

PIÑATA PRAYERS

Directed by Daniel Larios

Documentary Short

TRT: 23:29

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Color

2025

[Trailer](#)

[Website](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Stills](#)





Piñata Prayers navigates a personal loss of faith and subsequent reckoning with mortality - with the help of a third-generation piñata-maker and her creations.

Synopsis

The film begins with a childhood memory. Daniel, age 2, sees a piñata from across the street and runs after it - he is nearly killed by a semi-truck in the process. Adult Daniel's narration guides us from this memory onto others, as archival and re-enactment intertwine and reveal core memories of a childhood spent in church and smashing piñatas. Parallel to this, the film unveils little-known origins of the piñata and its evolution from a colonial Catholic ritual into a secular celebration of life. Daniel fears death - an ever present possibility during his teenage years in the ganglands of El Salvador - but he ultimately believes that so long as he is faithful to God, he will live forever under his protection. Yet as he grows older and begins to question his faith, this shield begins to crack.

In the present, Daniel has since lost his faith... but not his love for piñatas. This leads him to meeting with Yesenia Prieto, a third-generation piñata-maker who runs her own piñata studio. Daniel asks for her help in restoring a piñata he tried to make in the shape of himself - and for her help in telling this story. Her piñatas help animate the re-enactments, as dancers and rear-projection create a stage for these piñatas to bring memory, history, and emotions to life. Through this process of co-creation, Daniel confronts his loss of faith and his persisting fear of death, as both Creator and Created ponder the possible meaning you can find in a temporary life.

Artistic Approach

Piñata Prayers is a creative and personal nonfiction film, exploring lost memories and faded connections in creative, emotive manners. I'm inspired by films such as Elena by Petra Costa and The Missing Picture by Rithy Panh.

The narrative of this film follows memories from my life where I was in mortal danger that show how protected I felt by faith... and how vulnerable I felt when I lost it. We bring these to life in a Black Box stage, using pulleys to arrange piñatas that dancers will interact with. We use rear projection to create "sets" for these memories, made from a combination of footage and animation.

My narration guides the audience through these scenes, as they interweave with archival footage of my family, both in the United States and El Salvador - a country literally named after God where violence is unfortunately rampant and Christian teachings heavily dictate the law. A recorded conversation with my mother brings to light our differing experiences, as we discuss ours upbringings and my loss of faith.

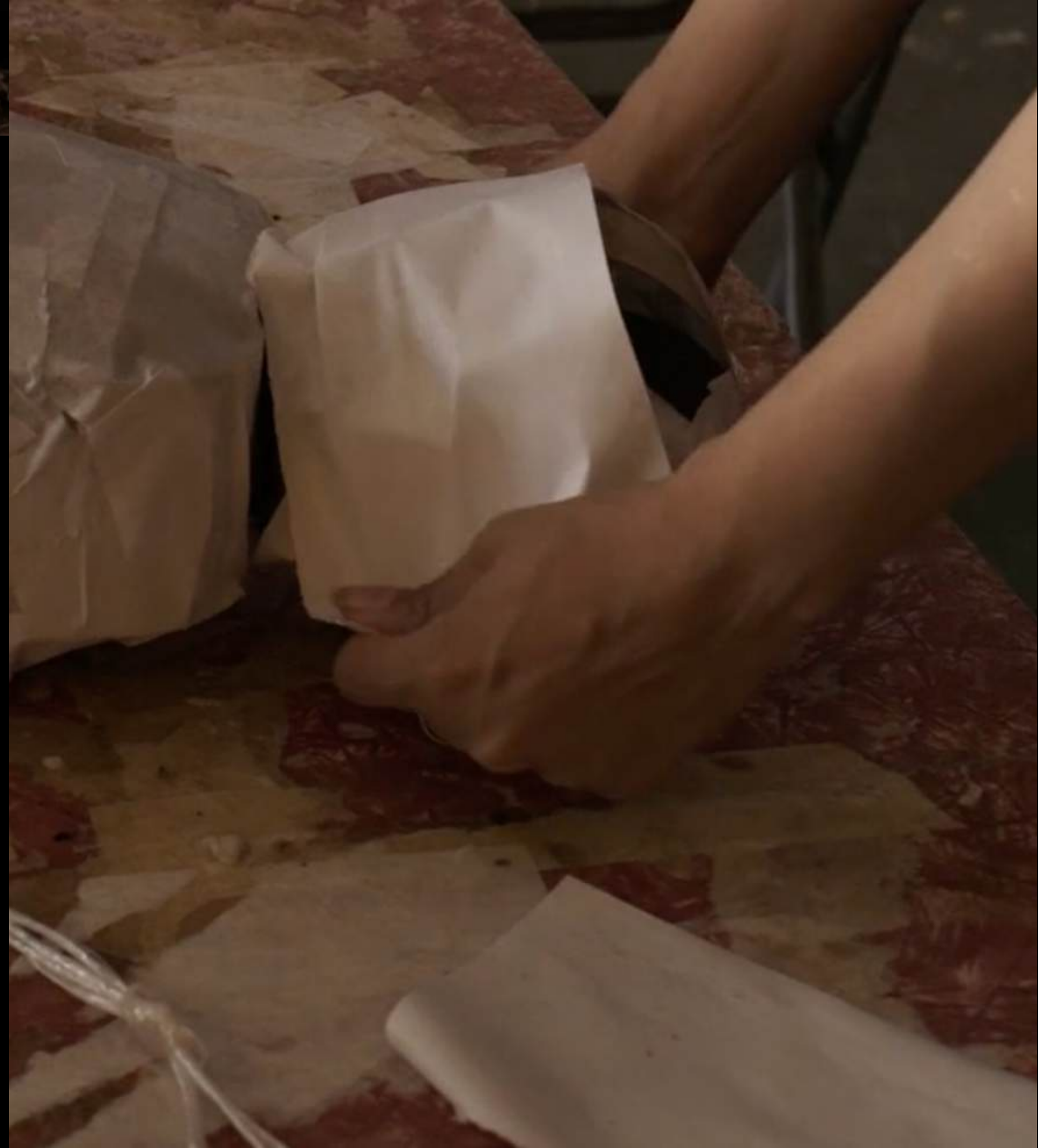


Artistic Approach

We feature one other important character: Yesenia Prieto, a third-generation piñata maker. We capture verite of her working in her studio, and interviews, through which we illuminate the past and present of the art form, as she shares her own philosophy on life and piñatas. She becomes an accomplice in the journey, as she helps me bring a piñata version of myself to life.

Throughout the film I want the soundscape to reflect the minimal melancholy of the visual approach, environmental textures offering echoes of reality while feeling slightly surreal, much in the way old memories and dreams do.

I want the score to be at times tender and nostalgic, at times haunted and unsettling. It will be primarily electronic, while taking some inspiration from religious music I grew up with. I want the music to reinterpret these sounds for renewed meaning.



Crew



Daniel Larios - Director, Writer, Producer

Daniel is a Salvadoran-American producer, director, and writer based in Los Angeles. His third short, SUPERESTAR, has played at festivals including Bentonville, NewFilmmakers LA, San Diego Latino, San Francisco Latino, and Philadelphia Latino where it won the LOLA Award. His second short film MEMORAMA (2019) played in competition at festivals including Oaxaca International, Paraguay International and ICARO International, where it won 2nd place for Best Fiction Short. Daniel previously worked as a coordinator for the Sundance Documentary Film Fund, and has associate produced and post-supervised feature documentaries for companies like Tremolo Productions and Actual Films. He is a 2022 Tomorrow's Filmmakers Today Fellow and a 2023 Sundance Collab Scholarship recipient. He won the 2022 Blackstar Doc Shorts Pitch with this short film.

Crew



Marcel Perez - Producer

Marcel is a film producer from Miami, FL, and a 1st generation Cuban-Peruvian American. His work focuses on diverse stories from different cultures, backgrounds, and LGBTQIA identities to put people of color and women at the forefront of the media. Marcel studied mechanical engineering and robotics at FIU. He learned and performed improv at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre. He has produced three features: *The Way You Look Tonight* (distributed by Gravitas Ventures, Nominated for Best Feature at Cinequest Film Festival, and received the Peach Award at Atlanta Film Festival), *I Before Thee* (distributed by Bridgestone Multimedia). His latest feature *La Leyenda Negra* (Official Selection 2020 Sundance Film Festival, OutFest LA, BFI Flare, IndieLisboa, and Festival MIX Milano) is currently streaming on HBO Max/HBO Latino and was nominated for the Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award as well as the GLAAD Media Award (Outstanding TV Movie) in 2021.

Crew



B. Ruben Mendoza - Director of Photography

Rubén Mendoza is a Salvadoran-American cinematographer from Los Angeles. Most recently he photographed the feature films PUDDYSTICKS, starring Mamoudou Athie and Dan Bakkedahl, and WE BURN LIKE THIS, which premiered at Santa Barbara International Film Festival and also played at Deauville Film Festival and Heartland Film Festival. He received his MFA from USC film school and was a mentee in the ASC Vision Mentorship Program under Xavier Grobet, ASC. He was a 2021 Project Involve Cinematography fellow.



Sansanto- Composer

Sansanto is a Mexican-American electronic music producer and composer based in the Inland Empire. He composed the score for Arroró, directed by Annie Valdes, which was selected as part of Hola Mexico Film Festival's Tomorrow's Filmmakers Today 2022. Their compositions move seamlessly between feelings of dread and ecstatic euphoria.

Crew



Yesenia Prieto - Piñata-maker / Participant

Yesenia Prieto is the founder of La Piñata Design studio and a third generation piñata-maker. Her work has been featured in the Howard Griffin Gallery, Music Taste Good Festival, Coachella 2019, and Craft in America. She has done custom orders for numerous celebrity clients such as Rihanna, Drake, and 2Chainz. Yesenia is Mexican-American and originally from South Central LA; her family-run studio is based in Covina, CA.



Erika Soto - Choreographer/Dancer

Erika Soto is a choreographer and dancer from Laredo TX, now based in Los Angeles. Her work is informed by her Catholic bordertown upbringing, influenced by her Mexican-American upbringing as well as her studies in contemporary dance. She has performed in numerous music videos and dance films, and has choreographed works for the Stomping Ground Indigenous/Latine Showcase in 2022 and 2023.

Director's Statement

When I was 27, I decided to make a piñata in the shape of myself. What I thought would be a one-week endeavor became two months of placing parts wrong and ruining proportions and it eventually resulted in this weird little shell of a piñata person. After laboring for nights and weekends on this miniature me, I also couldn't bring myself to destroy him. So in my apartment he lived, watching me from the corner of my room. Staring at him from my desk, I reflected on the frustration and humility I experienced making him and it made me wonder: why does my community choose to celebrate life by destroying something?

Piñata Prayers is a film that delves into the parallels between two colonial inheritances many Salvadorans receive: piñatas and Christianity. Being Salvadoran, there are two things that can often be hard to talk about in our community - the gang violence we've endured, what we've lost due to colonialism. It was my hope that through this film, I could find a way to broach this topic in a creative, earnest way.

I usually know when I have a film worth making in my head if it scares me. I like having a practice that demands that I be brave and confront the parts of myself and of humanity that haunt me. I try to make the process and style fantastic and eye-catching because it's how I make these projects approachable enough for myself and others.

I think all human expression is essential to our ability to love and care for one another. Cinematic transcendence comes through intentional, beautiful work, where we face the challenges of humanity and insist upon meaning. I think of this film is an exorcism, capturing my ghosts and turning them into something beautiful. I hope this film gifts you something you cherish. Thank you for your time!



Audience and Distribution

Our film will have its world premiere at the 2025 True/False Film Fest. After, it will go on a festival run that will target Latine, Shorts and Documentary Festivals -particularly festivals located in areas with large Latine populations - such as Blackstar, LALIFF, DC/DOX, SFFILM, Guanajuato, ICARO, DOC NYC, and others.

We'd like to acquire distribution for 2025/2026 on televised public distribution in North America such as POV Shorts, and/or a platform such as LA Times Docs, NYT Op-Docs, or the The New Yorker. We'd like to share the film at art museums close to large Mexican and Central American populations (LA, Oakland, DC, Houston, Miami, Chicago), and have Yesenia conduct piñata-making workshops with audiences after each community screening. We have preserved the piñatas from the films in the hopes we can display them at these screenings. **We are particularly hopeful for a distribution partner that is supportive of this kind of impact work.**

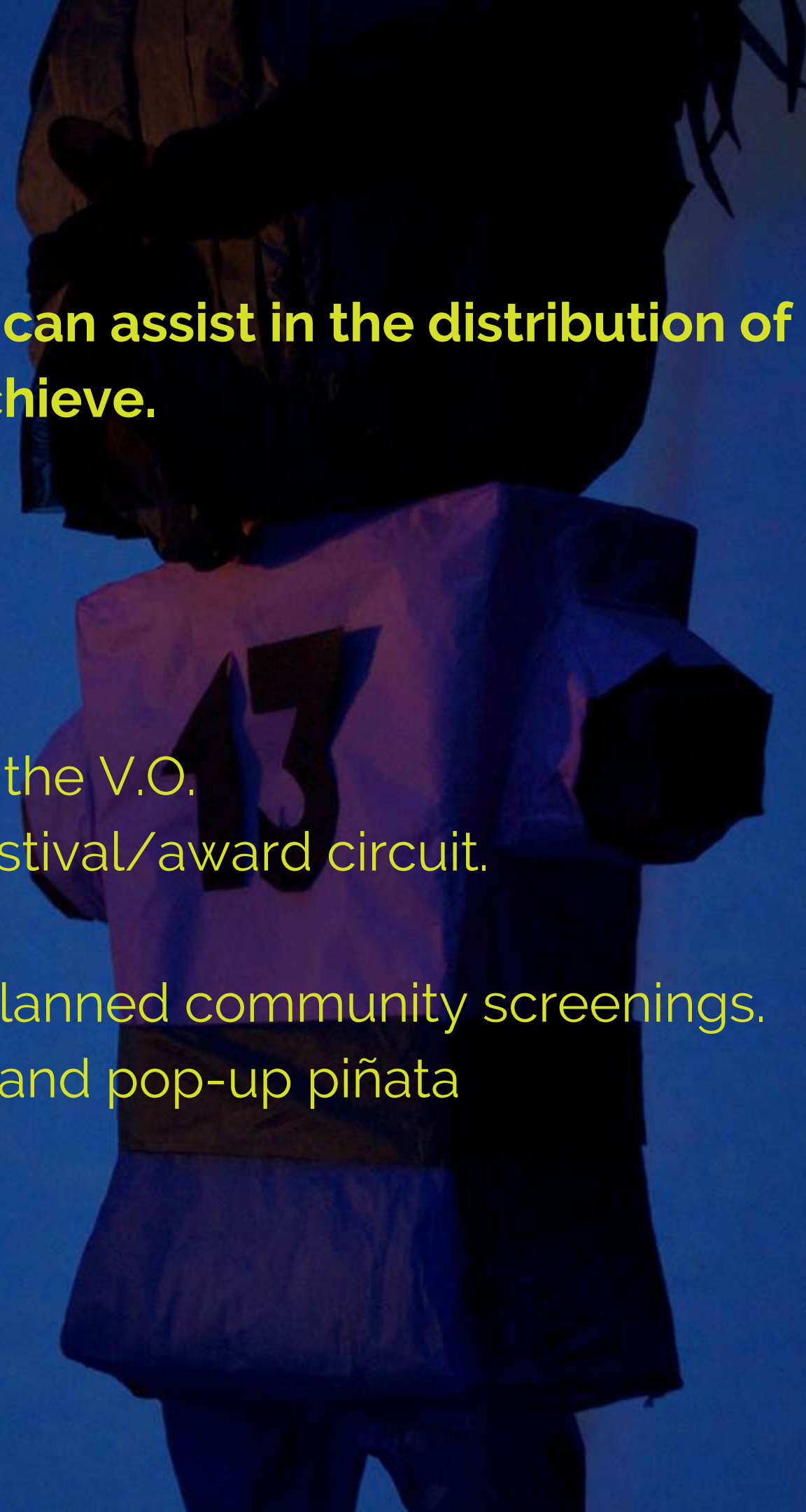


Executive Producers

We are very interested in Executive Producers who can assist in the distribution of the short, as well as the impact goals we hope to achieve.

We are looking for:

- Additional Funds for recording Spanish version of the V.O.
- Additional Funds for the sharing the film on the festival/award circuit.
- Introductions to potential distributors
- Connections to Museum/Gallery spaces for our planned community screenings.
- Additional Funds to stage community screenings and pop-up piñata galleries/workshops.



For all Inquiries, Please contact:

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- Blackstar Projects
- Warner 150

(2022 Doc Shorts Pitch Grand Prize Winner)

- Sundance Artist Accelerator Program

(2023 Sundance Collab Latine Scholar)

Postcolonial Pinata LLC