

AI is no match for humanity’s strength in this new Latino sci-fi film



A woman confronts the humanoid AI meant to help her in “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines,” written by Miguel Angel Caballero and Luis Antonio Aldana. (Miguel Angel Caballero)

BY STEVEN VARGAS | STAFF WRITER

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One afternoon, Tita (Laura Patalano), an elderly fieldworker who works picking strawberries, opens her front door. An artificial intelligence humanoid (Nico Greetham) is at the door, its eyes gleaming with an adjusting camera. Tita analyzes the futuristic invention before letting it in.

Tita has hired the humanoid to help her with her work, as she is getting older and isn’t as agile as she used to be. But she soon will prove that an AI can’t replace her humanity and strength.

This story is immortalized in the film “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines,” directed by Miguel Angel Caballero and co-written with Luis Antonio Aldana. It premiered at the [2023 Tribeca Film Festival](#) and will make its way to Los Angeles at the NewFilmmakers Los Angeles [InFocus: Latinx & Hispanic Film Festival](#), co-hosted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, on Sept. 23. *(Disclaimer: I will be moderating a panel at this year’s NFMLA.)*

NFMLA is a monthly festival that aims to foster fresh voices by providing industry resources to the artists behind the chosen films. The InFocus Latinx & Hispanic Film Festival, in partnership with AMPAS, coincides with the beginning of Hispanic Heritage Month. This year’s iteration welcomes 24 new films, including “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines.”

Caballero was one of 10 filmmakers chosen to create a project for [Indeed’s Rising Voices program](#), which financed short films on the theme of “the future of work.” He was selected for the program in December, then he went into two months of development at the beginning of the new year. From there he gathered a team of filmmakers to assist in what would become “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines.”



“The Ballad of Tita and the Machines” centers on a farmworker. (Miguel Angel Caballero)

The story of the film came with the help of Aldana, whom Caballero met while working in the Latino Theater Lab with the Latino Theater Company. They bonded over being queer Latinos from immigrant families. (Caballero’s family lived in Oxnard and Aldana’s called Huntington Park home.) While at LTC, they contributed to the creation of [2007’s “Melancholia.”](#) a play that told the story of a young Marine who returns home from the Iraq war and struggles to readjust to his old life.

In their latest work for Rising Voices, Aldana suggested they dive into the history of their own families who immigrated to the U.S. to find work. They took the story they were familiar with and added a futuristic twist: What if AI couldn’t keep up with what their families had endured?

“It’s a bit of an homage to our working-class families and community that very often are rendered invisible in this country,” Caballero said of the film.

Caballero’s mother, father and older siblings worked in fields, picking fruits like grapes, oranges and strawberries — the same fruit that Tita picks throughout the short film.

He then mulled on the concept of essential workers, a term that became commonplace at the start of the pandemic to describe people who worked in positions crucial to helping society stay afloat, such as grocery workers, farmworkers and fast food workers. Picking, something often considered “unskilled work,” suddenly held a new importance.

“It’s a very specific skill that machines cannot do,” Caballero said.

The duo chose to pit humans against AI because the emerging technology had been a big part of the discourse at the beginning of the year. “We didn’t realize it was gonna be so prevalent now,” Caballero said.

Bojana Sandic, programming director of NFMLA, says she chose to include Caballero and Aldana’s film in the InFocus festival because of its relevance and wit, introducing humor to address the dehumanizing nature of AI.

“The conversation is moving forward so quickly and there are lots of people who are pushing back on that narrative,” Sandic said. “I think this film does that in a way that is pointing out the ways in which all types of human labor are discounted in that process.

“It can not only be unethical but also impossible when you don’t account for humanity,” she added.

Even in today’s context — [ongoing strikes](#) against Hollywood calling for industry leaders to steer from relying on AI to replace human creativity in screenwriting and acting — the film itself highlights the importance of supporting the work of living people.

“I think that there is a prediction in this that is already starting to be borne out in some places, and I think we will see it borne out more and more,” Sandic said.



“The Ballad of Tita and the Machines” tackles the relationship between humanity and AI. (Miguel Angel Caballero)

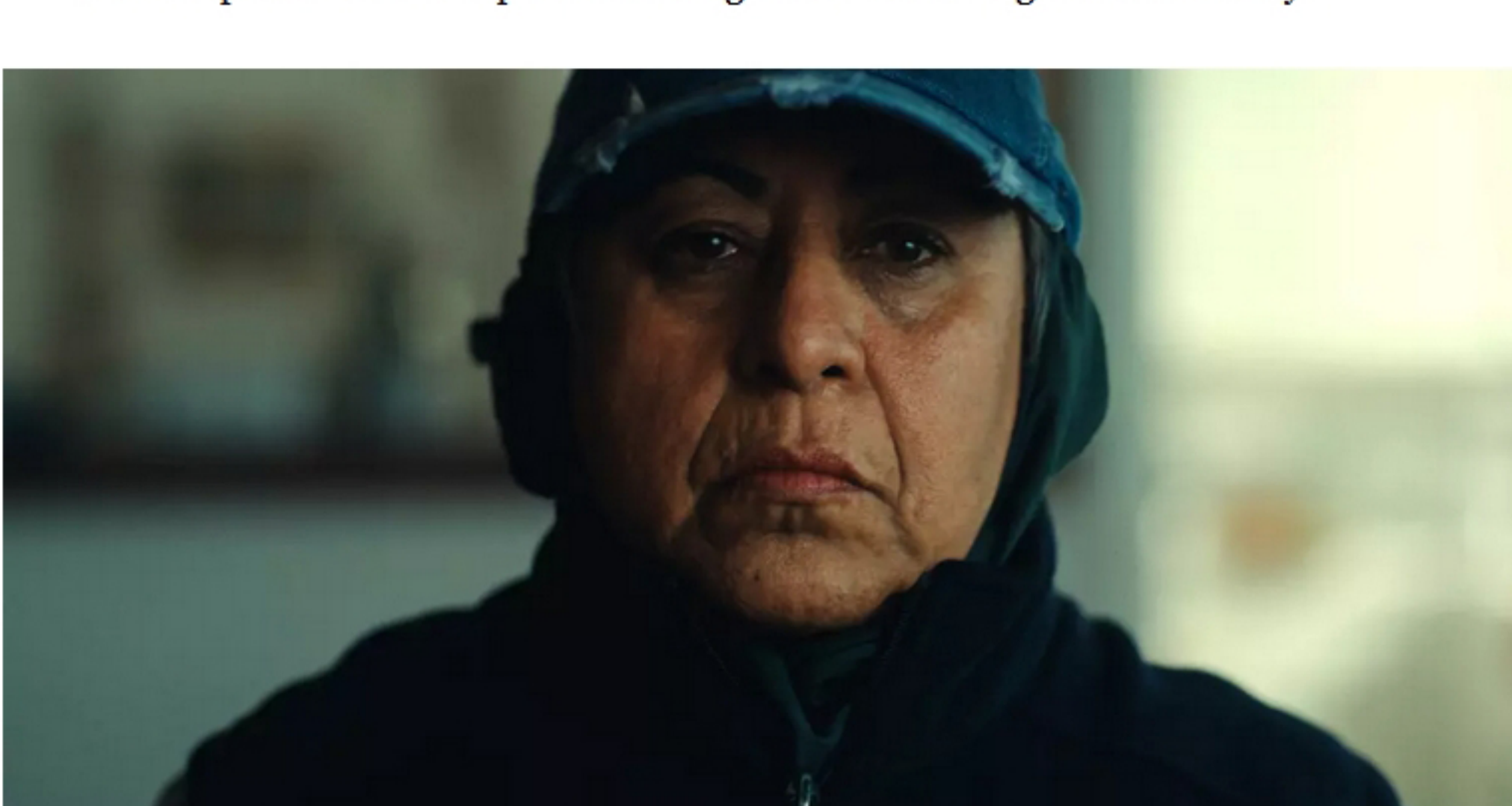
Aldana, an avid sci-fi fan, wanted the film to be more than just another dive into AI. He wanted to subvert the stereotypes of sci-fi. Oftentimes, the hero of these tales is white and aids the working-class characters on the sidelines. This time around, he made the working-class character the hero.

“It’s a testament to our lens as children of immigrants and queer filmmakers,” he said.

The duo’s perspectives in the sci-fi genre add nuance to Latino filmmaking. Their goal was to represent the voices of queer Latinos in California. Caballero pointed out that the Latino experience in the U.S. is more diverse than the usual narratives told by Latinos outside the U.S. They sought to depict a multitude of experiences in “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines” through small exchanges onscreen.

For example, Tita holds up a picture of her late wife (portrayed by a photo of Aldana’s mother), and she speaks to her daughter in Spanish while her daughter responds in English. These moments feel small, but for other Latinos who grew up in the U.S., the experience is familiar.

“We’re writing stories about our reality,” Caballero said. “Our mothers spoke Spanish and we spoke to them in Spanish and English. We’re writing from that reality.”



A farmworker faces her own obsolescence in the film. (Miguel Angel Caballero)

The short film, like many others in the festival, spotlights Latino talent in cinema, a [long-underrepresented group](#) in entertainment. Patalano told Caballero that she had been in the industry for almost 40 years and “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines” was her first leading role.

“She said, ‘Yeah, Hollywood doesn’t write roles for leading women that look like me with my skin color,’” he recalled. “It was a very happy moment but it broke my heart.”

In casting the film, Caballero sought to bring in talent that had close proximity to fieldwork. He cast his older brother and sister, who worked in the fields with his parents and donned the regalia once again — this time for the camera.

“We made a huge effort that everybody that we had as an extra either had to be a current field worker — which we had quite a handful of them — had to be children of field workers, or past field workers,” Caballero said.

Caballero found it “beautiful” to represent working-class folks as three-dimensional characters like Tita, who portrays both a sweet childlike joy and a defiance against technology threatening her livelihood.

In “The Ballad of Tita and the Machines,” the story tells of a reality that is not only filled with expansive technological advances but also a future where someone like Tita stands in front of an AI, holding undeniable power over it.

“It’s high time that we had a sci-fi movie with a brown, queer Mexicana in the lead existing in this hyper-futuristic world,” Aldana said.

‘The Ballad of Tita and the Machines’

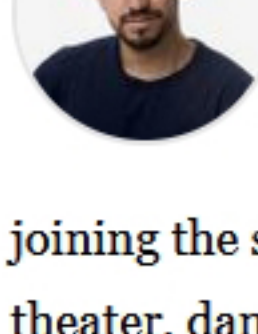
Where: Linwood Dunn Theater, 1313 Vine St., Los Angeles

When: 5:30 to 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 23.

Cost: \$10 to \$30

Info: [newfilmmakersla.com](#)

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Steven Vargas is an arts reporter for the Los Angeles Times. Prior to joining the staff, he was an Entertainment and Arts intern. His areas of focus include theater, dance and social change. He previously reported with such outlets as E! News, USA Today, L.A. Sentinel and BuzzFeed News. During his time at USC, he co-founded the Equity Board with Annenberg Media through a Poynter Media Project and penned the newsroom’s “Guide for Equitable Reporting Strategies and Newsroom Style.” His short documentary, “Dancing at Home,” earned first place in the L.A. Press Club’s Life in the Time of the Coronavirus contest in May 2020 and awarded the PPAGLA Student videographer of the year. In 2021, he took part in the second cohort of Jose Solís’ BIPOC Critics Lab with the Kennedy Center. When he isn’t dancing, or writing about dance, he is scrolling through TikTok and obsessing over the latest internet trends.