in Hasbro's talent incubator program. One might see the film as a big zig-zagging crusade, filled with vignette-like interludes from Torres's mind, all cohering to fulfill this unusual American Hasbro Dream. Everything, from helping Elizabeth get Bobby his prestigious show (retrieving his paintings that are exclusively portraits of eggs), to finding himself cleaning a strange man's apartment, to hand-delivering an apology to a spurned artist (Greta Lee), serves as the surreal side quests along the way of the hero's journey at the movie's core.

The obstinately wishful worldview that propels the film and Alejandro's almost storybook-like tale of exploits comes from Torres's own life. Alejandro's mother (played by Chilean actress Catalina Saavedra), who raises her son in a fantastical world, is a proxy for Torres's own artist mother. "She really caused me to imagine things differently. She always made me feel like things could be whatever I wanted them to be and that I should get it my way," he says, laughing. His father's sensibilities are in there, too: "Alejandro's constant questioning of authority comes from that part. I was raised with two people that kept asking, 'well, why not?' Or, 'why is it this way?'"

The curious effect of this upbringing is a character with a tinge of the determined, yet also a still-untainted child: Alejandro has alfalfa hair sticking out as if he has perpetually just gotten out of bed, and he maneuvers through the streets of New York City with an almost literal float to his every bounding step. "In many ways, he's a little bird or a little mouse—he's taking in the world," Torres says. "He's very observant. He's sort of under a log."

It's this innocence that allows him to perceive his predicament—being broke in the city and potentially facing deportation—through the eyes of what Torres and Swinton often refer to as a Don Quixote-esque knight, delighting in the opportunity of challenge and adventure. Each new headache and outburst from Elizabeth is just another mission, another dragon to slay, on the way to a clean immigration status and the top of the Hasbro mountain.

This attitude, again, comes from Torres's experience. "I always want to portray things as they feel, rather than as they are, and to me, when I was going through this period, it felt overwhelming, but exciting," he says. "It felt difficult, it felt like a big problem, but it felt like a quest. It felt like an adventure in the way that I think the movie feels."

He saw his situation as a *Problemista* does, and Alejandro does the same. "It's the kind of problem that gives you a chance to prove yourself," Torres explains. "Elizabeth and the immigration system, as portrayed through Alejandro's experience, are both the same in that they're all-encompassing, completely engulfing, scary, but ultimately exciting and alluring."

The world of the film, in turn, bears this kind of playfully audacious scale, the little knight roaming from the luminescent forests of El Salvador to the grime of New York City, from dingy immigration offices to the campy dungeons where your boss is a dragon, motor mouthing in her frayed and frazzled red hair. We're rooting for the plucky, improbable hero that is Alejandro, and at some point, we trust that he will prevail. It's an ethos of magic and momentum that is aided by Torres's team of somewhat whacky, like-minded collaborators — the grandiosity of Isabella Rossellini as the film's narrator, the propulsive wonder of Rob Rusli's score, RZA in fully-committed and gleefully strange character.

The key twist of the film, though, was to make Elizabeth not only the insufferable monster on Alejandro's quest, but also his "floatation device," whose interior life we ultimately come to see with a sort of wistful empathy. Whereas Elizabeth is a walking nightmare to everyone around her, when Alejandro lays his eyes on her, Torres says, "He thinks: oh good. My mother can't keep me away from this."

The Odd Couple

The seemingly impossible task that Tilda Swinton pulls off in embodying Elizabeth, Torres says, is that she is at once "so outlandish and yet so recognizable. She's a type for sure. She's an art world type that I met a few of, and when talking to friends who've had similar work experiences, they're like, 'oh my God, she reminds me of this person."

The art world of *Problemista*, though, cuts against stereotypically glamorized depictions, even satirical ones. "There are just so many cords," Torres chuckles, thinking of the real-world rooms and offices that Elizabeth's own mimics. "And no wall is actually white. There are stains. No screen is clean—there are spit stains on them." The film's anchor in this world is a harried outsider, who can't ever seem to get her hair right and has a run-in with everyone she encounters.

"Everywhere she goes—it's her benzene," Swinton says. "It's what makes her work. She's always talking about wanting order, but then you think, my Lord, if order actually was achieved, she would just sort of sputter and die. She's very attached to problems. It gives her life." Chaos gives life to her and Alejandro's escapades, all of which add up to a funny, beautifully peculiar arc of self-actualization for Alejandro.

But the constant swirl of frustration and indignities and how-dare-theys also serve as a portrait of a city constantly on-edge—one that, in Torres's view, is filled with countless, complicated interior lives beneath all that anxiety. "That's very New York—everyone has these tense moments with people, but they are coming at it from their own life experiences, and you don't know what those life experiences are. They're going through their own hell," Torres says. "Every waiter that Elizabeth chews up is going to go home and talk to the roommates or whomever about what an insane woman they met today. But we will know where she was coming from."

That is to say that as much as *Problemista* revels in the fire-breathing chaos that is Elizabeth, it also gives some poignant shape and depth to this type we've all encountered before. "My fantasy about her is that she was a girl from the West Country, who'd gone to Glastonbury as a groupie and had met some musician and come back to New York with him, and then split up with him and then met Bobby," Swinton says.

In flashbacks, the film shows Elizabeth alone with Bobby, rare moments when we see her fire finally dimming, her face softening. "There's something about her that's innately unhappy, and you do get a sense in the flashbacks that she was happy with Bobby," Swinton explains. As with Alejandro's battle, she compares Elizabeth to Don Quixote. "She's just tilting at windmills. She's set herself this ridiculous task. She breaks my heart."

And yet, even as Elizabeth commences on this impossible journey for a husband that left her for a cryo-chamber, she ultimately, improbably, finds her soul mate. "Elizabeth and Alejandro are a great love story," Swinton says. "They are the original odd couple."

In embarking on their farcical, fantastical quest together, a deep understanding and unusually tender bond develops. "They get what they need from each other. Even the fact that he attaches himself to her—he could take one look and turn away. He doesn't," Swinton says. "The fact that he sticks with her is meaningful." She references a scene in which Elizabeth has a characteristic freakout, unable to find the keys in her bag, before Alejandro calms her: "He's a good mother to her, and she's this sort of chaotic child."

"They're both outsiders," Swinton adds. "And I think they share this feeling of—to a certain extent—loneliness, and this sense of being shut out."

They see each other and ultimately know that "we are the same," Torres says. "He is the sort of unwavering love through time and space that she thought she had or she wanted. He sees her for what she is and likes it. She sees a partner in him."

In the process, she improbably pulls off what Swinton calls "the magic trick" of the film—actually teaching Alejandro how to go about reaching an impossible dream: to be a problem in order to solve the problem. To be his own dragon. "From her, he gets claws, he gets the tenacity," Torres says. "He learns that no is not an acceptable answer."

A Unique Pairing

Early on, as Torres and Swinton were talking about building the character that became Elizabeth, Swinton had a simple concern that is somewhat hard to imagine for any viewer of the finished film: she was worried about talking so fast.

"Elizabeth speaks a mile a minute, obviously, and Tilda has a very precise way of talking. Everything is very enunciated, very

crisp," Torres says. Filling Elizabeth's shoes meant spiraling into anxiously sinuous monologues, mostly about how every customer service representative is out to get you. "I mean, it's insane. It's very precise," Swinton says. Torres had "written it all down, no improvising."

Then, Swinton almost unwittingly toyed with a specific English accent (after first imagining that Elizabeth was from a Southern state in America) that Torres says suddenly enabled "her to be this machine gun" with her speech. "Having this sort of West country voice, it just amused me and it amused Julio. And I did it one day for a sort of laugh," Swinton recalls. "We laughed and I thought, okay, well then, let's just do that."

It was one of the early challenges of shaping the innately over-the-top nature of the character, a task Swinton found daunting. "I loved Elizabeth, but didn't know how on earth to serve her up," she says. "I needed quite a lot of encouragement from Julio to understand that I might be able to serve up something that he wanted."

But there was inherent trust—it was, after all, Swinton who had been one of the primary champions of the unplanned decision for Torres to direct the film—built into what quickly became a creative partnership, one that might seem unlikely for a veteran star like Swinton and a newly minted director.

Swinton had read the script early and signed on immediately. "It was incredibly straightforward, uncharacteristically straightforward for me," she says. Having already been a fan of Torres's work, she could immediately interpret the writing through Torres's playfully absurdist rhythms.

"I think that actually the reason she and I ended up being such a fun match is because we are both interested in people that are often side characters or smaller parts," Torres says. "I always felt, in my life, like I had a supporting character energy. I think if Elizabeth were one scene in one movie, you would get what she looks like, what she sounds like, but you wouldn't excavate as deep as we've been able to do here."

That meant swinging for the fences at first, making Elizabeth bigger and badder and more chaotic. Part of that encouragement came from Torres not only as a director, but as a scene partner and through a chemistry that Swinton says was both immediate and "delicious." "We both understood the mechanism of this coupling—the bigger she is, the smaller he is, the stiller he is, and vice versa," she notes. Torres "had a sort of cattle prod and he was constantly poking me and making me go faster, wilder, sillier."

Costuming provided an early key to tapping into Elizabeth's unruliness. "Coming up with the wig was one of the most joyful experiences I've had," Torres says. "We wanted her hair texture to fight her choice of haircut, and we wanted her to constantly be fixing her hair. And I would say to Tilda, every time she fixes her hair in her mind, she should be like, 'Fuck this fucking hair stylist that didn't get it right. It doesn't look like it did in the magazine!"

Swinton and Torres refer to costume designer Catherine George as the mastermind behind the larger-than-life shadow that Elizabeth almost literally casts. Elizabeth's cutting wrath is both mirrored and protected by the spikes, angles, and leathery textures George used in building Swinton's often armor-like exterior.

Building up this scale of extremity was in essence the setup to Elizabeth's tragic humanity: "exploring who she wants to project, versus what she actually is," Torres says. It provided a role unlike any other for Swinton amid an already illustrious career. "That was the special thing, to be able to work both—

to be as silly as we were able to be, but then to be able to actually be quite emotional," Swinton says. "I've never done anything exactly like this before. No, this was Julio Torres—absolutely unique."

The emotional counterweight, her character's soft underbelly, came through the iconically zany pairing that is RZA's Bobby to Swinton's Elizabeth—the sensitive painter to the embittered art critic.

"RZA just became the perfect Bobby because he brought this energy, this wonder—and at the same time, this artistic temperament—to Bobby, both dignity and fragility, that I think gave Elizabeth something to want to protect and latch onto," Torres says. Looking at this idiosyncratic couple, he adds, "I buy it—they're a sexy couple."

"I wanted him from the beginning," Swinton says of RZA's casting. "He's a brother in Jim Jarmusch with me. So when we first were talking about Bobby, I thought, oh God, he has to be played by RZA. He was so funny and it was his idea to bleach his hair like a baby chick."

The rest of the film was populated by Torres's own superteam of the New York comedy world, from Larry Owens to Meg Stalter, and several actors he's long admired, from James Scully to theater mainstay Greta Lee, as well as New York queer nightlife star Charlene Incarnate. Torres was also able to reunite with several of the actors from *Los Espookys*, including Spike Einbinder, Greta Titleman, and River Ramirez. And, of course, the legend that is Isabella Rossellini. In the film, Rossellini becomes a majestic proxy for Torres's authorial voice.

"I have been in love with Isabella Rossellini since I was a teenager, and I have loved her voice," Torres says. "I devoured her

Green Porno videos and she became such a person I would think of constantly. I didn't know who the narrator would be because I kept imagining my voice, obviously. And then I was like, oh, wait, what if it was Isabella? It was just so wonderful that she wanted to be a part of it, and she's been so immensely collaborative. It's just been so exciting to have the badge of being able to include her in this."

A World of Delight

Everybody, Torres explains, is a heartbreaking character in *Problemista*, from Elizabeth to Alejandro to Sharon (Kelly McCormack), the boss who fires Alejandro and is seen only briefly in the film at the start.

"She is so tragic to me," Torres says, recalling the imaginary backstory he would tell McCormack. "She went to Pace. She wanted a better job. This is the job that she got, and she's going to climb up this very small ladder and she's going to hold onto it for dear life. And she makes it sound bigger to her friends. She makes it sound bigger to her Tinder dates."

When Alejandro slips up and unplugs the cord to Bobby's cryochamber, "her whole life could come crumbling. What the hell is she going to do with that resume? So then she fires him. She's looking out for herself. She doesn't know that she's in a movie where this other kid is a protagonist."

In other words, just as *Problemista* is about Alejandro's storybook adventure, everyone else is on their own quest, full of their own small tragedies and meaningful triumphs. As heartbreaking as it might be, the film, in this way, is also decidedly hopeful, savoring all that is ugly and beautiful, messy, frustrating and precious. Torres references the film's first shot of New York, one that, as the film transitions from Alejandro's

dream-world home in El Salvador to the big city, deliberately pans over garbage on the streets.

"I kept wanting to have these garbage 'still lives' all over because that's what they are. They're 'still lives,'" Torres says. "They're not a nuisance. There's beauty to them in the same way that Elizabeth's hair is beautiful and has a sort of manic imperfection."

It's a perspective that comes alive through the particular eye of cinematographer Fredrik Wenzel, whose work with director Ruben Östlund (*Force Majeure, Triangle of Sadness*) Torres had long admired. "Fredrik has a tender but matter of fact quality to his visual style that feels like reality but through a curious and compassionate lens," Torres says. "It is elegant but humorous."

Wenzel's sensibilities paired perfectly with Torres's version of New York City that he says was a deliberate reaction to the typically "glammed up" depictions, ones where "people look like they are in a credit card commercial and everyone has this insane apartment. It's like, no, in reality, there's just plastic bags in every room."

And everyone is scraping by. When he's not under Elizabeth's clutches, Alejandro is trying to find work on Craigslist, falling into its black hole of odd jobs, pyramid schemes, and sexual fetishes. Or he's visiting the ramshackle offices of his immigration lawyer, Khalil (Laith Nakli of "Ramy"), someone who is neither a saint nor a cynical paper-pusher, but someone who operates with the earnest frankness of someone who understands the system.

To Torres, none of this is particularly sad or hopeless—it's the texture of life in New York City. A through line of his work, he notes, is "drawing attention to mundane things that we see all

around us, but seeing them, not with a mocking light, but with a curious light." He is an innately optimistic person, and he and his film are imbued with the same sensibility that Alejandro has, seeing the real world—all the sharp, unsightly edges, the problems big and small, the Elizabeth types we recognize but avoid in the streets—with "delight and pleasure, with empathy and excitement."

It's how he felt when he was on his own quest, lost in New York, hoping to make it, trying to secure his work visa and get to the mountaintop where his dreams lived. "What I understood subconsciously then, I understand at face value now, which is that the journey was important," Torres says. "All these problems weren't obstacles, they were the thing. They weren't a wall on my way to life—they were life."

Crew

Written & Directed by Julio Torres

Produced by Dave McCary

Ali Herting

Emma Stone

Julio Torres

Director of Photography Fredrik Wenzel

Production Designer Katie Byron

Edited by Sara Shaw

Jacob Secher Schulsinger

Costume Designer Catherine George

Sound Design by Ruy García

Music by Robert Ouyang Rusli

Line Producer Becky Glupczynski

Casting by Gayle Keller

Emer O'Callaghan

Cast

Alejandro Julio Torres

Elizabeth Tilda Swinton

Bobby RZA

Narrator Isabella Rossellini

Dolores Catalina Saavedra

Bingham James Scully

Khalil Laith Nakli

Spray Spike Einbinder

Young Alejandro Logan J. Alarcon-Poucel

Dalia Greta Lee

Craigslist Larry Owens

Beatriz, Khalil Law Paralegal Glo Tavarez

Sharon Kelly McCormack

FreezeCorp Receptionist Eudora Peterson

Apple Customer Service Rep Ronald Peet

Celeste Greta Titelman

Nadine Shakina Nayfack

Travis Theo Maltz

Estefani, Bank of America Rep River L. Ramirez

FedEx Clerk Sheila Moikangoa

Ms. Fuentes Yvette Mercedes

Secretary, Khalil Law Secretary Ruba Thérèse Mansouri

Gallerist Martine Gutierrez

Waiter Jack P. Raymond

Rebecca, Hasbro Receptionist Mimi Davila

Brian, Hasbro Executive Miles G. Jackson

Client Milagros Rivera

Lili Megan Stalter

Stefano, Tram Operator Jason Furlani

Drunk Bro Paul Cooper

Salon Packages Guy Bardia Salimi

Man (Cleaning Boy Fetish)

James Seol

Bartender Jordan Mendoza

MC Charlene Incarnate

Poet Amy Zimmer

Rosemary Sandra Caldwell

Man Vincent Ford

Victor Roman Maldonado

Old Alejandro Carlos E. Navedo