



Presents  
**THE STATE OF TEXAS VS MELISSA**



Directed by: Sabrina Van Tassel  
Produced by: Isaac Sharry

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## **THE STATE OF TEXAS VS MELISSA**

RT: 98 minutes

### **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

*The State of Texas vs Melissa* explores the life journey of Melissa Lucio, the first Hispanic woman to be sentenced to death in the state of Texas. For ten years she has been awaiting her fate, and now faces her last appeal.

### **LONG SYNOPSIS**

Her name is Melissa Lucio. For over ten years, she's been awaiting her fate on death row and is now on her last appeal. Melissa was the first Hispanic woman sentenced to death in Texas. To many, Melissa looks like she is responsible for her daughter's death. Guilty of abusing Mariah, her two-year-old child, day after day, until she died from a blunt head trauma. But strangely, she was never known to be violent towards her children. And nobody had ever seen her being abusive to Mariah. This film explores her life's journey. Set in South Texas, on the other side of the border, in the heart of the Latino community. From her broken childhood to the adult she became, doomed by prejudice and poverty. It highlights the bizarre miscarriage of justice she went through. No investigation, a court appointed attorney who willingly set aside evidence and a District Attorney who used her case for his reelection and now sits in prison convicted of bribery and corruption. It is the portrait of a woman against the entire system. It tells the fate of so many indigents destroyed by the courts.

### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

Nothing had predestined me for crossing paths with Melissa. No one could have imagined that our lives that were worlds apart would one day become intertwined. It happened three years ago. Since then, not a day has gone by without me thinking of her. It is as if I had to tell her story at all costs and that I was the only person who could help her. Melissa came into my life as I was directing a documentary about women sentenced to death in the United States. I had decided to follow five female inmates whose stories all shared several commonalities - rape, addiction and encounters which had propelled them on a downward path. A film for television which shed light on their lives as inmates and briefly looked at their paths leading to prison. Oddly, Melissa's story was the one that I was the least drawn to. I almost canceled our meeting. I didn't want to tell the story of a drugged-out woman who had mistreated her two-year old, daughter resulting in her death. Nothing could excuse such an act. And I thought at the time there was nothing more to tell. Melissa's family had more or less turned their back on her. Her story had not attracted much media attention. Only a few sentences in the local newspaper. A banal child abuse case. Not morbid enough for true-crime reenactments on TV. Not touching enough, either. The fate of Melissa had failed to provoke any empathy. No one was interested in her. I had only spent one hour with her and my life was altered. Seated on each side of the thick wall of glass in the visiting room. Time seemed to stop. Our encounter appeared meant to be. I knew instinctively that she was telling me the truth. That her story was full of facts that had never been explored. In her eyes, I saw all the flaws of the American judicial system which tends to get rid of the most vulnerable defendants. When everyone could see a criminal, I

saw a woman who had been used, sacrificed. A victim. I knew I had to investigate, find the protagonists of her case and make a film about her journey. But not any film. A cinematic documentary in which I could be totally free to say and show what I aimed for, where the narration would take shape through images, through the atmosphere that would emanate from these visuals, driven by my vision as a filmmaker. The story emerged with all its facets and nuances. Because this film depicts not only the America of the less fortunate, but also the fate of a woman who was a victim from the day she was born, a woman who had been crushed by the American judicial system. Through this story, it's the entire system that I aim to denounce. The mechanism by which judges and prosecutors must reach a certain quota of convictions to be reelected. The death sentence being the ultimate Graal, a proving that they are THE STATE OF TEXAS vs. MELISSA • 8 being tough on crime, bringing them the media attention they so desperately need during their campaign. In addition, the court-appointed lawyers who sacrifice their clients because of their lack of experience or time. This is the ordeal of those alienated by the system who can't be heard, guilty or not. The reality of indigent defendants. It's because America has turned a blind eye on Melissa that I became fascinated by her. Because she checks all the boxes of the ideal culprit, poor, Hispanic, living off of scarce social subsidies. Like so many others stuck on death row. Because after the first few hours researching her case, I discovered so many cues which had never been presented during her trial. Because 13 years after the facts, I realized that I was the first person to meet her tribe. A broken family, decimated by pain, which preferred to forget, feeling too powerless to help Melissa. When we take a closer look at this reality, we are far, very far, from the near universal fantasy of the American Dream. It's this third-world America that I wanted to depict through the stillness and warmth of Southern Texas. A world where hardship has marked the faces of locals. Where children run across the streets, left on their own. Where people survive without electricity or running water. This is where Melissa lived, where her fate was sealed. If Melissa had had a fair trial, she would not be on death row. She might well be in prison. Maybe not. Today, if nothing is done to show her innocence, she could be executed. I'm one of those who believe in miracles, who believe that nothing happens by coincidence. One cannot be confronted with such an injustice and walk away. It was my duty to make her story known. To make sure that the ID number 999537 stands out and does not become just another entry in the United States death sentence statistics.

### **CREW BIOGRAPHIES**

**SABRINA VAN TASSEL (DIRECTOR & WRITER)** Sabrina Van Tassel is a French-American film director and a journalist. As an investigative reporter she has directed over 45 documentary films for the last 15 years for major television programs. Focusing mainly on social and politically motivated matters such as women forced into marriage, underage sex trafficking, post-traumatic stress, children in the white nationalist movement, women in prison and the holocaust. The Silenced Walls (2015) was her first documentary theatrically released. Critically acclaimed by the French press, it told her journey to discover the history of the Drancy camp, the biggest internment camp, turned into a social housing building at the end of the war. The State of Texas vs. Melissa (2020) tells the story of the first Hispanic woman sentenced to death in Texas. It tells the fate of so many indigents destroyed by the court.

# **THE STATE OF TEXAS VS MELISSA**

## **CREDITS**

Vito Films presents in co-production with Tahli Films and Andaman Films

Directed by	Sabrina Van Tassel
Written by	Sabrina Van Tassel
Producer	Isaac Sharry
Executive Producers	Sabrina Van Tassel
	Philippe de Bourbon
Director of Photography	Cyril Thomas
Editor	Damien Bois
Original Soundtrack	Christophe La Pinta
Sound Editor	Maxime Saleix
Re-recorder Mixer	François-Joseph Hors
Colorist	Richard Deusy
Graphic Design	Arturo Moreno Reyes
	Johann Darcel