

Wrestling fans, nonfans alike will all enjoy ‘Cassandro’

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 107 minutes

This feature from Amazon Studios is currently playing at cinemas in major markets, but will be available to stream on Friday, Sept. 22 on Amazon Prime.

Most kids find themselves being introduced to wrestling on the T.V., taking in the over-the-top spectacle and showmanship. Frankly, plenty of them continue following these characters into adulthood. One of the most popular leagues in the world is located in Mexico and known as Lucha Libre, with the most famous wrestler being El Santo or The Saint. But there have been other notable luchadors who have made their mark.

The new film *Cassandro* tells the real story of one such person who overcame personal and professional obstacles to make his dreams come true.

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Saúl Armendáriz (Gael García Bernal), is a gay man living with his single mother (Perla De La Rosa) in El Paso, Texas and struggling to make ends meet. He works the amateur wrestling circuit in Juárez, Mexico, but isn't treated well by fellow competitors.

Tired of losing every match and frustrated at the lack of attention given to him, Armendáriz convinces successful trainer and female wrestler Sabrina (Roberta Colindrez) to coach him. His skills improve and it is suggested that he create a new "exotico" personality for the ring.

The protagonist initially refuses but soon comes around to the idea, creating the character "Cassandro" and occasionally using telenovela costumes to inspire his look. He instantly becomes popular, attracting the attention of local promoter Lorenzo (Joaquin Cosio) and his assistant Felipe (Bad Bunny). But Armendáriz's newfound success causes stress with his mother and friction in his relationship with closeted fellow wrestler Gerardo aka "El Comandante" (Raúl Castillo).

Despite being the tale of an aspiring wrestler who uses a flamboyant public persona to accomplish his goal, the movie still manages to keep its lead character relatable. Gael García Bernal makes a very positive impression as Armendáriz. The character is treated poorly by those around him and serves as a real underdog. Despite many difficulties thrown his way, he generally keeps smiling and turning on the charm to get ahead.

A lot of the fun comes in seeing Armendáriz build his character and embrace his role as a heel in the ring. Horrible insults and slurs are consistently thrown his way, but one can see the joy in the wrestler's face, not only knowing that he is finally making a lasting impression on crowds, but also winning over some of them with his exaggerated routine.

Of course, we do see insecurities as Armendáriz faces threatening opponents who can potentially hurt him, as well as personal struggles that include a deeply religious father who wants nothing to do with him. Some of these moments are effective, but a few aren't as moving.

The longshot story itself is still about as familiar as it gets and certain elements ultimately feel predictable. And the movie does try to show the effects of personal trauma on the lead's psyche during a big moment in the ring in front of a large crowd, but it's dealt with too briefly. Still, the work of the star and supporting performers are compelling enough to cover for any tropes.

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This feature also marks the narrative debut of documentarian Roger Ross Williams, who previously made a non-fiction short on the wrestler and seems an expert choice in handling this biopic. While the director's documentary background might lead one to anticipate a gritty, grimy look for the film, it is surprisingly polished and beautifully lit. Many of the arena backdrops, bars, clubs and even strolls outdoors at sunset feature bright colors that are vibrant, pop and make an impression.

Despite a few familiar moments, this outsider story is confidently told and features a wonderful cast. It certainly manages to keep one's attention throughout the zippy running time. Even Lucha Libre fans will be impressed by a significant supporting role for real-life wrestler The Son of El Santo. But in the end, you don't have to be a wrestling enthusiast to find *Cassandra* an enjoyable and inspirational biopic.

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