

# In Merced Elizondo's 'The Mourning Of,' a Woman Attends Strangers' Funerals



Merced Elizondo made his short film “The Mourning Of,” about a woman who visits strangers’ funerals, to deal with his own fear of death.

The film stars a magnetic Natalia Villegas and came about from Elizondo’s grandmother telling him about “mujeres plañideras”— professional mourners hired to weep at funerals, who are usually women.

“The idea of a stranger walking amongst your friends and family on the worst day of their lives fascinated and terrified me. But what felt even more interesting was someone doing this not for money, but because they couldn’t face the idea of moving on from their loss,” Elizondo says.

The film recently played the [El Paso Film Festival](#), where it won Best Narrative Short. It played El Paso while the city’s film community is on a collective high with the release of Paul Thomas Anderson’s *One Battle After Another*, which shot largely in the border town and is coming out during the festival. The Dallas-based Elizondo says *One Battle* — and many other projects by Texas-based filmmakers — prove that you don’t need to live in New York or Los Angeles to make films.

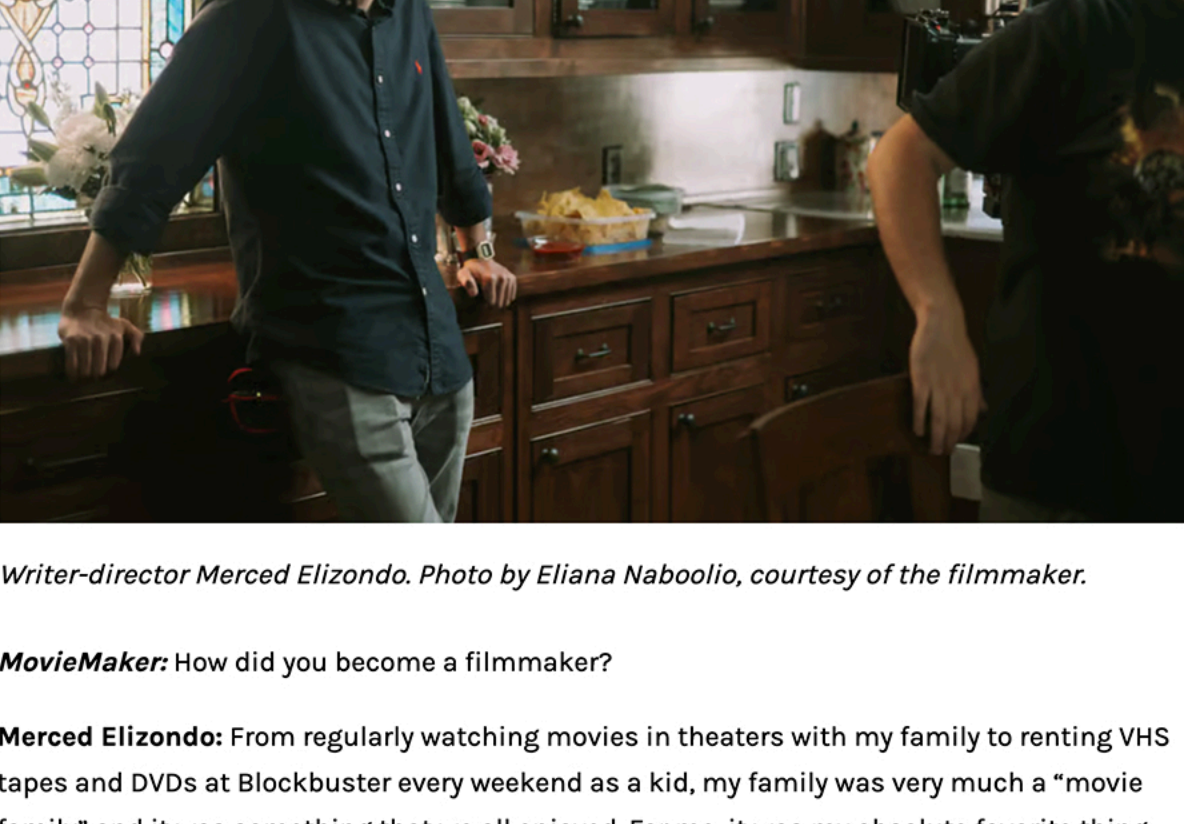
But both coastal cities do factor into his filmmaking journey. As a child of Mexican immigrants, he didn’t see filmmaking as a viable career path. But that changed a decade ago when he worked in New York City. And “The Mourning Of” came about thanks in part to a grant from NewFilmmakers Los Angeles and Warner Bros. Discovery.

The film had its international premiere at the Festival Internacional de Cine en Guadalajara, one of the most important festivals in Latin America. “It was my first time getting to screen any of my films in Mexico, so that of course meant a lot to me, but we also got to project the film on the biggest screen in the entire continent. That’s something you never forget,” he says.

It became Oscar qualifying at the St. Louis International Film Festival, where it won Best Live Action Short. He was working on a commercial shoot when he got the news and “just about jumped out of my seat,” he recalls.

Elizondo, who has also been a directing fellow for Ryan Murphy’s Half Initiative and honored as Person of the Year by the National Hispanic Institute, is now at work developing his debut feature film, *The Thing About Elephants*. We talked with him about Texas, New York, Los Angeles, and, of course, death.

## Merced Elizondo on “The Mourning Of”



Writer-director Merced Elizondo. Photo by Eliana Naboolio, courtesy of the filmmaker.

**MovieMaker:** How did you become a filmmaker?

**Merced Elizondo:** From regularly watching movies in theaters with my family to renting VHS tapes and DVDs at Blockbuster every weekend as a kid, my family was very much a “movie family” and it was something that we all enjoyed. For me, it was my absolute favorite thing in the world to do. I knew from a very early age that I wanted to make films, but as a Latino from Texas with immigrant parents and no one in my family ever having dared to attempt a career in the arts, it seemed so far out of the realm of possibility. I didn’t even allow myself to dream that big because it felt like something that was totally unrealistic for someone with my background.

So, I completely let go of the idea of going to film school. I had no one to look up to and didn’t see anyone that looked like me or spoke like me making movies, so I kept this dream a secret all to myself. I studied advertising at the University of Texas at Austin and did an internship at

NBCUniversal during the summer of 2015, and it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. Being in New York and working at 30 Rock for three months while surrounded by other people chasing their passions was the uncomfortable push over the edge that I needed to finally pursue my dream, and ever since then I haven’t looked back.

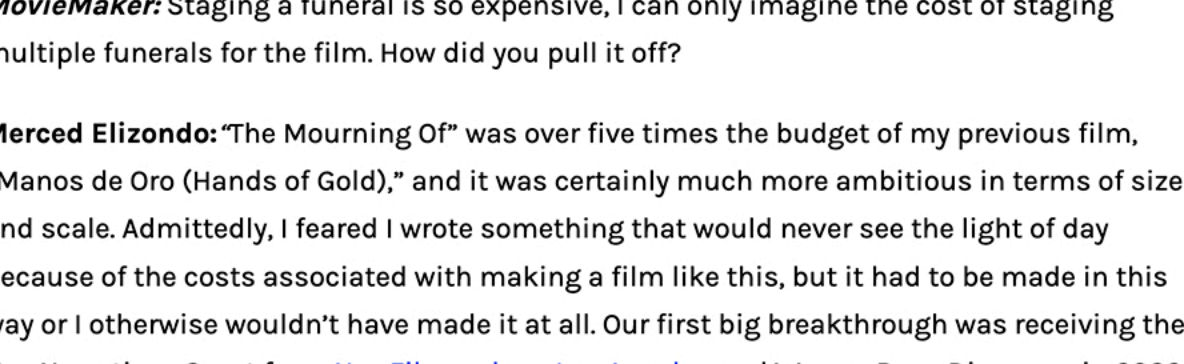
I threw myself at any production that would be willing to let me on their set, read dozens of books, and watched thousands of hours of YouTube videos in order to make up for lost time because I felt like I had to. I’ve made four films now and found this to be the best form of film school, but even after eight years of working as a filmmaker, I still feel like I’m learning. I hope I can keep it that way.

**MovieMaker:** What made you want to make “The Mourning Of”? What did you want to express?

**Merced Elizondo:** *The Mourning Of* was actually the first idea for a film that I ever had back in 2016, but I sat on it for years until I felt ready to tackle it.

Death is my biggest fear— not the physical suffering, but the existential dilemma of what happens after. The notion that people will attend our funeral one day and then learn to live in a world where we only exist in their memories is terrifying. How will I be remembered? Will I even be remembered at all? On the flip side, how will my grief manifest when I lose my loved ones, and what will this devastation look like when pushed to the limit?

“The Mourning Of” was born out of a necessity to answer these questions. Through Maribel’s journey, I wanted to reshape the perceptions that are commonly associated with death and grief. When you lose someone close, that pain stays with you like a ghost. Some days you feel it more than others, but it’s always there. What I was really trying to express is that grief isn’t something you move on from. You carry it with you for the rest of your life, and making this film was me finally giving into that idea in hopes that others can do the same.



Natalia Villegas in “The Mourning Of”

**MovieMaker:** Staging a funeral is so expensive, I can only imagine the cost of staging multiple funerals for the film. How did you pull it off?

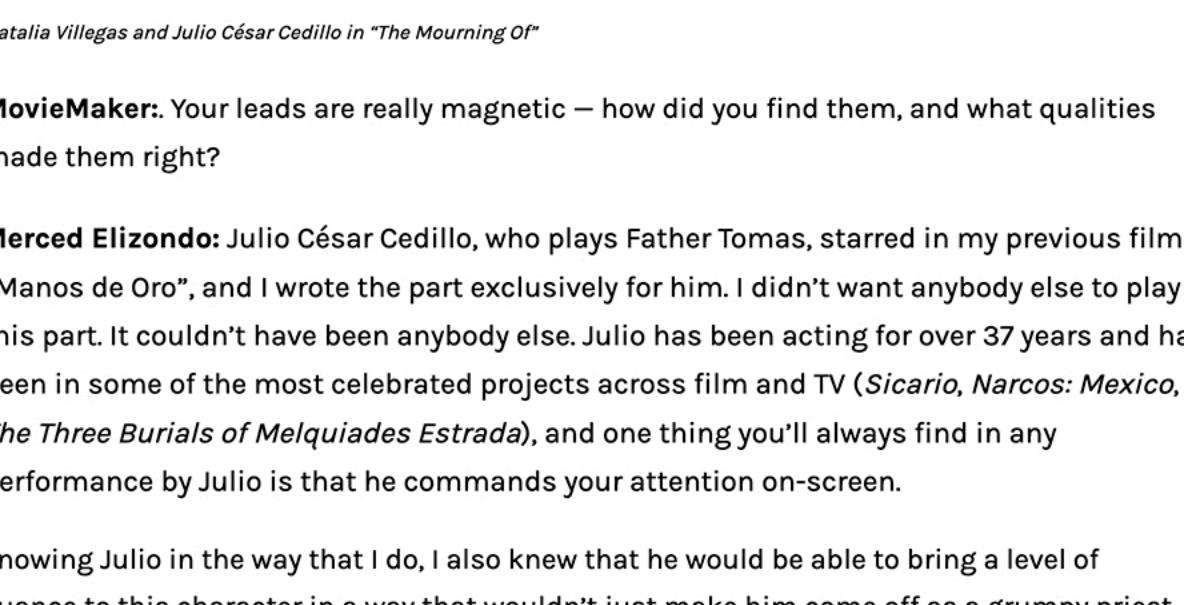
**Merced Elizondo:** “The Mourning Of” was over five times the budget of my previous film, “Manos de Oro (Hands of Gold),” and it was certainly much more ambitious in terms of size and scale. Admittedly, I feared I wrote something that would never see the light of day because of the costs associated with making a film like this, but it had to be made in this way or I otherwise wouldn’t have made it at all. Our first big breakthrough was receiving the NewNarratives Grant from [NewFilmmakers Los Angeles](#) and Warner Bros. Discovery in 2022 that helped cover a significant portion of our budget, and that changed everything.

Being able to tell people that our film was supported by Warner Bros. opened many doors to help us raise the rest of the money we needed through fiscal sponsorship, and it also allowed me to bring on collaborators that I always dreamed of working with. From having to stage several funerals on-camera, to printing hundreds of funeral programs and obituaries, to having to direct over 175 extras across five days of production, there’s no question that this was the most challenging thing I’ve ever done in my entire life, but I feel that we were able to get the proper amount of resources and the right people to pull it off in a way that I’m still very proud of.

**MovieMaker:** How did you get permission to film inside a church?

**Merced Elizondo:** Finding the right church felt like it was make or break for this film because I was after a very specific look— something gothic, with lots of stained glass windows, and spacious enough to where we could easily move our camera. I spoke to several Catholic churches around the Dallas-Fort Worth area about using their spaces, but they wanted to get the dioceses involved and have them approve the script, and I knew they would immediately take issue with the notion of a woman attending the funerals of strangers.

I kept running into a wall and decided to turn to other churches that weren’t Catholic, and that’s when I found St. John’s Anglican Church in Fort Worth. This is an English-gothic church that was built in 1924, and it’s as if it was made for our film. From the first conversation, I made it clear that we would be respectful of their space and wouldn’t do anything that would otherwise be considered irreverent to their church and community, and because I was honest about our intentions, they opened their doors to us completely. For three days straight, they gave us carte blanche access to every corner of the church and let us stay as long as we needed to. I owe them everything.



Natalia Villegas and Julio César Cedillo in “The Mourning Of”

**MovieMaker:** Your leads are really magnetic — how did you find them, and what qualities made them right?

**Merced Elizondo:** Julio César Cedillo, who plays Father Tomas, starred in my previous film “Manos de Oro,” and I wrote the part exclusively for him. I didn’t want anybody else to play this part. It couldn’t have been anybody else. Julio has been acting for over 37 years and has been in some of the most celebrated projects across film and TV (*Sicario*, *Narcos: Mexico*, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*), and one thing you’ll always find in any performance by Julio is that he commands your attention on-screen.

Knowing Julio in the way that I do, I also knew that he would be able to bring a level of nuance to this character in a way that wouldn’t just make him come off as a grumpy priest. Father Tomas has a profound heart and level of empathy for Maribel that needed to be carefully woven into his confrontation with her at the end, and I’m so grateful that Julio took full ownership of the character and gave him life in such an honest way.

Finding our Maribel was like finding a needle in a haystack while in the middle of a tornado, but when we did, let me tell you — it felt like my entire world opened up. I found Natalia Villegas on Instagram about three weeks before production, and right away we began to audition her and talked through her ideas for the character across several conversations.

Similar to Julio, I quickly knew that it quite literally couldn’t have been anyone else. Natalia is the beating heart of “The Mourning Of” and clearly a gifted performer. I knew that from the start, but what drew me to her is how she’s able to express so much without not having to say anything at all.

Her character hardly has any dialogue, yet through her body language, composure, and big eyes that you can’t look away from, she made Maribel feel like a person you want to hug as much as you want to shake her down for doing what she’s doing. She couldn’t lean on words because she barely had any, and that’s not an easy thing to do. I can’t wait for the rest of the world to discover Natalia Villegas.

**MovieMaker:** How do you find the Dallas film scene? And making films in Texas overall?

**Merced Elizondo:** I love this question because I’ll take any opportunity I can get to talk about what’s going on here in Texas. Historically, tons of commercials shoot here in Dallas and it’s been that way for a long time. It’s what has driven a good chunk of the production work that’s available, with the occasional network television show that chooses to film here.

That being said, since I began my career, I’ve noticed two things slowly happening— more and more productions are coming to Dallas and filming their projects here, and more and more prolific filmmakers are calling Texas their home. From David Lowery and Clint Bentley (Dallas) to Richard Linklater and Noah Hawley (Austin), the culture is shifting. It’s fantastic when those productions come to Texas because it creates more jobs for our incredibly robust workforce of filmmakers to make a living. For example, significant portions of Paul Thomas Anderson’s *One Battle After Another* were filmed in El Paso.

Yet even when they don’t film here, it signals to the rest of us that it can happen no matter where you live, and you don’t have to live in LA or New York to build a career as a filmmaker. I’ve seen this attitude get adopted much more lately.

You can either make cinema in your community and still be successful or travel the world to make cinema and never leave the community that you call home. Either way, you’re doing what you love, and both Dallas (and the state of Texas) are all the better for it because it raises the bar for all of us.

I’d like to exist somewhere in the middle. No matter how big my budgets are in the future or where I shoot my next couple of films, I’ll always be an independent filmmaker at heart and carry this community-minded spirit with me wherever I go. I’ve had many opportunities to move to Los Angeles and New York, and maybe I will someday for a brief moment, but I see no reason to right now. I choose to be in Dallas because this is my home, and I choose to keep punk-rocking my way as an indie filmmaker in the community where it all started.

[The El Paso Film Festival](#), one of *MovieMaker*’s [50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee](#) and [25 Coolest Film Festivals](#), continues through Saturday.

Main image: Natalia Villegas in “The Mourning Of” by Merced Elizondo.