Gaspar Henaine "Capulina" 1926-2011

Gaspar Henaine Pérez, better-known as comic actor "Capulina," died on 30 September 2011; he had been hospitalised for over a week with complications from an ulcer, and had also developed pneumonia. He was 85 years old.

Henaine was born in Chignahuapán, Puebla on 6 January 1926, the son of a Lebanese immigrant. His family moved to the capital in the early 1930s, and Gaspar began working as a singer-comedian in his teens, forming part of the groups "Los Excéntricos del ritmo" and "Los Trincas." It was while working with the latter that he met Marco Antonio Campos "Viruta," and the two men eventually formed a team. They appeared on the popular "Cómicos y canciones" television program and began making films: their first starring vehicle was Se los chupó la bruja (1957). However, the duo broke up after Dos pintores pintorescos in 1966, and went their separate ways.

Capulina starred in a large number of films between 1967 and 1981 before retiring from the screen. He came back for Mi compadre Capulina in 1989 (a remake of the 1949 Tin Tan movie No me defiendas, compadre). Although he made no further movie appearances, Capulina continued to work on television and in live venues (including his own circus) until 1999, when he finally retired from performing altogether.

In addition to his movie, live, and TV work, Capulina also recorded a number of albums, and was the protagonist of a very long-running series of comic books (successors to the original Viruta and Capulina comics of the 1960s).

Capulina's son Antonio Henaine followed his father's footsteps into show business as a comedian and singer.

Jorge Lavat Dies

Actor Jorge Lavat died in a Mexico City hospital on 14 September 2011; the cause of death was a fatal infection that developed after a recent back operation. Jorge Lavat Bayona was born in Mexico City on 3 August 1933. His older sister Queta Lavat began acting career in Mexican films in the 1940s, and Jorge followed suit, starting with extra roles and bit parts. In the late 1950s he began to work regularly in television, on the stage, and in films. He was particularly popular in telenovelas--his last professional work was in this medium in 2011.

In 2009, Lavat starred in El estudiante, the most successful Mexican film at the box-office that year. He received a Diosa de Plata as Best Actor for his role.

Jorge Lavat was married a number of times and is survived by his four children, including actress Adriana Lavat.

Manuel López Ochoa 1933-2011

Actor and singer Manuel López Ochoa died on 25 October 2011 in Los Angeles. López Ochoa was a radio announcer and singer who achieved his greatest success in the role of "Chucho el Roto," a character he played on the radio for more than a decade, in a popular telenovela, and in a series of four feature films.

José Manuel López Ochoa was born in the state of Tabasco on 7 July 1933. He became a radio announcer in his home state, then moved to Mexico City where he added television work to his repertoire. Jorge "Che" Reyes heard
the young man sing and promoted his transition to actor and singer in the early 1960s. López Ochoa, who grew up in a rural environment, worked primarily in the ranchera and Western genres, although he would occasionally take "civilian" roles. In addition to his movie work, he also starred in a number of telenovelas.

Some of López Ochoa's films were remakes or movies using pre-existing characters--in addition to the Chucho el Roto series, he starred in new versions of Quinto Patio, Me he de comer esa tuna, and Angelitos negros. He also incarnated comic book hero "Alma Grande" in two films.

López Ochoa moved to the United States and made at least one movie there, Cacería de traficantes. His final large- and small-screen performances came in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

**Halloween Reviews**

**El rápido de las 9.15**

[The 9:15 Express Train]
(C.L.A.S.A., 1941) Assoc Prod: Financiadora de Películas, S.A.; Dir: Alejandro Galindo; Scr Adapt: Alejandro Galindo, Marco Aurelio Galindo; Story: Marco Aurelio Galindo; Photo: Gabriel Figueroa; Music Adapt/Dir: Raúl Lavista; In Charge of Prod: Salvador Elizondo; Prod Chief: Fidel Pizarro; Prod Mgr: Gustavo Candiani; Asst Dir: Miguel M. Delgado; Film Ed: Emilio Gómez Muriel; Makeup: Ana Guerrero; Sound: José B. Carles; Sound Ed: Jorge Bustos

**Cast:** Virginia Fábregas (Susanita del Mercado), Alfredo del Diestro (Atanasio), Miguel Inclán (antiques dealer), Carlos López Moctezuma (El Chulo), Alejandro Cobo (killer), Enrique García Alvarez (Ulises), Gloria Marín (El Chulo's girlfriend), Edmund Espino (Nacho), Carmen Conde (bride), Rafael Baledón (groom), Lucille Bowling (Alberta), Ángel T. Sala (Atanasio's relative), Guadalupe Inclán (wife of Ulises), Salvador Ibáñez, José Torbay [sic] and Armando Velasco (governor's henchmen), Gerardo del Castillo (train conductor), José Elias Moreno (hotel clerk), Salvador Quiroz (don Ramón), Arturo Soto Rangel (father of the bride), Joaquín Coss (priest), Crox Alvarado (member of wedding party), Max Langler (employee of Legaspi company), Humberto Rodríguez (Felipe, servant), Tito Junco (Rodolfo), Conchita Gentil Arcos (Toñita, owner of boarding house), Alfonso Bedoya & Julio Ahuet (train crew), Manuel Dondé (don Rodrigo)

**Notes:** Alejandro Galindo's early directorial efforts show the definite influence of Hollywood cinema, both in style and content. While El rápido de las 9.15 was written by Galindo's brother Marco Aurelio Galindo, the plot, characterisations, and film form are reminiscent of the slick, fast-paced movies made in 1930s Hollywood. However, it's interesting to note that no explanation is given for what happens in the film, and the climactic train crash apparently claims the lives of all the passengers, good and bad! It's difficult to imagine a U.S. film of the same era doing either of these things.

The production values of El rápido de las 9.15 are good, with a lot of location shooting providing some interesting views of 1941 Mexico. The final train crash is marred by rather obvious model work--to make things worse, they didn't even overcrank the camera to slow down the bridge collapse and train wreck, reinforcing the toy-like nature of the models--but to be fair, special effects in a Hollywood 'B' movie of the era would probably have not been much better. Galindo's direction is not overly stylish but is certainly accomplished and interesting: he uses matched cuts (gun to gun, clock to clock) as scene transitions, employs sound (or the lack of it) effectively in some scenes, moves his camera (the film even ends with a crane shot, up and out), and varies his staging (the confrontation between the antiques dealer and his assassin is shot almost entirely in close-up, for example).

Various individuals all make plans to take the 9:15pm express train out of the capital. A mysterious man in black crosses the path of each person as they make preparations for their journey. The prospective passengers are:

Escaped criminal El Chulo, who visits his former girlfriend and compels her to accompany him by threatening to implicate her brother in his crimes.
A newlywed bride and groom, so superstitious that when a black cat wanders in front of the altar during the wedding ceremony, they both faint!

Mortally-ill Atanasio, who is tired of fruitless medical consultations and the vulture-like attitude of his relatives, who pretend to be solicitous but are actually anxious to inherit his fortune when he dies. Atanasio agrees to visit the coast for a rest, accompanied by his niece Alberta.

Susana del Moral, whose two sons are political exiles. She's informed they'll be killed if they return to Mexico City; instead, they invite her to visit them in their new home.

Ulises, a meek clerk in an import business. He dreams of adventure on the high seas and in foreign lands, but is saddled with a shrewish wife and numerous children. The company owner finally assigns Ulises his dream job of "supercargo," which involves a long sea voyage to the exotic Far East.

The newlyweds are too late to catch the 9:15 train, which departs from Rodrigo, located at the next station on the line. Heavy rains have caused rising waters, and the railroad bridge is unstable. The 9:15 passes through Empalme at full speed. Rodrigo attempts to use a lantern to warn the engineer as the train approaches the now-collapsed bridge, but he's too late: the 9:15 plunges into the raging river. Rodrigo attempts to use a lantern to warn the engineer as the train approaches the now-collapsed bridge, but he's too late: the 9:15 plunges into the raging river.

While the Man in Black--the spiritual precursor of the Lady in Black who served a similar purpose in the "Hora marcada" TV series of the 1980s--is presumably the harbinger of death, this isn't articulated in any way. He never speaks or directly interacts with anyone (but he's not invisible to others and he doesn't do anything supernatural), he's just...there. Of the film's protagonists, only two seem to "deserve" death by any stretch of the imagination (El Chulo and the murderer), while El Chulo's girlfriend, Susanita, and Ulises at the very least are sympathetic characters (Atanasio is resigned to dying soon anyway, though his niece is a young and fairly benign character). The newlyweds survive, although not as a direct result of their superstitious nature, as might have been expected. The "uplifting" coda showing Nacho with his newborn child could signify circle-of-life, lives end-life begins, but since Nacho inadvertently caused the death of a large number of people (in addition to the protagonists, there were other people were on that train) by deserting his post, it hardly seems like a fair exchange: one baby for dozens (or more) of adults?

El rápido de las 9.15 doesn't give its characters much of a back-story, choosing to drop hints rather than forcibly insert a lot of expository dialogue. We don't hear all the details of El Chulo's relationship with his girlfriend, we get a vague story about the antique dealer's treachery, Ulises doesn't talk about why he dreams of leading an adventurous life (and why he never had one), Atanasio's past isn't discussed at all, and who Susanita is and why she's living alone in a boarding house aren't explained. It's as if the viewer jumps into the characters' lives at a certain point, and all we see and know is what is immediately visible at that moment. Yet-- to the credit of the Galindo brothers and the rest of the cast and crew--the characters are humanised, not stereotyped.

The performances are generally effective, as was largely the case during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema: the actors may have come from diverse backgrounds (the legitimate stage, the carpas, radio, other national cinemas, even rank newcomers with or without training) but poor acting is really quite rare in this era. Carlos López Moctezuma was already slightly typecast as a sleazy villain, but in El rápido de las 9.15 he is less cruel and more rational even while still playing a gangster. Virginia Fábregas, one of the most famous stage actresses in Mexico, is memorable, as is Alfredo del Diestro. The actor who plays the Man in Black is not credited, although the name of Salvador Ibáñez appears in the credits with no corresponding character name, so perhaps this is he.

The presence of the lurking Man in Black qualifies this as a fantasy film, although--as already stated--the script refuses to openly comment about his role or the events of the movie, leaving his identity and purpose open. But fantasy film or not, El rápido de las 9.15 is a smooth, professional and entertaining product.
**Tres citas con el destino**

**[Three Appointments with Destiny]**

(Oro Films-Plus Ultra-Unión Films, 1953)* Prod: Gonzalo Elvira R., Alberto Soifer, Joaquín Reig; Dir: Florián Rey (#1), Fernando de Fuentes (#2), León Klimovsky (#3); Scr: Miguel Mihura (#1), Alberto Girri (#2), Alejandro Verbitzky & Emilio Villalba Welsh (#3); Photo: Ricardo Torres (#1), Rosalio Solano (#2), Pablo Tabernero (#3); Music: Regino Sáinz de la Maza (#1), Gustavo César Carrión (#2), Alberto Soifer (#3); Film Ed: José W. Bostos (#2), Antonio Gimeo (#1); Art Dir: Enrique Salva (#1, uncredited), Xavier Torres Torija (#2), Saulo Benavente (#3); Music/Re-Rec: Jesús González Gancy

*Mexican-Spanish-Argentine co-production

Cast: Jorge Mistral (#2) (Count Everardo Garrido y Altamira), Antonio Vilar (#1) (Antonio), Narciso Ibáñez Menta (#3) (Dr. Félix Miranda; Martín Pacheco), Amparito Rivelles (#1) (Chelo), Olga Zubari (sic) (#3) (Matilde), Santiago Gómez Cou (#3) (Fernández), Fernando Cortés (#2) (Everardo Barbosa), Tito Novaro (#2) (Sebastián), Nathan Pinzón (#3) (El Griego), Fernando Galiana (#2) (Eye-patch assassin), Alba Solís (#3) (Angela), Sara Guash (#2) (Sra. Barbosa), Maurice Jouvet (#3) (Roberto), Manuel Arbó (#1) (Zapico), Félix Briones (#1), José G. Rey (#1) (don Pedro), Alberto Quiles (#3), [Ricardo] Argemi (#3), Lolita Sevilla (#1) (Gloria)

**Notes:** Tres citas con el destino was the first official co-production between the major Spanish-language filmmaking nations, Mexico, Spain, and Argentina. Co-productions in general were rare prior to the late 1940s for political, economic, and logistical reasons, but there had always been a fair amount of cross-pollination in the Spanish-speaking entertainment world. A quick glance at the personnel involved in Tres citas con el destino illustrates this: Fernando de Fuentes had gone to Spain to shoot Jalisco canta en Sevilla in 1948, León Klimovsky directed films in both Spain and Argentina, and Jorge Mistral, Amparo Rivelles, and Narciso Ibáñez Menta all had substantial acting careers in two or more of the countries involved in this film (Mistral actually made movies in Spain, Mexico and Argentina, although his Argentine credits are few).

**Tres citas con el destino** is a rather unusual co-production in one way: it consists of three episodes with a narrative link, but each section has a discrete cast and crew. The "traditional" co-production was to send a star (or two) from one country to the other and make a film, but perhaps for this first (and rare) three-way collaboration, the omnibus format was easier and cheaper to accomplish. Alberto Soifer produced a handful of movies—including the Spanish-Argentine co-production La guitarra de Gardel in the late '40s, also directed by Klimovsky—but was primarily an orchestra leader and composer, while Joaquín Reig seems to have had a minor career in Spanish cinema, chiefly as an editor. Gonzalo Elvira R., of course, was the head of Oro Films and produced many films during his long career in Mexico.

As the film opens, a printed title and voiceover narration inform the viewer that Tres citas con el destino deals with a cursed ring and its effects on various people. This suggests some supernatural explanation for the events that unfold, but in fact the ring—while it serves a purpose in the plot of each episode—is not the center of attention in any of the segments and does not really cause anything to occur (either supernaturally or simply because it's valuable). However, one supposes whoever wrote the opening didn't want to say "this is a movie about some random bad things that happened to various people who coincidentally happened to own a piece of jewelry." Not quite as dramatic.

The Spanish episode takes place in the port of Cádiz. Sailor Antonio has one night of shore leave and is looking for female companionship. Passing a dark house, he hears a scream and a shaken young woman emerges. He more or less compels her to accompany him; in a nearby bar, she eventually admits her name is Chelo and she dances there. When she gets up from the table, Antonio discovers a gaudy diamond ring in the seat cushion. Chelo's story emerges: she lives with her elderly father, who is employed by the wealthy, elderly merchant don Pedro as a night watchman. This job, and the ring, are part of a plot by don Pedro to win Chelo's affections. However, she didn't respond and when he made indecent advances, there was a struggle and Chelo shot him to death. Antonio and Chelo return to the scene of the crime but can find no corpse. Antonio suggests don Pedro was only wounded and didn't report the shooting because he was ashamed of his actions. Antonio and Chelo decide to go away together, but the jealous don Pedro follows them to the docks and shoots Antonio to death.

The scene shifts to Mexico City. Count Everardo arrives at the jewelry shop of Everardo Barbosa, who is impressed by his new client's title and apparent wealth. The Count is shopping for his wife's birthday present, and Barbosa shows him a large diamond ring that has a...dun dun DUN...mysterious history! The Count makes an offer for the trinket but is short of cash, so he decides to send his chauffeur home to get some from the Countess. However, it seems the Count hurt his right arm in a recent automobile accident, so he asks Barbosa to write a note for him, asking for the money. The chauffeur sets off and...
poisoning him (in a nice touch, she goes in the bathroom
prisoner, so Martín agrees. The convict disguises himself
ring. Barbosa goes home and is shocked to discover it was
Count's chauffeur arrives with the cash to purchase the
Back in Mexico, Barbosa concludes his tale, and the
recognise the scar on his patient's chest?
Martín's identity (why? Wouldn't it have been smarter to
Later, Félix is released from prison and assumes
hysterically swears her husband is dead. Trapped in
Félix Miranda. But when they visit the prison, Matilde
not Martín, Félix says his wife can identify him as Dr.
Doctor never saw him without his shirt on, so he wouldn't
derive from his wife (who in
Barbosa tells the Count the story of the ring's adventures in
Argentina...
Dr. Félix Miranda is a famous lawyer but an obnoxious
husband to his wife Matilde, constantly finding fault with
her actions. No wonder she's having an affair with
Roberto! Félix overhears Matilde tell Roberto that she's
going to get rid of the impediment to their future happiness
(i.e., her husband). Through an amazing circumstance,
years before one of Félix's clients was criminal Martín
Pacheco, who strongly resembles the acerbic lawyer. Félix
visits Martín in prison and makes a proposition: if Martín
will switch places with him (Martín is going to be released
in 3 months), Félix will pay him a large sum of money.
Martín is suspicious, but Félix says he wants to undertake
a study of prisons and the best way to do it is to pose as a
prisoner, so Martin agrees. The convict disguises himself
as Félix and goes free. One of the first things he does is
visit pawnbroker El Griego, retrieving...dun dun DUN...a
valuable (stolen) diamond ring he'd left with the merchant,
then passes the ring to his girlfriend Ángela for safe-
keeping. Then Martín goes "home" to Félix's house and

poisoning him (in a nice touch, she goes in the bathroom
and runs water in the tub so she can't hear him in his death
throes). However, an anonymous letter (gee, I wonder
who sent it?) to the police denounces Matilde and she is
arrested.

Later, Félix is released from prison and assumes
Martín's identity (why? Wouldn't it have been smarter to
start a new life rather than pretending you're an ex-
convict?). A short time later, he's arrested and accused of
murder and robbery in the matter of the diamond ring
(Angela and El Griego turned him in). Protesting that he's
not Martín, Félix says his wife can identify him as Dr.
Félix Miranda. But when they visit the prison, Matilde
hysterically swears her husband is dead. Trapped in
Martín's identity, Félix goes mad. So, apparently in
Argentina they don't know about fingerprints? And Félix's
doctor never saw him without his shirt on, so he wouldn't
recognise the scar on his patient's chest?

Back in Mexico, Barbosa concludes his tale, and the
Count's chauffeur arrives with the cash to purchase the
ring. Barbosa goes home and is shocked to discover it was
his wife who handed over the cash for the ring: since the
note was in her husband's handwriting (and on his
stationery) and was signed "Everardo" (which,
coincidentally was the first name of both the jeweler
and the Count), she sensed nothing amiss. Meanwhile, the
false Count
and his
chauffeur-
accomplice
head for the
airport,
planning to
catch a
flight to
Cuba. But
as they
enter the
terminal, a gangster sporting an eye-patch guns them
down, apparently over some underworld vendetta. As he
dies, the Count drops the ring and it falls through a grate
into the muck of the sewer, lost forever.

The three episodes of Tres citas con el destino (the
Mexican segment may be split into two parts, but it's still
one story) vary in style and content. The Spanish sequence
is all build-up to a quick and confusing pay-off: Antonio
gets to know Chelo, gradually learns her story, they
become emotionally involved, then Antonio is killed. The
end. There is a fair amount of padding, including a song
by Lolita Sevilla and Chelo's dance, and the last few
moments seem rushed and vague. The Mexican story
takes place mostly in Barbosa's jewelry shop (a set), and
the mise-en-scene is far less atmospheric than either of the
other sections. The story is clever enough, although
slightly illogical: the Count and his henchman get a large
sum in cash from Barbosa's wife, which they then turn
over to Barbosa (adding a small amount of their own
money) in exchange for the ring. But if they'd simply kept
the cash and not bothered with the ring, how much would
they have "lost?" Surely Barbosa wouldn't have sold the
ring for that much less than it was worth, and the Count
now has to go to the trouble of finding a buyer for a "hot"
piece of jewelry.

The Argentine episode is in many ways the most
elaborate and effective, with numerous characters and
locations, but the story is horribly contrived from premise
to denouement. Félix just happens to have a client who is
virtually his exact double and who just happens to be
coming to the end of his prison sentence--why not spend a
little effort and have Félix stumble across Martin's photo in
the newspaper or something? And as noted earlier, the
idea that Félix can only be identified by his wife (who in
the first place tried to murder him)--so her objectivity might
be questioned--and in the second place is now clearly
unbalanced, mentally, so whatever she says cannot
automatically be accepted as correct) is ridiculous.
However, the excellent performance of Narciso Ibáñez
Menta in the dual role lifts this segment considerably.

Tres citas con el destino is a moderately entertaining
multi-story film, but neither any individual part nor the
film as whole is outstanding or special. This is primarily
of historical interest, or for aficionados of Narciso Ibáñez
Menta.
The Livi ng Idol

(MGM, 1955)* Prod: Albert Lewin, Gregorio Walerstein; Dir-Ser: Albert Lewin; Associate Mexican Dir: René Cardona; Photo: Jack Hildyard; Associate Mexican Photo: Víctor Herrera; Music: Rodolfo Halffter; Music Dir: Manuel Esperón; Prod Mgr: Valentín Pimstein; Prod Chief: Paul Castelain; Asst Dir: Jaime Contreras; Film Ed: Rafael Ceballos, Fernando Martínez R.; Art Dir: Edward Fitzgerald; Asst Art Dir: Agustín Ytuarte; Camera Op: José L. Carrasco; Chief Electrician: Miguel Arana; Sound: Eduardo Fernández, Galdino Samperio; Paintings: Carlos Mérida; Choreog: José Silva, David Campbell; Makeup: Armando Meyer; Eastmancolor, Cinemascope

*U.S.-Mexican co-production; Gregorio Walerstein was the head of Filmex, but this company is not credited on-screen.

Cast: Steve Forrest (Terry Matthews), Liliane Montevexchi (Juanita), James Robertson-Justice (Prof. Albert Stoner), Sara García (Elena Stoner), Eduardo Noriega (Manuel)

Notes: after World War II, Hollywood filmmakers began traveling to Mexico with relative frequency, shooting their own movies and occasionally participating in co-productions. This continued throughout the 1950s and beyond, with mutual benefits: the visitors got "exotic" locations, trained technicians and actors, while the Mexicans got work and international exposure. The Living Idol fits the bill, making good use of its Mexican locations --including Chichen Iztá and Mexico City--and features an almost entirely Mexican crew, with the exception of director Albert Lewin and cinematographer Jack Hildyard (who were "shadowed" by René Cardona and Víctor Herrera, as per union rules--how much, if any, work Cardona and Herrera did on the film is debatable).

The cast is curiously small. Steve Forrest was Dana Andrews' (much) younger brother and had just begun to make a career for himself in the cinema in the mid-1950s (although he'd played bit roles as early as 1943). James Robertson-Justice split his time between his native Britain and Hollywood. Eduardo Noriega's command of the English language guaranteed him frequent work in Hollywood productions--in this movie he's made up to look like an old man and strongly resembles the way Ignacio López Tarso would eventually look! This may be the only time Sara García worked in an English-language feature (usually Fanny Schiller got those roles), but her English is fairly good and she's a sympathetic character.

One of the weakest points of The Living Idol is Liliane Montevexchi. A French dancer who later gained fame as a stage performer in her native land, she is (pardon me for saying it) not very attractive here (she actually got better-looking in the next few years) and not a very good actress. She was an MGM contractee at the time, which probably explains the casting, although one can only wonder what Albert Lewin thought, since his two previous leading ladies had been Ava Gardner (Pandora and the Flying Dutchman) and Rita Gam (Saadia), both of whom were quite striking in appearance. Montevexchi is not convincingly a Mexican, nor as a bewitched young woman, and she has trouble expressing even the simplest emotions. In the first part of the movie she's saddled with a horrible hairstyle and frumpy clothes which don't flatter her rather dumpy figure; in the second half she's considerably more chic but still sleepwalks through her scenes.

On an archeological dig in Chichen Iztá, Prof. Stoner conducts reporter Terry and young Juanita--the daughter of Stoner's Mexican associate Manuel--into a hidden chamber where the stone figure of a fierce jaguar god resides. Juanita panics and runs away, although she cannot later explain her terror. Stoner says the jaguar god was the embodiment of pure evil for the Mayans. Manuel is crushed by a large stone slab bearing the image of the jaguar. Juanita is adopted by Stoner and his Mexican wife Elena; Terry departs to cover the Korean War, but promises to return.

A few years later, Terry comes back to Mexico. Stoner is now teaching at UNAM (footage of the newly-opened UNAM campus is prominently featured) and Juanita is a student there. However, she has a strange illness which leaves her weak and depressed much of the time. Medical doctors can't explain it, but Stoner believes her soul was stolen by the jaguar god, embodied in the
stone figure (which has been brought from the Yucatán to Stoner's personal "museum"). Stoner thinks the jaguar god has been reincarnated in the big cat "Balam" in the Chapultepec zoo. In order to free Juanita from the curse, he releases the jaguar from its cage—and is severely mauled for his trouble—then watches as it unerringly heads for his home. While Terry battles the actual jaguar, the stone effigy becomes animated and destroys the contents of Stoner's museum (off-screen): when Balam is killed with a ritual obsidian knife, the stone idol returns to its status as an inanimate object. Stoner dies of his injuries but Juanita regains her soul and marries Terry.

_The Living Idol_ is rather slowly paced and contains a fair amount of filler material, including a long dance sequence and an extended lecture by Prof. Stoner. In the novelisation of the film (written by Robert Switzer, not Lewin as some sources indicate), Terry and Juanita visit the Salón México, but in the film itself they dance the "Tepo" in front of a back-projected crowd of young people. This is clumsy, pointless padding for the most part. Stoner's lecture is interesting on a number of levels. Lewin, a Harvard graduate, taught English literature at university before entering the film industry, so his own teaching experiences may have informed this sequence, which includes numerous projected slides depicting human sacrifice and Stoner dressing up as a Mayan warrior! It also provides the framework for a quasi dream-sequence: Stoner narrates the tale of a Mayan princess sacrificed to the jaguar god (i.e., a real jaguar) and Juanita imagines herself as the victim (thus providing the bondage-inspired "key art" for the film posters).

Lewin directed 6 films, all rather idiosyncratic and self-consciously tasteful, with some intellectual and philosophical pretensions. _The Living Idol_ begins with a quote from Plato ("The soul can wear out many bodies"), and the film is constructed as one long debate between mystical scientist Stoner (a twist on the usual oppositional set-up, in which the science is allied with skepticism rather than mysticism) and pragmatic, skeptical journalist Terry. In fact, the film makes almost no effort to be suspenseful or "fantastic"—at no point does Juanita seem physically in danger, for instance, and the loss of her soul makes her seem anemic or depressed at most. Lewin did not, it seems, have any interest in making a horror film, but rather one about the power of ancient myth, ritual, and superstition in the modern world.

Lewin's last three movies were all filmed in colour by British cinematographers: Jack Cardiff, Christopher Challis, and Jack Hildyard. _The Living Idol_ was shot in Eastmancolor and Cinemascope. The Cinemascope process allows for extensive vistas of the ruins at Chichen Itzá and the UNAM Ciudad Universitaria (the construction of which was completed in 1954, and which features prominently in a number of Mexican films shot in mid-decade)—these panoramic shots are the most impressive and interesting in the movie, making excellent use of the wide screen. Most of the interior scenes are fine but without a lot of noticeable visual style: the shots are well-composed and the _mise-en-scène_ is slick and sumptuous, but as noted above, the emphasis is on ideas conveyed through dialogue, rather than imagery.

_The Living Idol_ is moderately entertaining, if one is not deceived by the advertising which promoted it as a romantic melodrama with a supernatural foundation (including a link to the reincarnation theme popular at the time). The romance is actually the least interesting and developed aspect of the picture, which is more of a philosophical and historical discourse.

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_Yambaó Yambaó Yambaó Yambaó_ (Dominó Films, 1956) _Prod:_ Rubén A. Calderón; _Dir:_ Alfredo B. Crevenna; _Adapt:_ Julio Alejandro; _Story:_ Julio Albo; _Photo:_ Raúl Martínez Solares; _Music Dir:_ Lan Adomian; _Ritual Music:_ Obdulio Morales; _Prod Mgr:_ Manuel de la Pedrosa, Paul Castelain; _Asst Dir:_ Mario Llorca; _Film Ed:_ Gloria Schoemann; _Art Dir:_ Salvador Lozano; _Camera Op:_ Cirilo Rodríguez, Julio Chávez, Enrique Bravo Jr.; _Choreog:_ Rodney; _Script Clerk:_ Ícaro Cisneros; _Makeup:_ Armando Meyer; _Sound Supv:_ James L. Fields; _Dialog Rec:_ Rodolfo Solís, Manuel Solé; _Music Rec:_ Galdino Samperio

*also released as _Cry of the Bewitched_ and _Young and Evil_
Cast: Ninón Sevilla (Yambaó), Ramón Gay [Raymond Guy in English version] (Jorge [George]), Rosa Elena Durgel [Rosalind Dunhill in English version] (Beatriz [Beatrice]), Ricardo Román (Lázaro), Luis López Puente (Damián), Fedora Capdevilla [Capdevila], Celina Reynoso, Olga Guillot (singer), Isolina Herrera, Armando Velasco (doctor), Martha Sean Claudet, Mercedes Valdés, Paulina Álvarez, Dandy Crawford, Henri Boyer, Bob Curtis, Miguel A. Chequis, José Martínez Silva

Notes: in 2011, the news that El vampiro y el sexo was discovered in the Calderón film vaults swept across Mexico and the rest of the film world. However, the release of the English-language version of Yambaó on DVD in 2008 passed almost unnoticed. Most people probably assumed it was simply Cry of the Bewitched or Young and Evil, two titles for the English-dubbed version released in the USA in the late 1950s-early 1960s, but this does not seem to be the case (although the DVD bills the film as Yambaó--Cry of the Bewitched, the title on the movie itself is simply Yambaó).

This version of Yambaó seems to be an alternate English-language version shot at the same time as the original, but never released theatrically in the USA. Although the dialogue was post-dubbed, the lip movements of the actors clearly indicate they were speaking English on the set. Furthermore, although Ramón Gay and Rosa Elena Durgel had their names (and character names) Anglicised, the credits are otherwise consistent with the original Mexican credits—in other words, although the credits are in English (although the end title reads "Fin" rather than "The End"), they were not generated at a later time, but are visually identical to the original Spanish version.

Therefore, although I've not been able to find a copy of Cry of the Bewitched (or Young and Evil, a cut version released in the USA in 1962 by John Alexander Film Associates) for comparison, at the very least the version of Yambaó presented on the "Psychotronica" DVD from VCI is the "original" from which the other English-language copies were created, and at best it is a heretofore unseen alternate (as opposed to a post-dubbed) version of the Mexican release.

Yambaó was filmed in Cuba and Mexico (most likely the mansion-house interiors were shot at the Azteca studios, since the producers would have been unlikely to bring Armando Velasco to Cuba for his one brief scene). The film is not very successful as a fantasy film or even a romantic, period melodrama: instead, it resembles some sort of folkloric musical pageant with a sketchy "story" utilised as a framework for the extensive song and dance numbers. The musical sequences are presented in a colourful manner but after the third or fourth instance (or, after a scene of drumming & dancing goes on for what seems like forever), the modern-day viewer will thank heaven for the fast-forward button. Unless, of course, one has an interest in authentic indigenous Cuban music, and in that case Yambaó is probably a treasure trove, since the songs and dances are largely devoid of glamorous artifice.

The film is set in 1850. Jorge owns a large plantation in Cuba, and lives there with his pregnant wife Beatriz. One night, drums are heard in the forest for the first time since Jorge's foreman Damián drove bruja Caridad to her death, years before. Now, Caridad's granddaughter Yambaó has returned. Caridad is still alive, and is intent on using Yambaó to get revenge. Jorge saves Yambaó from the lustful advances of Damián's son Lázaro; he also rescues her when Damián and the other workers blame her for the plague and attempt to burn her alive. Yambaó falls in love with Jorge and uses voodoo to bring him to her side, but he contracts the plague. She saves his life and they later begin an affair, but Jorge changes his mind when Beatriz gives birth to his son. Urged on by Caridad, Yambaó sets out to slay Beatriz and the baby, but Damián kills Caridad instead. Upon the death of her grandmother, the murderous spell is snapped. Yambaó mourns the death of Caridad and leaps off a cliff to her own death.

Yambaó ascribes various supernatural powers to Yambaó and Caridad, powers which cannot be explained as mere mental or psychological dominance or suggestion. For example, Yambaó steals some of Jorge's clothing and casts a spell (by doing a dance, of course) that brings him to her when she speaks her own name. Jorge leaves the mansion in a trance and walks across his lands to join her. Later, the spell is broken because Jorge's love for Beatriz and their son is greater than Yambaó's witchcraft. At the moment of Caridad's death, Yambaó--some distance away--feels the pain of the death blow and her own murderous fury suddenly abates. These are clearly supernatural events (or evidence of ESP at least), but Yambaó doesn't dwell on the supernatural aspect, leaning more towards standard melodrama if anything.

Ninón Sevilla, wearing dark makeup, a shaggy black wig, and a "Nyoka of the Jungle" leather mini-dress, turns in a standard "native girl" performance with few nuances.
The Astronauts

She speaks of herself in the third person ("Yambaó loves Jorge" and so on), is alternately fiery, child-like, seductive, and imperious, popping her eyes in anger, surprise, fear, etc. Given the involvement of the Calderón family in the production it shouldn't come as a surprise, but I was surprised that Yambaó contains a bit of nudity: Jorge comes upon Yambaó swimming nude, and they exchange some flirtatious glances. There are several shots of Yambaó's nude body (from behind--it's possible this was a body double) and one quick topless shot. Furthermore, some closeups in the sequence seem oddly framed, as if the image was zoomed in during the shot. Furthermore, some closeups in the sequence seem oddly framed, as if the image was zoomed in during the post-production process to show only Yambaó's face, and not more of her body.

The other actors in Yambaó are generally satisfactory, taking into consideration the dubbing (which is well executed) and the fact that they've relatively little to do. Ramón Gay is handsome and stalwart and Rosa Elena Durgel pretty and wan, although Ricardo Román overacts somewhat as the love-crazed Lázaro (then again, his character is love-crazed). The production values are good, with lovely colour location photography (although the actual locations aren't that unique or breath-taking, it's just the Cuban countryside after all) and plenty of extras.

Nice to look at and--in moderation--to listen to, but the slim plot is overwhelmed by the plethora of musical numbers.

Los astronáutitas

[The Astronauts]

(prods. Zacarias, 1960) Prod: Mario A. Zacarias; Dir-Scr: Miguel Zacarias; Story: Roberto Gómez Bolaños; Cast: Mia (mariachi) Viruta, Capulina, among other comedians.

Notes: this is a moderately entertaining Viruta and Capulina comedy with a few good jokes (verbal and visual), interesting "monsters," a rather imaginative set or two, and a reasonably brisk pace. Certainly the plot and most of the science-fiction trappings are not new--"Abbott and Costello Go to Mars and Queen of Outer Space were clear "influences," among other films--but the time passes painlessly enough.

It's a bit of surprise to see the name of Miguel Zacarias in the credits of this film: Zacarias was one of the most successful directors of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, and a few months before shooting Los astronáutitas (in November 1960) he had completed a blockbuster tale of the Revolution, Juana Gallo, starring Maria Felix. Los astronáutitas was followed by a number of strictly "commercial" pictures by Zacarias, including one of Capulina's solo effort, Capulina corazón de león.

If Miguel Zacarias was on the downslope of his career, the author of the screen story of Los astronáutitas was on his way up: Roberto Gómez Bolaños, still a decade away from achieving super stardom on Mexican television, was perfecting his comedy craft by scripting numerous movies for Capulina and Viruta, among other comedians.

As the film begins, the female president of Venus is faced with several problems. First, the brutish Martians are at war with their neighbouring planet, although their weapons are no match for the Venusians' power. At home, the men of Venus are disgruntled because women have taken over the government. But that's a good thing, the President says, "there is no hate, misery, or pain." True, retorts Lómbar, spokesman for the "Union of Oppressed Husbands," but there is "no happiness or laughter or music or dance or song. There are no tears on Venus, but in exchange...there's boredom." He demands new elections with an all-male slate of candidates, or the men of Venus will go on strike. The President instead sends Laur and Kuana to Earth to bring back two males who are cheerful, can take a beating, and are not too smart--if these two work out, "thousands more" will be imported to Venus to teach the Venusian men a lesson.

Laur and Kuana arrive on Earth and visit a cantina where itinerant mariachis Viruta and Capulina are trying
(and failing) to make a living. The two Earth men appear to meet the requirements as involuntary ambassadors to Venus, but Laur and Kuana decide to observe them for a bit longer. After a violent encounter with a bearded man who knows martial arts and thrashes them both, the two musicians apply for a job as gardeners at a sports club, hoping to learn enough to get revenge on their assailant. However, the bearded man happens to be their employer! The Martians learn of the Venusians' plan, and send some of their fierce warriors to Earth to kill Capulina and Viruta. Laur and Kuana save their "specimens" with their paralysing ray-guns (the Venusians have abolished capital punishment and won't even kill Martians in war); Capulina inadvertently dons a Martian medallion that gives him super-strength. The Martians bring in reinforcements, and Laur, Kuana, Capulina and Viruta flee Earth (Capulina and Viruta accidentally board the Martian spacecraft but are later picked up by the Venusians).

On Venus, Capulina and Viruta are introduced to the marvels of an advanced civilisation. Their foolish antics amuse the Venusians, even the men, and the threatened strike is averted. Capulina and Viruta marry Laur and Kuana and set off for a honeymoon...on the Moon.

Los astronáutas isn't very original, but there are a few interesting aspects in both script and execution. Having the Venusians make their essential pacifism explicit is unusual--"good" characters might refrain from killing on moral grounds, but they generally don't state this openly, it's just assumed. The confrontation between Lómbar and the President of Venus early in the film is also fascinating: in many female-dominated societies (in film and literature), the women have abolished war and other socio-political problems. However, in a seemingly-contradictory corollary (since women are generally perceived as more "emotional" than men), this new world order has resulted in a lack of emotions on the planet: while it isn't said outright, if "hate" is absent, then "love" also vanishes. The concept of a "perfect" society being devoid of emotions is reminiscent of the alien manifesto in Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

There are also a few minor but pleasant touches. The Martians move very stiffly and slowly on Earth, doing a "monster walk" that resembles the Frankenstein monster or the Mummy's method of locomotion. This is explained by Laur and Kuana, who say the Earth's atmosphere is thicker than that of Mars, so it's as if the Martians are swimming through water, a clever touch. The Martians themselves slightly resemble uniformed apes with giant bat-ears, and have very amusing, belligerent personalities. Not only are the masks and costumes rather good (considering), for once it seems a sufficient quantity were created, since in one sequence we see at least half a dozen creatures pursuing Viruta and Capulina.

The optical effects, including shots of the spacecraft, are not very good, and in one scene in which Viruta and Capulina's bodies are split in half, an unconvincing matte shot is utilised. On the other hand, a nicely detailed model of a Venusian city is shown, and Viruta and Capulina's quarters on their adopted planet has a modernistic modular design, with the kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom emerging from behind a wall on demand. They also have a "robotic dog" which bears a remarkable resemblance to a Roomba. None of these things are amazing or outstanding, but they demonstrate a bit of thought and care were expended on the picture.

The performances are about what one would expect. Everyone is subordinate to the stars, and exist only in relation to them (or to provide what little exposition is needed to advance the plot). Capulina and Viruta do their usual shtick, while Gina Romand and Norma Mora's chief purpose is to look good (although for some reason their mini-skirted costumes don't show any cleavage at all, which is shocking!), although certainly one has to credit their acting ability, since their characters are supposed to fall in love with the clodhish Viruta and Capulina! Tito Novaro has an odd role but does an effective job playing a Martian in muscular human form.

Los astronáutas isn't a great film, but the science fiction aspects make it slightly more interesting than the more
"realistic" Capulina and Viruta vehicles of the era. Curiously, the comedy team was caught in an odd Catch-22 situation: they were too popular, appearing in 26 films between 1957 and 1962 (six of these, including *Los astronautas*, in 1960). However, because they made so many films, cinemas couldn’t schedule them all, and as a result *Los astronautas* wasn’t shown in Mexico City until 1964.

☠☠☠ ☠☠☠ ☠☠☠ ☠☠☠

*Las vampiras* [*The Vampire Women*]

(Filmica Vergara-Cinecomisiones/Columbia Pictures, 1967) *Exec Prod*: Jesús Fragoso; *Prod*: Luis Enrique Vergara C.; *Dir*: Federico Curiel; *Scr*: Adolfo Torres Portillo, Federico Curiel; *Photo*: Alfredo Uribe J.; *Music Dir*: Gustavo César Carreón [sic]; *Asst Dir*: J. Luis González; *Script Clerk*: José Delfos; *Film Ed*: J. Juan Munguía; *Asst Film Ed*: Álfredo Camaecho; *Art Dir*: Octavio Ocampo, José Méndez; *Asst Photo*: Eduardo Rojo; *Camera Op*: Carlos Morales; *Makeup*: María Eugenia Luna; *Re-rec*: Heinrich Henkel; *Dialog Rec*: Joaquín Jiménez; *Recordists*: Ricardo Saldivar, Guillermo Carrasco; *Union*: STIC-ANDA


*Notes*: although never dubbed into English, *Las vampiras* is nonetheless fairly well-known internationally thanks to the combination of vampires, John Carradine, and Mil Máscaras. However, despite these factors, and the presence of Federico Curiel in the director’s chair (Curiel helmed two of Carradine's Vergara movies, the boring Jaime Salvador did the other two), *Las vampiras* is only moderately entertaining, hampered by a plodding and unimaginative script and low production values.

Mil Máscaras witnesses a number of strange incidents involving bats, and reporter Carlos Mayer has had similar experiences, but even when people die or vanish (Mil's assistant Alicia is killed and wrestler Blackaman disappears), police commander Garfias refuses to believe there is a connection. Actually, the bats are women vampires: some of them have just arrived from Transylvania to link up with their Mexican cohorts. A power struggle develops between Aura, the Mexican leader, and Dracula's widow Veria. All of the male vampires have been destroyed over the years, with the exception of Branus, and his powers have been greatly diminished and his mind affected by an encounter with a vampire-hunter that left a splinter of wood embedded in his brain.

Aura and Veria each want to reign over the vampires, but agree that they must find a powerful mortal and convert him into their king. Mil Máscaras and Carlos, who've figured out that weird bat antics = vampire infestation, are eventually captured by the vampires. They have to battle some undead (male) slaves to decide who is the best candidate to become King Vampire (spoiler: it's Mil). Meanwhile, Branus (who has been feigning insanity to lull Aura into a false sense of security) makes an alliance with Veria to seize power. Later, when Branus desperately needs blood to survive, Veria sacrifices herself so he can continue his quest to reestablish the vampire dynasty. Branus abducts Marian, the girlfriend of Carlos, intending to make her his consort. Branus also frees Mil...
Las vampiras isn't as entertaining as many of Curiel's genre films. The narrative is confused and nothing much really happens. The action sequences are infrequent and the protagonists are reactive rather than proactive. This is somewhat understandable, since the script seems to have been assembled from ideas and scenes cribbed from Santo vs. las mujeres vampiro and other films, chosen at random, with no organisation or linear flow. For example, Carlos' girlfriend Marian appears briefly (her uncle is a "rare weapons collector" and has some silver bullets--the uncle is murdered by the vampires, although how they found out about him is not explained) then largely vanishes until the end of the film when she's abducted by Branus. The characterisations of the protagonists are also flimsy: Marian reacts almost not at all when her uncle is killed, Carlos is first seen acting like a hysterical fool on a television show, Cmdte. Garfias refuses to investigate various crimes because he thinks the vampire angle is ridiculous, etc. In contrast, the internecine struggle in the vampire community is rather interesting, and John Carradine (although dubbed), María Duval, and (to a lesser extent) Martha Romero have well-developed roles and handle them effectively.

There are some good ideas in Las vampiras and some amusingly silly parts (even when in human form, some of the vampire women constantly move their arms as if they're "flying"), but they never jell. Early in the movie, Branus says Aura and Veria must compete in the "trial of Satan" to determine who shall be queen. Fair enough. But first, we get a long vampire-girl ballet (it sounds better than it is), leading one to wonder if the "trial of Satan" is going to be a dance-off. But no, Aura and Veria are (finally) given blazing torches and told to go at it, which they do...briefly. The later combat between Mil, Carlos and the vampires' crew of muscular slaves is slightly more extensive, but nothing to exclaim about.

The production values are skimpy, limited to the standard América studio sets. In some long shots the vampires' main throne room is shot with a fisheye lens, which makes it seem even more cramped. There are far too many scenes shot in mock-up autos in which the (off-screen) crew members rock the car so violently that it gives the impression every road in Mexico is full of potholes. Very little attempt is made to convey a horror atmosphere--which wasn't Curiel's forte anyway, although he could turn on the horror when needed--but unfortunately Las vampiras also lacks the energy and comic-book style of other, better films in the genre. Still, the presence of Carradine and the campy costumes and behaviour of the vampire women keep this from being dull, so there is some entertainment value to be had.
so forth. Luckily, the agency receives a call requesting a new caretaker for the Fontenac mansion. Earlier, a flashback to 150 years before showed Count Draca being dispatched in the mansion with a spear through his heart. His body is now invisible, but the spear remains anchored upright in the main hall of the house; Draca's consort Vampa hires "caretakers" who are ordered to remove the spear (thus allowing Draca to return to life), but none have been able to do so (and the inept workers are subsequently killed by Vampa).

Capulina goes to "work" and is befriended by Carbonato, a little person-ghost who is the guardian of the hidden Fontenac treasure. He and Capulina become friends of a sort, although Capulina rejects his advice and removes the spear from its place, reviving Count Draca. Because Capulina knows the location of the Fontenac riches, Draca and Vampa don't kill him at once. Draca revives a bevy of attractive vampire women who pursue the rotund comedian around the mansion. Meanwhile, Capulina has spent several gold doubloons (given to him by Carbonato) at the local general store; the store owner and his assistant visit the mansion in an attempt to find the treasure, but are attacked by the vampires.

Finally, Capulina dons a suit of armour and yanks out the vampires' fangs with pliers, rendering them harmless. So they won't starve, Capulina feeds them milk via baby bottles, and employs Draca as his butler. However, the storekeeper and his assistant, now vampires, attack Capulina but then... he wakes up. It was all a dream. As the film ends, there is a knock at the door—it's Draca! Capulina jumps into bed and puts a chamber pot on his head.

Capulina contra los vampiros features a few clever lines and Capulina's regular shtick--funny gestures, facial contortions, and noises. Unfortunately, the pacing is extremely poor—even the mildest bits of slapstick are stretched out or repeated interminably. There is a fair amount of aimless running around, although at least director Cardona doesn't resort to too much fast-motion in a futile effort to make this seem like humour (he does succumb to the temptation to have "comedy music" on the soundtrack). For a fair amount of the first part of the movie, Capulina works alone and is fairly amusing as he explores the haunted mansion; later, he's mostly paired off with Aurelio Pérez, Rossy Mendoza, and/or Juan Gallardo, and at times seems rather abrasive and obnoxious rather than sympathetic.

Rossy Mendoza gets into the spirit of things, declaiming her lines at full volume and laughily maniacally, but Juan Gallardo is much more restrained (to be fair, much of the time he's hampered by the ridiculously large fangs in his mouth, which make it extremely difficult for him to talk). Most of the film takes place on the Fontenac mansion set, which is large enough and relatively well-appointed. Still, the picture has a false and artificial look about it overall, in common with other Churubusco-shot productions of the early 1970s (on the other hand, Capulina's films made at the América studios look cheaper, so it's a trade-off).

Not especially good, but far from the worst Capulina film of this period.

La Texana maldita

[The Accursed Cowboy Hat]

(Alberto Granados B., ©2000) Prod: Alberto Granados Berber; Dir: José Luis Vera Alamillo; Scr: Ignacio Rivera Oviedo; Photo: José Luis Vera A.; Music: Carlos del Castillo, Alejandro Carrera; Prod Mgr: Víctor Vera A.; Asst Dir: Javier Vera; Film Ed: Roberto Vallejo Piñera; Makeup: Libertad Arce; Sound Engin: Enrique Rendón

Cast: Eleazar García (Jr.) (Aguilera), Luis Gattea (Padre José), Alfredo Gutiérrez "El Turco" (El Viejo), Jorge Aldama (Lic. Rentería), Flavio Peniche (Cumbias), Azul (Cata), Jorge Ortín (Octavio), Los Razos de Sacramento y Reynaldo (band), Gibrán González (Rubén), Víctor Bejarano (pistolero), Victor Garibay (Aguilera's henchman), José Mario Sánchez (priest), Alberto Granados (Man in Black), Libertad Arce (Woman in White)
THE MEXICAN FILM BULLETIN  Volume 17 Number 5  (Sept-Oct 2011)

Notes: Despite the brilliant "high concept" idea--a cowboy hat with a curse!!--*La Texana maldita* is a routine videohome (which is to say, clumsy and cheap) that somehow inspired numerous sequels.

Padre José is driving to his new assignment when his car overheats. Shabby-looking passerby Octavio conveniently has a jug of water for the radiator; he also insists the priest accept his black cowboy hat--with a big silver skull ornament on the front--as a gift, but requests a ride to town in exchange. On the way, there is an accident...Padre José awakes in bed, apparently not seriously injured. An old man dressed in black says he was brought to town after the car wreck. While they're waiting for the local priest to return--he's officiating at a funeral, the old man says...dun dun DUN--the man tells José the history of the black cowboy hat.

During the Mexican Revolution, *Villista* Col. Nájera brought the hat back from the USA, where it'd originally belonged to a gringo. However, it was crafted by Native Americans who built in a curse, in revenge for having half their tribe wiped out by whites. Now the hat brings misfortune to whoever wears it...

Drug kingpin Aguilera picks up the hat in a cantina, where it's been left behind by a mysterious Man in Black. Aguilera soon begins to see visions: after having sex with a prostitute, he thinks her face is horribly mutilated; the Man in Black pops up in his peripheral vision at inopportune times, causing him to shoot various clients and his own henchmen by mistake. Finally, the curse of the hat kills Aguilera himself. The hat passes through objects, no "rules" are set down about transferring ownership of the hat, what the curse involves (other than fatal bad luck), and so forth. Furthermore, the chain of ownership is presented in a very shabby manner--Aguilera gets the hat indirectly from the Man in Black (who left it on the table deliberately for him, since no one else can even see it there). Rentería is given it as a gift but the previous owner just says he "found" it, Octavio passes it to the reluctant Padre José (so Octavio doesn't die while he owns the hat, which seems contradictory to the legend), Cata picks it up after the previous owner is killed. There isn't a single consistent method of transferring the hat from one person to the next.

As so often is the case, the script is one of the major problems with *La Texana maldita*. Unlike similar stories of cursed objects, no "rules" are set down about transferring ownership of the hat, what the curse involves (other than fatal bad luck), and so forth. Furthermore, the chain of ownership is presented in a very shabby manner--Aguilera gets the hat indirectly from the Man in Black (who left it on the table deliberately for him, since no one else can even see it there). Rentería is given it as a gift but the previous owner just says he "found" it, Octavio passes it to the reluctant Padre José (so Octavio doesn't die while he owns the hat, which seems contradictory to the legend), Cata picks it up after the previous owner is killed. There isn't a single consistent method of transferring the hat from one person to the next.

Aside from its effect on Cata--the old man tells Padre José "the hat was made for men," so women react to it differently--the hat doesn't bring riches or power to the owner, which separates this from "The Monkey's Paw"-type tales. Basically, people in the film like the way the hat looks, and that's why they grab it. Conceivably, the hat could be compelling them to take it, but this is never made clear--although this might explain why so many people are willing to wear a used cowboy hat. Ew, dandruff, head lice, those could be the real curse of the *texana maldita*!

Also, the old man (and a priest who confronts Cata later in the film) repeatedly harp on the "fame" of the cursed hat. "Everyone knows the legend," etc. Well, everyone except the people who willingly accept the deadly hat in this movie, that is.

The film also includes repeat appearances by the Man in Black and the Woman in White. The Man in Black is either Satan and/or the original owner of the and/or the original owner of the *texana* (implied by a prologue in which he loses a duel to Col. Nájera, who then takes the hat): dressed all in black and with a black scarf over his face, the MiB glides through scenes as if on roller skates, a risible rather than spooky effect. The Woman in White shows up less frequently, but in similar peripheral-vision or background fashion. Col. Nájera raises her veil in the prologue and screams at her (presumably) horrid face, but naturally we never get to see it. Her identity is even less clear than the Man in Black, she's just...Death or something.
There are a few minor things to like about La Texana maldita. Alfredo Gutiérrez does a good job as the suspiciously-omniscient narrator--he’s the old pro in the cast, although Eleazar García Jr. and Luis Gatica are also experienced actors and turn in decent performances. The makeup of zombie-Rubén is rather good and is revealed in a satisfactory shock moment, but there is little in the way of other special makeup or special effects. The production values aren’t horrible but virtually everything is shot in a flat, over-lit style in nondescript locations. On the positive side, the music score, although repetitive, has its effective moments.

Nothing really special, La Texana maldita is a routine videohome which fails to live up to its outré premise.

☠☠☠ ☠☠☠ ☠☠☠ ☠☠☠

El libro de piedra

[The Book of Stone]

(Hilo Negro Films*, ©2007 Exec Prod: Estrella Medina Escamilla, Gonzalo Elvira Álvarez; Prod: Estrella Medina Escamilla, Julio César Estrada; Dir: Julio César Estrada; Adapt: Gustavo Moheno, Mario P. Székely, Julio César Estrada, Enrique Rentería; Orig. Story: Carlos Enrique Taboada Walker; Makeup: Josefina Arellano; Direct Sound: Miguel Sandoval

*In assoc. with FIDECINE-Gobierno de Chiapas-Duck Films-Grupo Financiero Inbursa-Tristain Entertainment

Cast: Plutarco Haza (Alejandro Ruvalcaba), Evangelina Sosa (Julia Septién), Ludwika Paleta (Maríana Ruvalcaba), Guillermo Larrea (Carlos), Maríana Beyer (Silvia Ruvalcaba), Marta Aura (Soledad), Enoc Leano (Germán), Jorge Victoria (Dr. Macías), René Gatica (Prof. Ponce), Miguel Couturier (Lt. Ramos), Jorge Lago (Hugo), Maríana Coutiño (Julia’s daughter), Sofí Louis (contractor), Esther Lanz (Silvia’s mother)

Notes: Carlos Enrique Taboada’s reputation has grown steadily in the years since his death, although most of the attention is paid to the handful of fantasy films he made in the late 1960s and early 1970s, rather than his script work or the other films--mostly dramas--he directed. Even Veneno para las hadas, for which Taboada received Best Film and Best Director Arieles, takes a back seat to Hasta el viento tiene miedo and El libro de piedra, his two most famous movies.

Filmmakers who remake older movies—even those not considered “classics”—often have to choose between fealty to the source and the desire to make a distinctively different version. Either way, criticism lurks: if the new picture is too close to the original, people may wonder why it was re-made at all; if the new version takes liberties with the plot, setting, and/or characters of the older movie, the filmmaker may be criticised for betraying the original.

Julio César Estrada, who produced the Hasta el viento tiene miedo remake (directed by Gustavo Moheno, who co-wrote El libro de piedra) and directed the supernatural-menace film Cañitas, selected the first option: the remake follows Taboada’s original film very closely. Unfortunately, in deciding what to keep and what to drop, Estrada left out most of the 1969 version’s atmosphere and the remake simply isn’t frightening—which is odd, since both Hasta el viento tiene miedo and Cañitas, while not perfect films by a long shot, did work hard for their scares.

Julia Septién, a child psychologist, is plunged into depression when her daughter is killed in a school bus accident. Her friend Dr. Macías urges her to take up the case of Silvia, the emotionally disturbed daughter of the wealthy Alejandro Ruvalcaba. Julia travels to the Ruvalcaba mansion in Chiapas, where she meets her employer, his new wife Maríana, servants Soledad and Germán, and young Silvia. Silvia is withdrawn but not hostile to Julia--she reserves her hostility for her step-mother Maríana. She also has an imaginary playmate she calls Hugo, after an antique statue in the garden depicting a young boy reading a book. Hugo, Silvia says, is the son of a powerful wizard who lived in Europe in the Middle Ages, and an academic researcher later verifies this information.
Some strange (but not really scary) things happen. Julia loses a necklace in a lake but someone returns it to her that night. Silvia is frightened by a large dog belonging to Carlos, a friend of her father. The dog dies. Silvia uses voodoo-like powers to cause Mariana a stabbing pain in her hand, nearly causing an automobile crash. Carlos does die in a fiery accident.

While Julia and Alejandro are in town identifying his body, Mariana wanders into the woods and is dragged off by a flesh-and-blood Hugo (this is the eeriest scene in the film). She's later discovered, drowned in the lake. Enraged, Alejandro takes a sledge-hammer and smashes Hugo's statue. Silvia collapses. She later vanishes from her bedroom. Alejandro and Julia rush to the grove and see the statue of Hugo has reappeared...and a statue of Julia is standing next to him!

Since the remake follows the original so closely, why is the new El libro de piedra so bland and tame? After all, "nothing really happens" applies to both movies. To be honest, Taboada's version is not an especially effective horror movie, but it's more lively and interesting than Estrada's picture. There may be a nostalgia factor at work, but the performers and performances seem more vivid in the original: Marga López, Joaquín Cordero, Norma Lazareno, and Aldo Monti vs. Evangelina Sosa, Plutarco Haza, Ludwika Paleta, and Guillermo Larrea? No contest (not to disparage the talents of the current generation of actors, who are all competent, experienced professionals, but they don't have the gravitas of the earlier cast).

However, judging the remake of El libro de piedra on its own merits is only fair. Unfortunately, it not only suffers in comparison to its source, on its own it is formally tepid and uninteresting, with claustrophobic photography, limp pacing, and an overall lack of suspense. While I wasn't especially fond of Estrada's earlier directorial effort Cañas: Presencia, most of the flaws in that movie could be attributed to the script, and I enjoyed the remake of Hasta el viento tiene miedo, so it's difficult to ascertain where El libro de piedra went wrong. Perhaps more liberties should have been taken with Taboada's original story (as occurred in the Hasta el viento tiene miedo remake), updating it, adding more graphic special effects and supernatural action. As it stands, the major difference in the script is the addition of the opening scenes which give Julia a tragic back-story. But once she arrives at the Ruvalcaba mansion in Chiapas, Julia loses most of her personality and the film loses focus: El libro de piedra isn't really about Julia, or Julia and Silvia's relationship, it becomes just a string of minor events involving various people in the household. El libro de piedra isn't a bad film, simply a rather colourless and unexciting one.