



NEW RELEASES

Earth Mama

Earth Mama

Directed by: Savannah Leaf
©: Earth Mama Rights LLC,
Channel Four Television Corporation
An Academy Films/Park Pictures production
Presented by: A24, Film4
Executive Producers: James Wilson,
Jackie Kelman Bisbee, Lance Acord,
Simon Cooper, Christine D'Souza Gelb,
Cameron Washington, David Kimbangi, Ben Coren
Produced by: Cody Ryder, Shirley O'Connor,
Medb Riordan, Sam Bisbee, Savannah Leaf
Co-producer: Danielle Massie
Unit Production Manager: Cheney Chen
Location Manager/Scout: Rashod Edwards
Post Production Supervision by: Post Hub
Post-production Supervisor: Mark Steele
1st Assistant Director: Siena Brown
Script Supervisor: Virginia McCarthy
Casting by: Geraldine Barón, Abby Harri,
Salome Oggenfuss
Written by: Savannah Leaf
Based on the short film The Heart Still Hums by:
Savanah Leaf, Taylor Russell
Photographed by: Jody Lee Lipes
VFX by: Artjail
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Matt Heron
Editor: George Cragg
Production Designer: Juliana Barreto Barreto
Art Director: Alanna D-Barrett
Costume Designer: Natasha Hester
Hair Department Head: Keke Vasquez-Tamalí
Makeup Department Head: Josie Rodriguez
Music by: Kelsey Lu
Production Sound Mixer: Brian Copenhagen
Re-recording Mixer: Per Boström
Supervising Stunt Coordinator/Consultant:
Rocky Capella
Stunt Co-ordinator: Mike Martinez
Cast:
Tia Nomore (*Gia*)
Erika Alexander (*Miss Carmen*)
Doechii (*Trina*)
Keta Price (*Mel*)
Sharon Duncan-Brewster (*Monica*)
Kamaya Jones (*Amber*)
Slim Yani (*Ari*)
Bruhfromlastnight (*Earl*)
James Allen (*James*)
Marley Thompson (*Short*)
Olivia Luccardi (*Alexis*)
Dominic Fike (*Miles*)
Bokeem Woodbine (*Paul*)
Amber Ramsey (*Talia*)
Tina D'Elia (*Jasmine*)
Alexis Rivas (*Shaynah*)
Ca'Ron Coleman (*Trey*)
Harry Chen (*photographer*)
Tina Robinson (*cashier*)
Anankha Pereira (*woman 1*)
Nathan Hunter (*store clerk*)
La Keisha Fuller (*woman 2*)
Tavia Percia (*woman 3*)
Cheyann Orsua (*woman 4*)
Tiffany Garner (*woman 5*)
Qeashaun Thompson (*man 1*)
Michael Bigasan (*man 2*)
Marsai Jackson (*nurse 1*)
Davina Countee (*nurse 2*)
Cynthia Mosby (*grandmother*)
Deonjena Patterson (*best friend 1*)
Joseph Nu'utai Taugavau (*young man*)
Clennetta Mars (*sister 1*)

'I don't need a gold star to tell me I'm a good mom!' Gia (Tia Nomore) snaps at her case worker, showing her frustration as she struggles to meet the seemingly impossible court-mandated conditions to regain her two young children from foster care in San Francisco's Bay Area. Heavily pregnant, and a recovering addict, Gia is the stubborn heart of writer/director Savannah Leaf's intimate and piercing first feature, which builds on the real-life single mothers' tales of *The Heart Still Hums*, the award-decorated 2020 documentary short Leaf co-directed with actress Taylor Russell.

Demonstrating an extraordinary lightness of touch, and a poetic visual sense, Leaf nudges Gia's story from social issue drama into a compassionate character study, one where Gia is quietly but defiantly trying to retain some control over her life, in a system that persists in treating her not as a person, but as a problem to be solved.

Leaf quickly embeds us in Gia's long days working at a photo portrait shop, stage-managing other happier families' celebratory photos, in bleak contrast to her weekly supervised hour with a clinging son and angry daughter. A watchful drama, which scrupulously avoids melodrama or sentimentality, the film swerves the traditional broke-single-mother tropes, like the you-go-girl empowerment of TV's *Maid* (2021), or the wild acting-out of Loach's *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994). Instead, the camera sticks second-skin close to the wary, life-swiped Gia, as she's faced with a mounting wall of money problems and chilly official refusals.

Nomore, a rapper in her first acting role (she's one of several fine non-actors here, including the Florida rapper Doechii as garrulous friend Trina) gives a subtle, sullen, and commendably understated performance that's one of the film's chief joys. She creates a believably tetchy low-key realism in Gia's guarded friendships, and a yearning stillness in the film's interludes of solitary disassociation, where the sheer pain of living makes Gia repeatedly dream of herself naked and peacefully pregnant, in the towering California redwood forest that is her mental refuge.

Despite the naturalistic playing and the urban setting, DOP Jody Lee Lipes's 16mm camerawork gives the film an expressionistic look at times, which combines with the tough story material for a feel that's simultaneously gauzy and gritty. His radical and frequent use of close-ups forces our gaze onto Nomore's face, to read her closed-down but pained reactions to official snubs, the humiliation of supervised pee tests, and the longing that flares when her son calls, missing her at bedtime.

Somehow, despite its hazy aesthetic and gentle pace, the film is acute, even insistent about the precarity of Gia's life, right down to her rapidly dwindling phone credit. We get glimpses of what a good mother she can be, immersed in her son's story during a supervised visit, and gently encouraging her daughter's halting reading. But threats pop up around her relentlessly, as she risks arrest stealing nappies she can't afford to buy for her unborn baby from a playground buggy, and her sister deals drugs upstairs while Gia sleeps on the sofa.

Without editorialising, the film works hard to show how the care system is stacked against poor American single mothers, with its intense schedules of

Tia Taugavau (*young woman*)
Kenneth Woodard (*sibling*)
Autumn Mirassou (*doctor*)
Vianca Turner (*radiology tech*)
Toni Johnson (*Miss Toni*)
USA-UK 2023©
101 mins
Digital

Courtesy of We Are Parable

NEW RELEASES

The Eternal Daughter

Continued from Fri 24 Nov

Anatomy of a Fall (*Anatomie d'une chute*)

Continued from Fri 24 Nov

Fallen Leaves (*Kuolleet lehdet*)

From Fri 1 Dec

Queendom

From Fri 1 Dec

Earth Mama

From Fri 8 Dec

Tish

From Fri 15 Dec

Priscilla (preview screenings)

Previews from Wed 27 Dec. Opens Fri 5 Jan

The Boy and the Heron (*Kimitachi wa do Ikiruka*)

From Wed 27 Dec

RE-RELEASES

The Red Shoes

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obligatory parenting classes preventing them from earning enough to provide the housing they need to regain custody of their children. Shreds of stories shared by the mothers in the parenting classes – expressed direct to camera – movingly illustrate how many families have been crushed and how many children left unmothered by several generations of this kind of separation and trauma.

Facing the horrific prospect of losing three children to foster care for good, Gia reluctantly investigates having the baby adopted, moving from her stubborn solitude to collecting active helpers like Erika Alexander's shrewd social worker Miss Carmen, and affable would-be-girlfriend Mel. Without taking sides, the film doesn't balk at showing Bible-quoting Trina's fierce and principled opposition to this route, as part of a system that, as Trina states, robs Black women of 'our culture, our homes, our freedoms, our God-given right to have our kids'.

Smartly increasing the emotional temperature in the last act, the director lets the film pick up momentum as Gia's choices threaten to break her. But *Earth Mama* retains its nuanced, deeply felt character to the last, without ever dipping into sensationalism. The result is an astonishingly accomplished movie that delivers a bold new take on a tough social issue.

Kate Stables, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023

Savanah Leaf on 'Earth Mama'

You've said Earth Mama is a mirror of your own experience in some ways, as your sister was adopted by your family when you were 16. When did the idea for the film start forming?

I feel like I've been prepping my whole life for this film. I was raised by a single mom, and I never knew my father growing up. And so there's always this kind of question of: who is this parent that's not raising you? And why aren't they raising you?... And then when my sister was born, I was thinking about what her birth mother is going through and why she can't raise her child. And so that question of a parent that can't be there was always a curiosity of mine.

I understand you didn't want to force emotion through your camera language in Earth Mama. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Something I feel sometimes with social dramas is that everyone knows that this is about to be a heavy film... the camera language is telling me it's going to be a heavy film, and you should feel on edge right now. It's forcing me into that emotion, even if the emotion is already there. And so what I tried to do with the camera was just allow you to feel that anxiety in stillness, and come up with your own feelings towards the characters, and not try to impose myself on those people.

You previously competed as a volleyball player in the 2012 Olympics. What was scarier – that, or premiering your film to an audience for the first time?

Definitely premiering the film. I mean, I was 18 playing in the Olympics. So there was a sense of fearlessness. Now, I feel like I'm more insecure, probably than I ever have been. But also... If you are a really good athlete, you might get some haters, but like, for the most part, people respect how good you are at playing that sport. Whereas art, you're just out there ready to be criticised. And that's terrifying.

Interview by Katie McCabe, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023