

# THE MEXICAN FILM BULLETIN

## VOLUME 19 NUMBER 4

### JULY-AUGUST 2013

#### DIOSAS DE PLATA, 2013

After a year's hiatus, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Diosas de Plata—awarded by PECIME, the entertainment journalists' organisation—were presented on 30 July 2013 at the Teatro Esperanza Iris in Mexico City.



Ignacio López Tarso received a lifetime achievement award, and learned the prize would from this point onward bear his name. Actress Flor Silvestre was also honoured with a special Diosa for her long career, as were Luz María Aguilar and Eduardo de la Peña "Lalo el Mimo."

The "Francisco Piña" award was given to the late Enrique Rosas, director of the classic silent film *El automóvil gris* (1919), and was accepted by his grandchildren. Other prizes:

**Best Film:** *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*

**Best Director:** Luis Mandoki for *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*

**Best Actress:** Ana Serradilla for *Luna escondida*

**Best Actor:** Joaquín Cosío for *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*

**Best Co-Starring Actress:** Angelina Peláez for *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*

**Best Co-Starring Actor:** Jaime Jiménez for *Cartas a Elena*

**Best Supporting Actor:** Hugo Macías Macotela for *Cartas a Elena*

**Best Supporting Actress:** Carmen Salinas for *Cartas a Elena*

**Best First Work:** Martín Barajas Llorent for *Cartas a Elena*

**Best Music Score:** Edén Solís for *Cartas a Elena*

**Best Photography:** Carlos Hidalgo for *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol*

**Best Original Theme:** *Luna escondida*

**Best Screenplay:** Michel Franco for *Después de Lucía*

**Best Editing:** Felipe Gómez and Martín Luis Guzmán for *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol*

**Best New Actress:** Tessa Ía for *Después de Lucía*

**Best New Actor:** Mane de la Parra for *El cielo en tu mirada*

**Best Short Film:** *La tiricia* (dir. Ángeles Cruz)

#### OBITUARY: OLGA AGOSTINI

Actress Olga Agostini died in a New York hospital on 7 August 2013; she had been suffering from cancer. Born in Puerto Rico in 1925, Agostini moved to New York at the age of 18 and began a long career as an actress on television, in films, and—particularly—in Spanish-language theatre.

Agostini appeared in a number of Nuyorican movies, including *El callao* and *Mataron a*

*Elena* (shot in Puerto Rico). She can also be seen in the Mexican-Puerto Rican co-production *Adiós, New York, adiós*, made in New York around 1977.

Olga Agostini is survived by two children and 4 grandchildren. She will be buried in Puerto Rico, next to her mother.



#### FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE: INTERNATIONAL LITERARY ADAPTATIONS IN MEXICAN CINEMA DURING WWII

Works of literature--novels, stories, and plays--have been adapted to the cinema since the early years of the medium. The reasons are obvious, and range from the publicity benefit of utilising a "pre-sold" property to the never-ending need for new source material for film stories.

However, in the early years of the Mexican film industry, literary adaptations of any type --much less adaptations of works from outside the Spanish-speaking world--were not the norm.

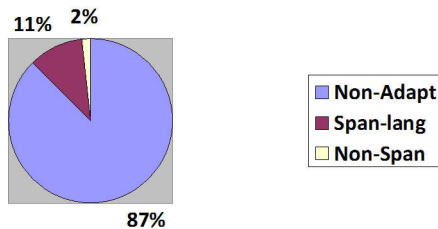
During the first 12 years of sound cinema in Mexico (1930-1941), 303 feature films were produced, but the vast majority were made from original screenplays. Only 13% were literary adaptations, and only a fraction of these--5 films, less than 2% of the total production--were based on non-Spanish-language originals. 3 of these five were made in the 1939-41 period when--as we shall see--

the trend towards "cosmopolitan" films was becoming established.

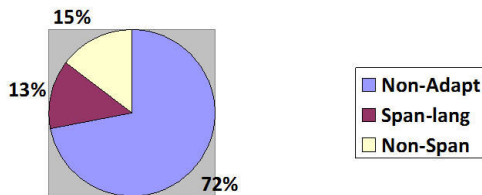
In contrast, 346 feature films were produced in Mexico between 1942 and 1946. Among these were 54 literary adaptations from non-Hispanic sources (15% of the total). After the war, this new trend came to an abrupt end: only 7% of 1947 films and less than 2% of Mexican movies made in 1948 were adaptations of non-Hispanic literary works.

What caused this sudden predilection for "foreign" literary adaptations in Mexican cinema of the early and mid 1940s?

**Mexican Cinema 1930-1941**



**1942-1946**



This paper shall attempt to explain why this "foreign literature" phenomenon occurred when it did, what effect it had on Mexican cinema, and why it was so short-lived.

Motion pictures were introduced into Mexico around 1896, and Mexican filmmakers began producing their own movies shortly afterwards. However, the first feature film was not made there until 1916, and Mexico never really developed a significant silent film industry: less than 150 features were made between 1916 and the advent of sound in 1930. A nascent film industry developed in Mexico after the introduction of sound, with the annual film production totals increasing slowly but steadily throughout the Thirties.

In the first half-decade of its existence, Mexican sound cinema had no particular national identity. The productions were largely a mix of melodramas and historical subjects. In 1936, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* helped create the indigenous *ranchera* genre, which contained "typical" Mexican cultural elements and helped

define the national cinema-- at least in the eyes of international audiences-- although as the annual output of the industry increased, so did the variety of genres which were addressed. In the latter half of the decade, comedies, horror movies, crime films, and others joined the staple themes of melodramas, historical films, and the new *ranchera* genre.

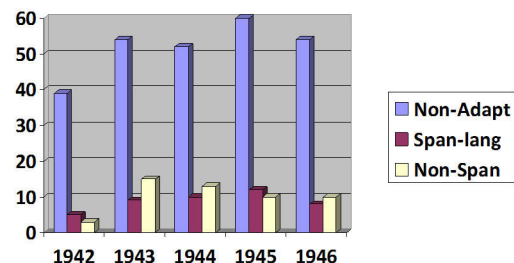
However, as mentioned earlier, the vast majority of Mexican feature films produced in the 1930-1941 period were made from original screenplays. Only 13% were literary adaptations, and most of these were adapted from works written in Mexico.

As a point of comparison, 41% of the 1935 releases of 3 Hollywood companies--MGM, Warner Brothers, and Columbia--were adaptations of previously published works. The ratio of adaptations to original screenplays seemed to correlate with the prestige and financial status of the companies: 57% of MGM's movies were adaptations, 46% of Warner Brothers', and only 20% of Columbia's. These numbers, while anecdotal, suggest that a small, relatively impoverished, fledgling film industry such as Mexico's would tend to make fewer literary adaptations.

The Mexican film industry of the 1930s was largely composed of individual producers and/or small companies that were chronically under-funded, which lent an air of uncertainty to production. Since Mexico had had no significant silent film industry, the industrial and economic infrastructure had to be created slowly, from scratch. Budgets were low, so large-scale spectacles were rare and money to pay for literary rights was scarce. Most films were set in Mexico, reducing the need for elaborate sets and costumes.

However, beginning in 1942, Mexican film companies suddenly began to make a significant number of movies based on international literary works, including many not originally written in Spanish. 346 films were produced in this period. This represented an increase in the average production over the 1930-1941 period from 25 to 69 films per year.

**1942-46**



97 films--or 28% of the total--were literary adaptations, more than double the percentage in the 1930-41 period. 51 of these, or 53% of all adaptations and 15%

of all films, were based on literary works--novels, plays, stories--originally written in languages other than Spanish.

There is no single explanation for this drastic increase in foreign literary adaptations, but there were a number of contributing factors.

During the Second World War, Mexican cinema changed in various ways--technically, economically, quantitatively, qualitatively and in terms of film content. The annual production increased and the potential audience for Mexican films widened significantly during the war years. The technical quality of films improved and higher budgets--aided by the establishment of a "film bank" which provided loans to producers-- resulted in improved production values, such as larger sets and more elaborate costumes. As a key player in the effort to promote hemispheric anti-fascist solidarity, Mexico received preferential treatment from the USA in the allocation of raw film stock and filmmaking equipment.

These and other factors in turn also helped bolster a trend which had begun in the late 1930s towards "cosmopolitan" films. Cosmopolitan films deliberately broke with the "folkloric" tradition in Mexican cinema. Many of these new-style films had urban, contemporary settings and plots; they were often imitations of Hollywood genres and styles, and were not deeply rooted in local Mexican culture. *Rancheras* and domestic melodramas continued to be made, but more "modern" pictures began to be produced.

Furthermore, Spain and Argentina--Mexico's primary competitors for the Spanish-speaking film audience--had been temporarily weakened by the world political situation, leading to the anticipation of greater international distribution, at the very least throughout Latin America and--so the industry hoped--in other areas of the world as well. Thus, the idea may have been that adaptations of "international" literature would have a broader appeal to these non-Mexican audiences.

Several additional contributing factors might be suggested, although upon closer examination it does not appear these were significant. Since the annual production of the Mexican film industry increased in this period, one might speculate that literary adaptations were a welcome additional source of film stories; however, the number of films made in Mexico continued to increase in the post-war period, and yet "foreign" literary adaptations decreased drastically.

And while it is true that certain producers such as Ramón Pereda made many literary adaptations in this period, they were not the sole source of such adaptations. Furthermore, Pereda—for instance—had made numerous movies in the 1930s and produced many more in the late 1940s and beyond, and literary adaptations did not predominate in either of these periods of his career.

Most of the literary adaptations fall into one of two categories:

There were close adaptations, adhering to the setting--time and place--of the original work. A number of

these were period pieces which would have lost a significant amount of their relevance, appeal and impact had they been artificially altered to take place in Mexico. Although this latter practice was not unknown--in the

1950s, for example, adaptations of "Crime and Punishment" and "The Three Musketeers" were filmed with Mexican settings--at least in the 1942-46 period filmmakers apparently felt it would have been counter-productive to make versions of "Les misérables" or "The Man in the Iron Mask" not set in the original French locations.

Consequently, a significant percentage

of the adaptations of foreign literature were set in other countries. It should also be noted that--in addition to the adaptation of foreign literary works--a number of wartime Mexican movies that were not adaptations were also set outside Mexico, a very rare occurrence before and afterwards. This was presumably another attempt to broaden the appeal of Mexican cinema.

There were also freer adaptations which transposed the original's time/place to Mexico but were otherwise fairly faithful to the source work.

Two examples of this are the 1943 productions *Camino de los gatos* and *La fuga*. *Camino de los gatos* was based on "Der Katzensteg," an 1890 German novel by Herman Sudermann, set during the Napoleonic Wars, while *La fuga* was an adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's story "Boule de suif," a tale of the Franco-Prussian War,

published in 1880.

Both Mexican film adaptations transposed the original plots to the 1860s, the period of the French Intervention and the war between the Juarista liberals and the

conservative forces. This change helped make the films more directly relevant to Mexican audiences.

The movies also served as allegories about the Second World War, with their themes of resistance to invasion, the fight for liberty and national sovereignty, and so on. Ironically, while Sudermann's novel was written from the Prussian point of view and de Maupassant cast



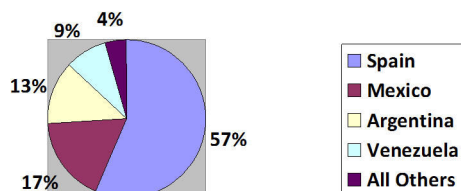


the Prussians as the villains in his story, both Mexican films were at least somewhat anti-French in nature. War-relevance was not the primary reason for the increase in literary adaptations in this era, but as these examples illustrate, some of the adaptations were either inherently relevant or could be modified to address the contemporary political situation.

Other films which replaced the original source's location with a Mexican setting include *Don Simón de Lira*, a version of Ben Jonson's "Volpone," and *Bodas trágicas*, which moved Shakespeare's "Othello" to a Mexican *hacienda*.

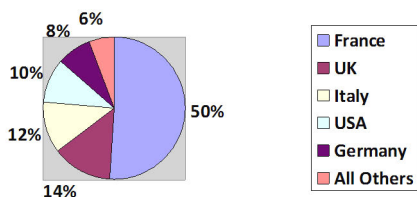
The majority of the original non-Hispanic source works adapted into Mexican films in this era were originally published in the 19th century or earlier, although there were exceptions: for example, Stefan Zweig's story "Amok" was first printed in 1922, and Florence Barclay's novel "The Rosary" was published in 1909. However, older works had the advantage of being considered literary "classics" and yet required no rights payments to the long-deceased authors.

#### Spanish-Language Sources



In the 1942-46 period, more films were made based on non-Hispanic literary works (51 films) than from literature originally written in Spanish (46 films). The majority (26 films) of the Spanish-language originals were novels, plays, or stories written by Spanish authors; 8 films were adapted from Mexican sources, with Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Chile also contributing. This reverses the trend in the 1930-41 period, when 19 Mexican works were adapted, compared with only 6 Spanish sources. The most frequently adapted authors in the 1942-46 era were Spaniard Pedro Antonio De Alarcón and Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos, with four films each.

#### Non-Spanish Sources



The foreign literary adaptations were also dominated by the works of one country, France. 26 of the

51 films were based on French literature, with the United Kingdom, Italy, the USA, and Germany trailing far behind. What can explain this rather drastic preference for French novels, plays and stories? France had attacked Mexico several times--first in the so-called "Pastry War" in 1838-39 and the second time in 1861--and subsequently helped place Maximilian on the throne of Mexico, but this historical aggression did not prevent Mexicans, particularly those in the upper echelons of society, from admiring and adopting many French social customs, cuisine, culture, architecture, dress, etc..

This *afrancesado* tendency grew and flourished under the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz, a devout fan of everything French (and who in fact died in exile in Paris in 1915). This admiration for French culture may help explain the predominance of adaptations of 19th century French literature in Mexican cinema of the war years.

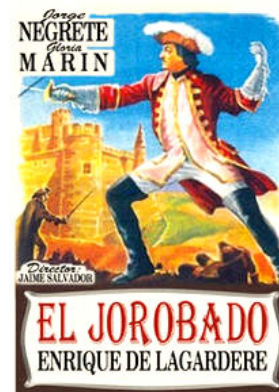
The sources ranged from works by "serious" authors such as Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Moliere, Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas *pere* and *fils*, to more popular writers like Jules Verne, Pierre Benoit and Maurice LeBlanc, as well as those who are all but unknown today like Alfonse Daudet, who had two of his works adapted to film in Mexico, and other writers like Theophile Gautier, Georges Ohnet, and so on.

French adaptations include swashbuckling period pieces such as *El jorobado*, *El hombre en la máscara de hierro*, crime-adventure movies such as two films featuring the Arsene Lupin character and a version of *Rocambole*, literary classics like *Los miserables* and *Naná*, melodramas and even farces.

Adaptations from other countries were fewer in number and not as easy to classify by time or genre. For example, English authors included the aforementioned Ben Jonson, as well as William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde, and popular women's novelist Florence Barclay, who had two of her books adapted into Mexican films.

The United States was represented by Jack London and Maxwell Anderson, among others, while Italian authors included poet Gabriele D'Annunzio and popular adventure novelist Emilio Salgari.

There does not seem to be any particular pattern in the selection of these authors. Certainly many of them were well-known and presumably carried a certain imprimatur of quality and popularity, but there were other films based on relatively obscure works by relatively obscure authors. It might be noted, however, that the non-French literary sources tended to be of more recent origin than the largely 19th-century provenance of the French works.





The literary adaptations flaunted their foreign origins. The advertising and credits sequences made sure audiences understood these movies were based on “classic, famous” novels, stories and plays written outside of Mexico and Spain.

The poster for *El hombre de la máscara de hierro* says it is the “FIRST version in SPANISH of the famous novel by Alejandro Dumas.” Similarly, the poster for *Resurrección* indicates it is the “First and Only version Spoken in Spanish of the famous novel by Leon Tolstoi.” The main titles for *Felipe Derblay* and *Papa Lebonard* credit the original works, presumably familiar to the “cultured” public.



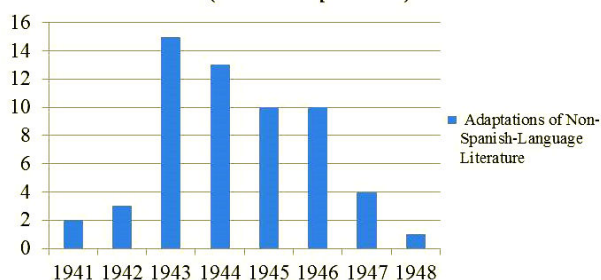
Some credits even included facsimiles of the actual books or title pages to remind audiences of the literary basis of their scripts.

The prominent billing of the source works, both in

advertising and on the films themselves, reinforces the supposition that the primary reasons for these adaptations were both the prestige they conveyed and the marketing opportunities they presented.

However, almost as suddenly as it had begun, the flood of foreign-literature adaptations declined to almost nothing. As mentioned earlier, only 7% of 1947 films and less than 2% of Mexican movies in 1948 were adaptations of non-Hispanic literary works. In the next seven decades, Mexican cinema would occasionally adapt foreign novels, plays, and stories, but never in the same quantity as during the war years.

International Literature Adaptations  
In Mexican Cinema  
(% of annual production)



Perhaps producers decided their hopes of expanding the audience for Mexican cinema beyond the Spanish-speaking world were not going to be realised: the end of World War II saw Hollywood resume its frantic pace of international distribution, and the end of its cooperation with the Mexican industry. Furthermore, Spain and Argentina were once again players in the production of Spanish-language cinema, increasing the

competition for this market. *Rancheras* made a comeback, and a noir-ish musical melodrama genre known as the *cabaretera* film became popular. Budgets decreased. The overwhelming majority of Mexican movies were once again set within the borders of Mexico itself.

While Mexican cinema continued to receive some international distribution, the films were often sold on their *mexicanidad*--in other words, on the unique “folkloric” qualities of Mexican culture they reflected--rather than as direct competition to movies from Hollywood or other “cosmopolitan” cinemas.

So, while the grand experiment of 1942-46 was ultimately unsuccessful if its goal was to establish Mexican cinema as a purveyor of cosmopolitan movies to the world, it did leave behind a legacy which formed part of the so-called Golden Age of Mexican Cinema: a substantial number of interesting films which are unlike anything made by the industry before or since.

[This article was originally presented as a paper at the 2012 Literature/Film Association Annual Conference.]



## Los dos pilletes [The Two Scamps](Grovas, S.A.,

1942) “Jesús Grovas presents” *Prod:*

Gonzalo Elvira; *Dir-*

*Scr:* Alfonso Patiño

Gómez; *Orig.*

*Novel:* Pierre

Decourcelle (“Les

Deux Gosses”);

*Photo:* Agustín

Jiménez; *Music*

*Themes:* Chucho

Monje; *Music Dir:*

Miguel Ángel

Pazos; *Prod Chief:*

A. Guerrero Tello;

*Asst Dir:* J[aime]

Contreras; *Film Ed:*

José Bustos; *Art Dir:* José Rodríguez G.; *Camera Op:*

Manuel Gómez U.; *Makeup:* Fraustita; *Sound Op:*

Consuelo Rodríguez, José D. Pérez; *Script Clerk:* Américo

Fernández

**Cast:** Narciso Busquets (*Fanfán [Juanito]*), Polito Ortín (*Claudio*), Consuelo Frank (*Elena*), Miguel Arenas (*Jorge de Lara*), Margarita Mora (*Carmen*), Francisco Jambrina (*Capt. Roberto Dávalos*), Miguel Inclán (*Caracol*), Lupe Inclán (*Ceferina*), José Morcillo (*Cachalote*), Alejandro Cobo (*Espinilla*), E[nrique] García Álvarez (*Renato Sanvicente*), Armando Velasco (*García, aide to Dávalos*), Rafael Icardo (*comisario*)

**Notes:** although mostly unknown today, Pierre Decourcelle’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel “Les Deux Gosses” was extremely popular in its time and was adapted to stage and screen not only in France but internationally (“Two Little Vagrants,” an English-language stage version, opened on



Broadway in 1896). *Los dos pilletes* was an early example of the “invasion of French literature” in Mexican cinema during World War II, although the story’s setting was changed to Mexico.

However, there is really very little “Mexican” flavour to the film—in fact, other than the characters’ names, everything else (costumes, sets, and so forth) is non-specific and the film could easily have been set in France with no alteration at all. The time period is also vague, although late-19<sup>th</sup> century seems like a good bet.

*Los dos pilletes* stars two second-generation Mexican film actors, Narciso Busquets—son of actor Joaquín Busquets—and Chato Ortín’s son “Polito” (as an adult, he lost the diminutive and went by “Polo”). Busquets is the more accomplished performer (he’d worked in more than a dozen movies prior to this one) but Ortín is adequate as well. They’re surrounded by experienced performers including scene-stealers Miguel and Lupe Inclán. Production values are adequate but not lavish—the majority of the movie takes place on a handful of sets, and the cast is relatively small, but the scope of the story



doesn’t require much more than this in any case. Alfonso Patiño Gómez’s direction and the cinematography by Agustín Jiménez are workmanlike but not in any way stylish.

Elena visits Capt. Dávalos, who has been having an affair with her sister-in-law Carmen. [In fact, she had a child by him, but this boy—who lives with Dávalos—is never seen or referred to again, oddly enough.] Carmen is moving overseas with her diplomat husband Renato, and Dávalos has threatened to expose their relationship. Elena convinces him to allow Carmen to move on, and even to return the letters she wrote him: Dávalos agrees, although the letters are in his home. He tells his aide García to retrieve them. Unfortunately,



García’s coach breaks down and unscrupulous passerby Caracol steals the metal box containing the letters. Elena goes home and is reunited with her husband Jorge, who’s been on an extended trip. Carmen tells Elena that one final letter from Dávalos arrived the day before, but was intercepted by her husband Renato: fortunately for Carmen (but unfortunately for Elena), the letter was addressed to Elena as a way of protecting Carmen’s reputation. Long story short, Jorge becomes convinced Elena has been unfaithful to him, and

their young son Juanito is not his child at all. He takes the toddler, goes to a shabby section of town, and hands Juanito over to Caracol and his wife Ceferina. What a coincidence—Caracol is the man who stole the letters that would have cleared Elena!



Four years pass. Juanito, now called “Fanfán,” is like a brother to Claudio, also raised by Caracol and Ceferina. The boys are sent out to steal and beg to help support their foster “parents.” Claudio has a persistent cough and weak

lungs. One day, Fanfán and Claudio coincidentally run into Elena and Carmen (no one recognises anyone, of course): Fanfán steals Elena’s coin purse to buy medicine for Claudio, but returns it. Elena gives the boys her address and invites them to visit her. Caracol goes into criminal partnership with Cachalote and Espinilla, but is arrested. Fanfán, fed up with being used for illegal activities, runs away, promising to come back for Claudio when he can.

Carmen’s first husband has died and she is now able to be with Dávalos; Dávalos tells Jorge that Elena was innocent of any wrongdoing. Caracol sends for Jorge and Dávalos, and agrees to return Fanfán to Elena in exchange for one thousand pesos. However, Caracol learns Fanfán is gone, so he sends Claudio instead. Elena doesn’t feel Claudio is really her son, but she takes him into her home and treats him as if he were. Fanfán shows up and some vague memories convince Elena that he is the long-lost Juanito. Fanfán and Claudio sneak out one night to steal the box of letters from Caracol: they discover Jorge has already been there and is now a prisoner of the criminal gang, who have forced him to write a check for five thousand pesos. Fanfán and Claudio help Jorge escape, but Claudio is stabbed by Ceferina and later dies.



*Los dos pilletes* is full of the usual sort of outrageous coincidences and other melodramatic plot devices, but it’s not overly sentimental, some of the performances are quite entertaining, and the overall pace is good.



**Los miserables** [The Miserable Ones] (José Luis Calderón, 1943) “José Luis Calderón” presents; *Dir*: Fernando A. Rivero; *Adapt*: Roberto Tasker, Fernando A. Rivero; *Dialogue*: Ramón Peón; *Orig. Novel*: Víctor Hugo; *Photo*: Ross Fisher; *Music*: Elías Breeskin; *Prod Mgr*: César Pérez Luis; *Prod Chief*: E. Hernández; *Film Ed*: Mario del Río; *Art Dir*: [Manuel] Fontanals; *Costumes*:

Chardy; *Photo FX*: Machado Hermanos; *Sound Engin*: Enrique Rodríguez; *Sound Ed*: Lupita Marino

**Cast:** Domingo Soler (*Juan Valjean*; *Champmathieu*), David Silva (*Mario de Pontmercy*), Andrés Soler (*Thenardier*), Manolita Saval (*Cosette*), Antonio Bravo (*Insp. Javert*), Margarita Cortés (*Eponina Thenardier*), Emma Roldán (*Mme. Thenardier*), Luis Alcoriza (*Juan Prouvaire*), Francisco Jambrina (*Enjolras*), M[anol] Noriega (*Guillernormand*), Guillermo Familiar, Arturo Soto Rangel (*Monsignor Bienvenido Myriel*), Virginia Manzano (*Fantina*), J. Ortiz de Zárate (*prefect*), Luis Cortés, Alicia Rodríguez (*young Cosette*), Lupita Torrentera (*Azelma*), Enrique G[arcía] Álvarez (*defense attorney*), Adelina Vehi, Roberto Corell (*Bautista, barber*), Andrés Novo, José Mora, Alfredo Varela [Sr.] (*doctor*), Max Langler (*Cochepaille*), Chel López (*Chenildieu*), Ricardo Avendaño, Stefan Verne (*Thenardier's henchman*)



Fernando A. Rivero. Rivero, a former art director, turned to directing in the late 1930s and while not especially favourably regarded by some critics and historians, demonstrates a fair amount of style in his handling of this picture: the camera moves effectively, shots are framed with some care, and the pace of the movie is satisfactory, although hampered a bit by the jumbled chronology of the script.

*Los miserables* is a long film (over 100 minutes) but since Hugo's novel was over 1,500 pages long, some cuts were obviously required. Curiously, Rivero and "Roberto"



Tasker (aka Robert Tasker, a Hollywood veteran who'd written *Doctor X* and other films of the Thirties and Forties before traveling to Mexico, where he scripted several pictures before dying of a drug overdose in 1944) begin the film with volume 3 of the book-- Juan Valjean is already established as a wealthy man in Paris and Cosette has graduated from convent school. Juan's whole back story--his prison sentences, escapes, various identities and occupations, pursuit by Javert, and so forth--doesn't appear until late in the film, narrated in flashback by Juan

**Notes:** Although considerably altered and condensed from Victor Hugo's source novel, *Los miserables* is an impressive film, well-produced, well-acted, and well-directed by

Tasker (aka Robert Tasker, a Hollywood veteran who'd written *Doctor X* and other films of the Thirties and Forties before traveling to Mexico, where he scripted several

to Mario de Pontmercy. This makes the first part of the film very confusing, unless one already knows the basic premise (from reading the novel or something).



Juan Valjean (as in the novel, the protagonist is given various names in the film but I'm not going to try to use them) and his adopted daughter Cosette move into a luxurious mansion in 1830s Paris. Juan is shadowed by a sinister figure, later revealed to be police Inspector Javert. Javert insists to his supervisor, the prefect, that the man he is following is escaped convict Juan Valjean, even though Valjean was declared dead some years before.

Cosette meets handsome Mario de Pontmercy, a young man who lives in a shabby flat near the disreputable Thenardier family. Despite her father's warning not to fraternise with strangers, Cosette falls in love with Mario. Juan is approached by Eponina



Thenardier, who says her father must speak with him; curious, Juan visits the family. Thenardier spins a tale of poverty and asks Juan for money to support his sick (faking) wife and two daughters. Juan realises the swindle and refuses to pay, solidly thrashing Thenardier and three burly criminals, then barely escaping before Javert and the police arrive.

Juan opposes the relationship between Cosette and Mario, but when the students revolt against the French government and Mario joins the rebels, Juan orders Cosette to remain behind and goes looking for the young man himself. As troops defeat the barricaded students, Mario is wounded; Juan carries him down into the sewers to escape. Javert follows and confronts Juan, but is surprised by another fugitive--Juan orders him to spare Javert's life, then flees. Javert, overcome by remorse, commits suicide.





Juan takes Mario to the home of his grandfather Guillenormand to recover.

Later, Mario and Cosette wed, but Juan distances himself from them, to avoid staining their reputation. He tells Mario the story of his life: sentenced to prison for stealing bread to feed his sister and her children, Juan escaped. After robbing a church, Juan is pardoned by the kindly priest and given two silver candlesticks, with the advice to live a decent life from that point onward. Arrested again, Juan assumes various identities and progresses in life, even becoming a wealthy businessman and the mayor of a small town; he befriends young Cosette, an ill-treated ward of the Thenardier family. Juan pays the Thenardiers to allow him to become Cosette's guardian (he had previously known the girl's mother, Fantine).

Javert sees Juan save a man trapped under a cart, and recognises him as convict Valjean. Later, Javert apologises because another man—Champfmathieu—has been arrested and identified as Valjean. Unable to allow the other man to suffer unjust imprisonment, Valjean reveals his true identity. Javert tells the mortally-ill Fantine who Juan really is, and she dies. Valjean goes back to prison but falls into the sea while saving another man and is assumed to be dead. [This roughly brings the flashbacks up to the time that *Los miserables* begins.]

Juan falls ill and tells Cosette and Mario he never sold the silver candlesticks the priest had given him. They are at his side when he dies.



recognises him as convict Valjean. Later, Javert apologises because another man—Champfmathieu—has been arrested and identified as Valjean. Unable to allow the other man to suffer unjust imprisonment,



The reasons for the “inverted” structure of *Los miserables* are not clear. It's not as if the novel starts slowly and only becomes dramatic in the latter half—Juan's early life and adventures are extremely picturesque and varied. Furthermore, as noted earlier, relationships between the characters which have a basis in the early part of the novel are alluded to in the first part of the film version, but are confusing or at the very least obscure

because no foundation has been laid for them. The narrative of Hugo's book is not strictly chronological—it begins with Valjean's encounter with Myriel and the gift of the candlesticks—and the film's sequence of Valjean telling Mario the story of his life is roughly analogous to a similar section at the end of the novel, but the narrative form of *Los miserables* still feels like a miscalculation.

The production values of *Los miserables* are substantial. There are a few stock shots during the scenes of the revolt, but—unlike *Miguel Strogoff*—they don't constitute whole sequences. The sets and costumes are impressive and there are enough extras when needed. The performances are generally good:

Domingo Soler is more convincing as the

older, bourgeois Valjean than he is in the flashbacks, while Antonio Bravo makes an excellent Javert (the sequence of his suicide is well-acted and cleverly directed, shot, and edited) and Andrés Soler is a despicable

but crafty Thenardier. David Silva and Manolita Saval are just conventional romantic sub-leads but they are adequate for their roles as written.

*Los miserables* is a good, but not great film, largely due to its awkward narrative structure. However, it is a very respectable attempt at a screen adaptation of a literary classic and a good example of the capacity of the Mexican film industry in 1943 to produce a lavish, well-acted and well-directed historical film with a non-Mexican setting. In a few years, such films would become very rare in Mexican cinema.



### Miguel Strogoff (El correo del Zar) [Miguel Strogoff (The Courier of the Czar)] (CIMESA,

1943) Prod: José N. Ermoloeff;

Dir: Miguel M. Delgado;

Adapt: J.N. Ermoloeff; Dialog:

Mauricio Magdaleno; Orig:

Novel: Julio Verne; Photo:

Alex Phillips; Music Dir:

Rodolfo Halffter; Prod Chief:

Antonio Guerrero Tello; Prod

Mgr: Miguel Mezquiriz; Asst

Dir: Carlos L. Cabello; Film

Ed: Mario del Río; Asst Ed:

Alfredo Rosas; Art Dir:

Manolo Fontanals; Decor: Luis

Bustos; Makeup: Sarita

Herrera; Sound Op: Enrique Rendón



**Cast:** Julián Soler (*Miguel Strogoff*), Lupita Tovar (*Nadia Fedora*), Julio Villareal (*Ivan Ogareff*), Anita Blanch (*Sangarra Petrova*), Andrés Soler (*Jolivet*), Miguel Arenas (*Czar*), Victoria Argota (*Miguel's mother*), Luis G. Barreiro (*Harry Blount*), Charles Steevens [sic] (*Tartar henchman*), Salvador Quiros [sic] (*governor*), Francisco Jambrina (*general*), Manuel Dondé (*Tartar*), Gerardo del Castillo, José Torvai [sic] (*Tartar*), Ángel T. Sala, José Arratia, Conchita Gentil Arcos (*woman on train*), Francisco Pando (*innkeeper*), Stefan Verne (*Tartar*)

**Notes:** Joseph N. Ermolieff was a Russian filmmaker who left his homeland after the Revolution but managed to keep producing movies internationally—initially in France, then elsewhere—into the 1950s. Ermolieff apparently had a special fondness for Jule Verne's 1876 novel "Michel Strogoff" (aka "Michael Strogoff: the Courier of the Czar"), since he eventually produced four film versions of the story in four different countries between 1936 and 1943. Three of these starred Anton Walbrook—*Der Kurier des Zaren* (1936), *Michel Strogoff* (1936—these two films were alternate French and German versions of the same film), and *The Soldier and the Lady* (1937). Six years later, Ermolieff sold the idea to CIMESA in Mexico, a company that in the 1940s made almost nothing but adaptations of foreign literature.

Presumably what Ermolieff had to offer was stock footage from his two 1936 movies rather than the rights to the story, since Verne's novel had been filmed before by others, suggesting it was in the public domain. RKO's *The Soldier and the Lady* allegedly contains more than 20 scenes from Ermolieff's original European versions, and *Miguel Strogoff* also features material of 1936 vintage. Although Julián Soler replaces Anton Walbrook in the title role, he and his fellow Mexican actors are costumed to resemble their predecessors, and while the stock footage is



detectable, it is not offensively so (the matching and cutting between old and new shots is expertly done), and a number of the sequences are impressive and would have been

beyond the budgetary and technical reach of Mexican cinema in that era. Consequently, *Miguel Strogoff* looks much more expensive than it probably was (although the Mexican-made sequences are all well-produced).

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, the Tartars rise in rebellion and threaten to seize Siberia. The capital city of Irkutsk is the last major Imperial outpost. Czar Alexander II sends one of his officers, Siberian-born Miguel Strogoff, with a message for the governor: Ivan Ogareff, a renegade Russian officer, is in league with the Tartars. A spy in the palace informs Sangarra, one of Ogareff's accomplices, and she leaves for Irkutsk on the same train as Miguel.

Also on the train are British journalist Blount, French journalist Jolivet, and Nadia, the daughter of a man who was exiled to Siberia for his political views. Leaving the train, Miguel and Nadia are in a group of travelers whose



boat is waylaid by Tartars: Miguel falls overboard and is presumed drowned, while Nadia is taken prisoner. Miguel is rescued by some peasants but is later captured when he accidentally meets his mother in a village tavern. Ogareff orders

him blinded with a hot sabre, but Sangarra—in gratitude for Miguel having saved her life from a bear attack—pays off the executioner and he spares Miguel's eyesight. Ogareff impersonates Miguel in Irkutsk and betrays the city to the Tartars, but Miguel arrives in time to defeat the villain, rescue Nadia, and rally the Imperial troops to a victory over the rebels.

*Miguel Strogoff* is not only an example of the wave of WWII-era Mexican cinema "international literature adaptations," it is also a very "Hollywood" looking film. The melodrama is muted, there are almost no musical interludes (except for some dance sequences in the stock footage), and the pacing is brisk. A romance develops between Miguel and Nadia, but it is secondary to the plot and action. Luis G. Barreiro and Andrés Soler, as Blount and Jolivet, are very Hollywood-esque comic relief (which isn't a complaint, their scenes are consistently amusing).



Julián Soler is fine as Miguel Strogoff, as is Lupita Tovar as Nadia (although neither performer has to stretch their acting muscles very much). Julio Villareal played a variety of roles during his long career in Mexican cinema,



but was often cast as grumpy or outright villainous characters, and he is quite good as the sinister Ogareff—the scenes between Ogareff and Sangarra are very interesting, as his apparent romantic interest in her is

revealed to be shallow and manipulative, which in turn causes her to ultimately betray him.



One of the curious aspects of *Miguel Strogoff* is the appearance of Charles Stevens (whose last name is misspelled on the credits, as were the names of several other performers). Stevens, of Native American and Mexican ancestry, appeared in numerous Hollywood movies from the 1910s until the early 1960s, but for some reason also shows up in several Mexican films of the 1940s, including *Miguel Strogoff*. As Ogareff's henchman, Stevens has a solid supporting role and his Spanish is very good (he was born in Arizona but apparently spoke both Spanish and English fluently), but he wasn't exactly a "name" performer and his Mexican roles could easily have been filled by someone else, so it would be interesting to learn the circumstances behind his brief foray into Mexican cinema.



*Miguel Strogoff* is a very slick period adventure film: it's worth watching not only for its entertainment value (which is significant), but also as an example of how stock footage can be smoothly integrated into a feature film to expand its production values.



### Resurrección [Resurrection] (CLASA Films, 1943)



*Exec Prod:* Vicente Saisó Piquer; *Prod Dir:* Mauricio de la Serna; *Dir:* Gilberto Martínez Solares; *Scr:* Eduardo Ugarte, Rodolfo Usigli; *Orig. Novel:* León Tolstoy [sic]; *Photo:* Raúl Martínez Solares; *Music/Music Dir:* Mario Ruiz Armengol; *Prod Mgr:* Ricardo Beltri; *Asst Dir:* Z[acarias] Gómez Urquiza; *Film Ed:* Jorge Bustos; *Art Dir:* Manuel Fontanals; *Makeup:* Felisa L. de Guevara; *Sound:*

Consuelo Rodríguez, Howard Randall; *Costume Design:* A. Valdez Peza; *Incidental Songs:* Laurita y Ray

**Cast:** Lupita Tovar (*María aka "Mimi la Tapatía"*), Emilio Tuero (*Fernando Rivas*), Sara García (*Genoveva*), Amparito Morillo (*Isabel*), Rafael Banquells (*Gabriel*), Consuelo Guerrero de Luna (*Aunt Refugio*), Elena D'Orgaz (*Natalia*), Víctor Velázquez (*Guillermo*), Eugenia Galindo (*Aunt Dolores*), Alejandro Cobo (*prosecutor*), Victoria Argota (*Isabel's mother*), Enrique García A[lvarez] (*judge*), Lupe del Castillo (*Eufemia*), Rosario García, Enrique Uthoff, Carmen Montejo (*prisoner*), Julio Ahuet (*servant*), Edmundo Espino (*member of jury*), Manolo Noriega (*foreman of jury*), Arturo Soto Rangel (*court secretary*), José Pulido (*doctor*), José Torvay (*jailer*), Humberto Rodríguez (*hacienda employee*), Francisco Pando (*head of prison hospital*)

**Notes:** Leo Tolstoy's novel "Resurrection" had been filmed numerous times prior to 1943, including a 1927 Hollywood production starring Dolores del Río and an English-language and a Spanish-language version in 1931, with Lupe Vélez in the lead. Lupita Tovar thus became the third Mexican actress to play the part, although the story's setting had been changed and thus her name and nationality were also altered.

Tovar had previously starred in *Santa* (1931) and the similarities between this film and *Resurrección* are numerous: an innocent country girl is seduced and abandoned by a visiting military officer; ejected from her home as a result, she

becomes a sought-after courtesan only to slip back into the lower depths of her profession and eventually die.



*Resurrección*, while primarily a melodrama, adds some socio-political commentary not present in *Santa*, although the protagonist's downfall is only peripherally related to this issue.

Wealthy aristocrat and military officer Fernando is summoned for jury duty. The case involves a man who



was poisoned in a brothel, and the defendants are two servants and a prostitute, Mimi la Tapatía. Fernando is shocked to recognise Mimi from his past...[flashback] Years before, Fernando and fellow officers Gabriel and

Guillermo visit his family's *hacienda* for the Christmas holidays. Fernando becomes reacquainted with María, a



childhood friend who works as a servant on the estate. On his last night there, Fernando seduces the young woman but promises to return for her. [end flashback] Distracted and upset, Fernando is unable to argue forcefully for María's acquittal: she claims she believed the drug she gave her client would only put him to sleep, but the majority of the jury, adversely swayed by her profession, condemns her to 20 years in prison.

Fernando asks his long-time servant Genoveva if she knows anything about María's life in the intervening years. [flashback] María, pregnant, was ejected from the



*hacienda* by Fernando's stern Aunt Refugio. Her child dies at birth. In each subsequent job she takes, María is abused or molested by all of her (male) employers, until she finally accepts a job as a high-class prostitute. She becomes a sought-after courtesan, but

eventually is reduced to working in a more modest brothel. [end flashback]

At a party held by his fiancée Isabel, Fernando meets the judge of María's case, who says she shouldn't have been convicted on such flimsy evidence. Fernando, guilt-stricken, decides to use his money and influence to sponsor her appeal. Visiting María in prison, Fernando is received coolly but apologises for his past errors and gives her some money. On his way out, he discovers his friend, former Army officer Gabriel,



is a political prisoner in the same facility, a victim of the oppressive government. Fernando is also spotted by a newspaper reporter, who publishes an article insinuating a relationship between Fernando and María, a convicted murderer and prostitute. This causes

Isabel to break off her engagement to Fernando; Fernando's sister Natalia and her husband Guillermo fear the scandal will taint the family name, and use their influence to oppose María's appeal.

María goes to work in the prison hospital, but is sent back to the general population after rejecting a doctor's indecent advances. Various convicts—among them María and Gabriel—are selected for transfer to a prison "on the coast." Fernando learns of this

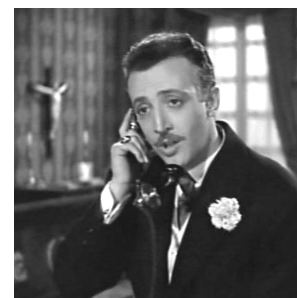


too late to save María, so he follows on the next train. Rebels attack María's train and the prisoners escape, but María is shot by a guard when she returns to rescue a young child, separated from its political-prisoner parents. She dies in Fernando's arms.

*Resurrección* is a very stylish film, with especially nice photography by Raúl Martínez Solares, working under his brother Gilberto's direction. The second flashback also contains several interesting sequences: the first one is a fairly conventional montage, showing María being groped by various employers, while the second shows her becoming a high-class prostitute, concluding with a rather kaleidoscopic, multi-image, spinning shot of her whirling around with a dance partner. The production values are very good, with a number of reasonably elaborate sets and substantial numbers of extras. One annoying touch late in the movie: as María's train heads for the coast, anti-government rebels set fire to a railroad bridge to stop it. This effect is conveyed via a miniature model of the bridge and since flames can't be miniaturised, these shots look very awkward.

The performances in *Resurrección* are all fine, at least in the context of a 1940s film melodrama. Emilio Tuero, as Fernando, undergoes a subtle transformation from rich idler to (mild) social activist, prompted by his guilt over María and the injustices he observes in prison. He's never seriously unsympathetic, although the scene in which he stands outside María's door and cajoles her into admitting him into her bedroom (objective = seduction) is rather disturbing. Lupita Tovar is good as María, evolving from naive servant girl to hard-boiled whore and then finding redemption by helping others as a nurse. Curiously, Sara García appears in a conventional, straight role as Genoveva, while Consuelo Guerrero de Luna plays a crochety old woman, almost a parody of García's later screen image (although García's characters would never act as callously as Aunt Refugio does in this picture). Carmen Montejo makes her Mexican cinema debut in *Resurrección*: she has a small but flashy role as one of María's fellow prisoners.

Trivia notes: Lupe del Castillo's character is referred to as both "Eufemia Pérez" and "Eufemia Serrano" in the trial scenes. Also, José Pulido, who plays the lecherous prison doctor, can be seen in the aforementioned flashback montage sequence as one of María's "clients." It's unclear if he is supposed to be the same person both times: in the hospital scene, he doesn't refer to having met her before,



and seems to simply be trying to force himself on her because she's a convict and thus unable to protest his abuse.

*Resurrección* falls somewhere in the middle between a pure melodrama and a social-problem drama (or a why-the-Mexican-Revolution-occurred drama), to the film's detriment. It's neither fish nor fowl, the romance between Fernando and María chiefly appears in the first flashback sequence and only sporadically flares up afterwards, and the criticism of social inequality and government oppression is muted and intermittent. The time-line is fuzzy, although there are several references to Victoriano Huerta in the non-flashback scenes, which would situate them in the 1913-1914 period (Huerta was president between February 1913 and July 1914). A stronger emphasis on either romance or politics would have improved the focus of *Resurrección*.



**El secreto de la solterona** [The Secret of the Spinster] (CIMESA, 1944) *Prod:* Vicente Saisó Piquer; *Dir-Scr:* Miguel M. Delgado; *Adapt:* Francisco Reiguera, Juan Roca; *Orig. Novel:* Eugenia [sic] Marlitt; *Photo:* Víctor Herrera; *Music:* Jorge Pérez H.; *Prod Mgr:* Luis G. Rubín; *Asst Dir:* [Julian] Cisneros Tamayo; *Film Ed:* Alfredo Rosas; *Art Dir:* Manuel Fontanals; *Decor:* Roberto Galván; *Camera Op:* Luis Medina; *Costume Des:* Meza y González; *Makeup:* Sarita Herrera; *Sound Dir:* H.E. Randall; *Dialog Rec:* José de Pérez; *Music Rec:* Manuel Esperón

**Cast:** Sara García (*doña Marta*), Isabela Corona (*Micaela*), José Cibrián (*Pedro*), Charito Granados (*Felicidad*), Nelly Montiel (*Celia*), Paco Fuentes (*don Juan Cortázar*), Tony Díaz (*Luis*), Agustín Sen (*Enrique, major-domo*), C[onchita] Gentil Arcos (*Federica*), Salvador Lozano, Alicia Rodríguez (*young Felicidad*), Gloria Rodríguez (*young Celia*), Manuel Noriega (*Profesor García*), Edmundo Espino (*notary*), Ángel Buenafuente, Ignacio Peón (*court officer*)

**Notes:** mostly unknown today, E. Marlitt was a 19th-century German novelist (real name Friederike Henriette Christiane Eugenie John) whose most famous book was probably "Das Geheimnis der alten Mamsell" (1869), aka "The Secret of the Spinster." Translated into various languages and adapted to film and television a number of

times in Germany, Marlitt's novel was filmed in Mexico by CIMESA, the same company that made *Miguel Strogoff* (and Miguel M. Delgado was tapped to direct once again).

*El secreto de la solterona* is a very insular film, with the vast majority of the scenes taking place in the Cortázar mansion (a large and well-appointed set); the cast is relatively small, with six characters (Marta, Micaela, Pedro, Felicidad, Celia, don Juan, and Enrique) accounting for most of the drama. The plot, as Emilio García Riera noted, is reminiscent of "Cinderella," with a young foundling being mistreated and abused by her cruel foster mother and older foster sister, before finding her "handsome prince." The film is interesting but rather slow, and the melodramatics are muted. The setting of the film is late-19th century Mexico, but this has no particular bearing on the plot, and could easily be any other country if the character names had been changed, and any other time period (with some costume and set alterations).

The performances are satisfactory, with top honours going to Isabela Corona, cast in one of her familiar "mean" roles. In contrast, Sara García (who dies about two-thirds of the way through the picture), José Cibrián, and Charito Granados seem rather pale and weak. Alicia Rodríguez, playing Granados' character as a young girl, is very good, as is Paco Fuentes, in limited screen time. [Note: it's very possible that Gloria Rodríguez, cast as the young version of Nelly Montiel, was Alicia's older sister in real life, since there seems to be some family resemblance.]

Don Juan Cortázar brings young orphan Felicidad into his home, over the objections of his wife Micaela, who suspects the girl is his illegitimate daughter. The household consists of don Juan, Micaela, their son Pedro (away at medical school), teenage niece Celia (it's unclear who her parents are and why she's living there), and don Juan's sister doña Marta.

Doña Marta is a reclusive spinster who spends her time in her upstairs room, playing the piano.

Although Micaela and Celia dislike the new arrival, Felicidad is well treated by don Juan and major-domo Enrique. However, when don Juan has a heart attack and





dies, Pedro comes home to settle his affairs: his father's will stipulated that Felicidad would remain in the house until she was 18 years old, but Pedro allows Micaela to turn the little girl into more or less a servant. One day, Felicidad meets doña Marta and the two become close friends; doña Marta teaches the girl to speak French and play the piano.



9 years pass. Pedro, now a prominent doctor, moves back into the mansion and gradually he and Felicidad become close. This upsets Micaela—who wanted to marry off Felicidad to a rich old man—and Celia—who wanted to marry Pedro herself. Doña Marta dies; Micaela ransacks her rooms, searching for family jewels and other

valuables, before she is locked out by legal representatives. She is chagrined to learn doña Marta left most of her fortune to Felicidad. In revenge, when Pedro announces his intention to marry the young woman, Micaela tells him that Felicidad is actually his illegitimate half-sister.

However, a book left behind by doña Marta reveals that she was Felicidad's real mother. Pedro and Felicidad leave the mansion: Pedro tells his mother that her bitterness and greed have ensured that she will be all alone in her old age.

*El secreto de la solterona* strains credulity at times, and not necessarily in the traditional outrageous-coincidence melodrama style. Don Juan is such a kind person, it's difficult to conceive of him being married to the horrible Micaela, or for her to be the mother of the basically-decent Pedro. Doña Marta's tremendous "secret" (an illegitimate child) would hardly seem bad enough that she would lock herself in her room for years.

On the positive side, the first part of the film (before the 9-year time lapse) contains some genuinely good moments, particularly in the scenes between Felicidad, don Juan, doña Marta, and major-domo Enrique. There is also a nice bit when, after don Juan's death, Felicidad is shown scrubbing some steps as Micaela and Celia are leaving the house. Micaela coldly averts her eyes from the little girl, but Celia deliberately kicks over Felicidad's scrub bucket as she passes.

*El secreto de la solterona* is a moderately entertaining melodrama, redeemed from the routine by some particularly good performances.



**El agente Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin** [Agent Víctor vs. Arsenio Lupin] (Pereda Films, 1945) *Dir:* Ramón Peón; *Scr:* "R.P." [Ramón Pereda]; *Orig. Work:* Francisco Navarro; *Characters Created by:* Maurice Leblanc; *Photo:* Jesús Hernández Gil; *Music:* Leo Carmona; *Orch Dir:* Genaro Núñez; *Prod Mgr:* Juan Mari;

*Prod Chief:* Enrique M. Hernández; *Asst Dir:* Valerio Olivo; *Film Ed:* Alfredo Rosas; *Asst Ed:* Eufemio Rivera; *Art Dir:* Ramón Rodríguez; *Camera Op:* Manuel Santaella; *Makeup:* Román Juárez; *Costumes:* Tostado y Rivera; *Sound Engin:* José B. Carles; *Title Art:* Saviur y Eddy de Cine-Servicio



**Cast:** Ramón Pereda ("Victor" aka Arsenio Lupin), Luana de Alcañiz (*Elisa Mason*), Juan Pulido (*Insp. Ganimard*), José Goula (*Baron Máximo*), Alejandro Cobo (*Count Antonio*), Eleanor Stadie (*Princess*), Cliff Carr (*British man*), Jesús Valero (*government official*), Alfonso Ruiz Gómez (*Víctor's asst.*), Anita Villalaz, Roberto Cañedo, Micaela Castrejón, Lady [sic = Lili] Acleamar, Gloria Luz Cabrera, Antonio Palacios (*Gustavo*), Luz Segovia, Roberto Banquels (*Alfonso*), Julio Dagnery [aka Danieri] (*taxi driver*), Ernesto Monato, Jorge Arriaga, Carlos Trejo, Sofia Haller (*Ernestina*), Rodolfo Calvo, Carlos Pomo, Juan Orraca (*police detective*), Berta Lehar (*woman in hotel*)

**Notes:** virtually every printed source gives the title of this film as *El inspector Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin*, but the main title card on the film itself is *El agente Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin*, and does not appear to have been altered or created for a re-release. Virtually no "paper" (posters, ads, etc.) exists to clarify the matter of the "original" title of this picture.

While Pereda's *Arsenio Lupin*—shot back-to-back with this one—is moderately entertaining and contains a bonus cameo appearance by José Baviera as Sherlock Holmes, *El agente Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin* is not very interesting at all. "Gentleman thief" Lupin impersonates detective Víctor throughout the movie, functioning solely as a traditional detective. The film consists of nothing more



than "Victor" interviewing various suspects, interspersed with scenes of bumbling police inspector Ganimard carrying out his own ineffectual investigation. There is no action and the

two murders and a suicide which occur during the course of the movie all take place off-screen!

Paris, the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: someone steals valuable government bonds. Agent Víctor of the secret police is assigned to the case, although police inspector Ganimard is given permission to conduct a parallel



investigation. Víctor suspects the middle-aged Baron and his mistress Elisa Mason of complicity; Elisa is subsequently murdered and the Baron commits suicide while under arrest. Posing as a fellow crook, Víctor makes the acquaintance of a larcenous Russian princess and Count Antonio, also apparently involved in the bond robbery. Víctor captures the Count and turns him over to



Ganimard, then reveals himself to be famous thief Arsenio Lupin: he hands over the recovered bonds, but keeps a sum of stolen cash for himself (and his good works), then vanishes.

The plot of *El agente Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin* is extremely complex (or

perhaps muddled is a better description): exactly who stole what from where isn't clear, and from time to time Arsenio Lupin's name crops up but he's never "seen" (except in his guise as Víctor, which isn't obvious to the viewing audience) until the end. For example, Víctor deduces that the bond thieves must have hidden an envelope containing the bonds in a taxi; when Víctor finds the envelope, it's empty except for a note from Arsenio Lupin. The only



way this sort of plot contrivance would work is if the audience was unaware Víctor = Lupin, but since Ramón Pereda had just appeared as Lupin in the first film in the series, this seems unlikely. There are also sub-plots or at least diverging plot threads

which go nowhere, and characters which seem to have no relation to the rest of the movie, or whose roles are confusing and illogical. For instance, Víctor has an assistant who spends half his time working with Víctor and the other half as a "mole" in Ganimard's employ (but for what purpose?). Cliff Carr plays a British accomplice of Count Antonio, but has almost no dialogue and nothing to do (other than to be murdered, late in the film).

The production values are adequate: although the film appears to have been shot entirely on sets, someone went to the trouble to find an antique automobile for a handful of scenes, and the interior and exterior sets are professional in appearance. Ramón Pereda is his usual suave self, and Jesús Valero is satisfactory as the government official who assigns Víctor to the case, but the rest of cast is generally undistinguished. Juan Pulido overacts as the incompetent Ganimard, and Eleanor Stadie--a minor German actress who apparently emigrated to Mexico due to World War II and made several film appearances--is stiff.

Ramón Pereda was especially prolific as a producer-actor in the mid-Forties, making a wide variety of

melodramas, comedies, and costume pictures (before he married María Antonieta Pons and dedicated himself to producing her films); Ramón Peón directed 9 consecutive films for Pereda in 1945-46 alone!



**Rocambole** (Pereda Films, 1946) *Dir:* Ramón Peón; *Scr:* Ramón Pereda; *Orig. Novel:* [Pierre Alexis] Ponson Du Terrail; *Photo:* Jesús Hernández Gil; *Music:* Leo Cardona; *Orch Dir:* Genaro Núñez; *Prod Mgr:* Juan Mari; *Prod Chief:* Enrique M. Hernández; *Asst Dir:* Matilde Landeta; *Film Ed:* Alfredo Rosas; *Art Dir:* Ramón Rodríguez; *Camera Op:* Manuel Santaella; *Makeup:* Román Juárez; *Sound Op:* Fernando Barrera; *Asst Ed:* Eufemio Rivera; *Titles:* Eddy y Delgado; *Title Illustration:* Saviur

**Cast:** Ramón Pereda (*Rocambole*), Adriana Lamar (*Antonieta Miller*), José Baviera (*Milón*), José Gould (*Viscount Carlos de Morlux*), Joaquín Coss (*Baron de Morlux*), Eleonor Stadie (*Olga*), Juan Pulido (*president of club*), Mimi Derba (*Antonieta's mother*), José Ruvalcaba, Jesús Valero, Juan Orraca, Amelia Robert, María Enriqueta Reza (*Apache henchwoman*), Esther de Castilla, José Arratia, Carlos Pomo, Alfonso Ruiz Gómez (*Viscount Ajenor*), Francisco Reiguera (*butler*), Salvador Quiroz (*Apache boss*), Stefan Verne (*convict*)

**Notes:** *Rocambole*, although not a very good film at all, is notable for several reasons.



First, it is yet another adaptation from a foreign literary source, in this case a series of 19th-century novels by Pierre Alexis Ponson Du Terrail about criminal-turned-crimefighter Rocambole, a predecessor of Arsene Lupin, Raffles, the Lone Wolf, etc. The main title screen indicates the film was taken from "a work by Ponson Du Terrail," but it is unclear if a specific novel was adapted or if Pereda simply utilised the French author's fictional character in an original screen story.

The other claim to fame for *Rocambole* is a sad one: during production of the film, actress Adriana Lamar, wife of Ramón Pereda, fell ill and died while undergoing an operation. Although García Riera suggests Eleonor

Stadie's part was revised to cover for Lamar's absence, in fact Stadie's role seems integral to the script and there are no glaring gaps in the narrative. Ironically, Lamar plays a



young woman who seemingly "dies" during the film but is actually in a cataleptic state and revives at the end.



Lamar's death prompted Pereda to temporarily retire from filmmaking after a very prolific decade to that point (he produced 17 films between 1940-46, starring in most of them), only returning to films after his marriage to María Antonieta Pons in 1948.

It is possible the script was revised in some way after Lamar's death. *Rocambole* is short, less than 70 minutes long—and if one subtracts the pointless padding of a lengthy "Apache" dance—the story content barely exceeds an hour's time. There aren't any noticeable gaps, but the plot is quite sketchy.



In turn of the century Paris, Rocambole escapes from prison in the company of Milón, a former servant of the Millers, who was framed and incarcerated through the machinations of the Morlux family. Antonieta Miller is

being courted by Viscount Ajenor, unaware his father Baron Morlux and uncle Viscount Morlux were behind his fiancée's ruination. When Ajenor tells his father of his plans to wed Antonieta, the older man panics and consults his brother. The Viscount hires some Apaches (French thugs) to bring Antonieta to a sleazy dive and stage a brawl; Antonieta is arrested along with some Apache women, and sent to jail. The women have orders to wait two days and then poison her. Ajenor is sent out of town on a pretext.

Meanwhile, Rocambole and his aides—Milón, Olga, and another man—work to foil the Morlux scheme. Rocambole poses as a Russian nobleman to infiltrate an exclusive club, and later impersonates a doctor to eavesdrop on the Baron and Viscount. Learning Antonieta has been arrested, Rocambole sends Olga to the same prison to protect her, but a newspaper article indicates she failed, since Antonieta is reported dead.



Baron de Morlux, Viscount de Morlux, and Ajenor are summoned to the former's house at midnight. Rocambole and his aides arrive, with Antonieta's body. The Baron is repentant and Ajenor is distraught (the Viscount stands his ground). Ajenor says if Antonieta was alive he would marry her and restore her family's fortune, so Rocambole admits Antonieta is only in a cataleptic state brought on by a drug Olga administered, not the poison the Apaches intended to give her. When Antonieta revives, she and Ajenor embrace; the Viscount flees, with Milón in pursuit. Rocambole has helped justice prevail.

*Rocambole* is not poorly produced but the action transpires on a handful of uninspired sets, so the film looks rather shabby. The theme music is catchy but the rest of the music, photography, editing, and so forth are only adequate. The performances are rather stagey and melodramatic, as is the dialogue, but this isn't a major problem. The script is the weakest aspect of

*Rocambole*, since it is vague and unclear on the one hand, and overly simplistic and bare-bones on the other. The most amusing sequence is practically a throwaway scene: Rocambole visits the home of the Baron, posing as a substitute doctor, and pays the man's butler to allow him to eavesdrop on the Baron's conversation with the Viscount. The butler is very solicitous of the spying visitor, even offering Rocambole a chair as he listens at the door of the Baron's study!



### Recuerdo de aquella noche\* [Memory of That Night] (CIMESA, 1944)

*Prod:* V[icente] Saisó  
*Piquer; Dir-Scr-Adapt:* Chano Urueta; *Orig. Novel:* Hugh Conway ("Misterio" aka "Called Back"); *Photo:* Victor Herrera; *Music Dir/Arr:* Jorge Pérez H.; *Prod Mgr:* Luis G. Rubin; *Asst Dir:* Enrique Cahero; *Film Ed:* Alfredo Rosas; *Art Dir:* Manuel Fontanals; *Decor:* Pablo Galván; *Makeup:* Sara Herrera; *Lighting:* Carlos Nájera; *Sound Dir:* H.E. Randall; *Dialog Rec:* José D. Pérez; *Music Rec:* Manuel

Esperón; *Costumes:* A. Vázquez Chardi  
\*many sources give the title as *El recuerdo de aquella noche*, but the title on-screen does not have the "El."





**Cast:** Emilio Tuero (*Gilberto García*), Tina Romagnoli (*Paulina Junco*), Paco Fuentes (*Dr. Manuel de la Fuente*), Tony Díaz (*Carlos González*), Jorge Mondragón (*doctor*), Salvador Lozano (*Antonio Lozano*), Natalia Ortiz (*Teresa*), Adria Delhort (*Juana*), José Goula (*Dr. Ramón Ramos*), Joaquín Roche, Raúl Lechuga, Emilio Rubio, José Mayorga, Aurora Ruiz (*landlady*), Manolo Noriega (*Dr. López*)

**Notes:** “Called Back” was the most popular novel of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British author “Hugh Conway” (real name, Frederick John Fergus), translated into various languages, adapted for the stage, and filmed at least 4 times prior to *Recuerdo de aquella noche* (3 silent films and one British sound version). The Mexican film adaptation is a reasonably entertaining, if far-fetched, mystery-romance (although the “romance” component is mostly one-sided, until the very last scene).



In 1861 Mexico, wealthy Gilberto García goes blind. One night he leaves his house on his own, counting the number of steps from his doorway to the corner and back, but becomes disoriented and enters another house whose door has conveniently been left unlocked. He hears a woman

singing and playing the piano, then the sounds of an argument and a scream. Blundering into the room and stumbling across a corpse, he is confronted by several (unseen, obviously) men who spare his life because he is blind. He’s drugged and dumped outside. When he recovers, Gilberto can’t prove his story of a murder—his hands have been washed and his blood-stained shirt sleeves torn away.

Some time later, Gilberto recovers his sight thanks to an operation. One day while strolling along with his friend Antonio, Gilberto spots a beautiful woman entering a church. Even after a stranger rebukes him for his blatant ogling, Gilberto becomes obsessed with her, even following her and her paid companion to the boarding



house where they live and renting a room there! When the companion, Teresa, slips on the steps, Gilberto takes advantage of this accident to make her acquaintance, and to meet the young woman, Paulina. Paulina seems to be in a constant daze. This doesn’t

deter Gilberto, who bribes Teresa to contact Dr. de la Fuente, Paulina’s uncle and guardian.

Gilberto tells de la Fuente that he wants to marry Paulina, and—surprisingly—the older man agrees. He even insists that the wedding occur almost immediately, since he (de la Fuente) is leaving the city soon. Gilberto weds the complaisant Paulina, but is soon frustrated by his

inability to elicit any sort of emotion from his wife. Paulina falls ill, and her fevered rambling reminds Gilberto of the night he witnessed a murder: he is certain she was the woman who was singing, and Dr. de la Fuente was the man who drugged him.

While trying to locate Dr. de la Fuente to learn more, Gilberto runs into Carlos, the man who had earlier confronted him outside the church: Carlos claims he is Paulina’s brother. He says the man who was murdered was Enrique, Paulina’s lover, who was going to abandon her and that he—Carlos—stabbed Enrique to death to save the family honour. De la Fuente is now a political prisoner, and when Gilberto interviews him, Paulina’s uncle reveals the true story: Carlos was an unwelcome suitor and he is the one who murdered Enrique, Paulina’s brother. As he leaves the prison, Gilberto sees Carlos in custody.

When Paulina recovers from her fever, she has also recovered her memory, but only up until the night of the murder. Consequently, she does not recognise Gilberto, or know that he is her husband. But for unexplained reasons, she suddenly (literally, in the last 2 minutes of the film) decides she loves him anyway, and they stroll off together at the fade-out.

The plot of *Recuerdo de aquella noche* is never properly worked out, although presumably Paulina went into a fugue state after seeing her brother killed, and her uncle failed to denounce Carlos for murder for political reasons and/or to protect the family name from scandal. This is a little sketchy, and added on top of this are some of the usual unbelievable coincidences: Gilberto *just happens* to spot Paulina and fall in love with her, unaware she (and her uncle and Carlos) were the people involved in



his earlier brush with murder. He also *just happens* to attract the attention of Carlos while searching for Dr. de la Fuente in Querétaro. The idea that Dr. de la Fuente would go to such lengths to hide Paulina (from what?) and then with little or no fuss marry her off to Gilberto, a complete stranger (albeit a very rich one), is also bizarre.

Gilberto’s infatuation with Paulina is also difficult to swallow. He essentially stalks her because she’s so beautiful—which is understandable, if slightly creepy (the only thing he doesn’t do is deliberately trip Teresa on the stairs so he can come to her aid and thus meet Paulina—then determines to marry her even though he knows she’s





practically catatonic and doesn't love him at all (she hardly even knows him). At least when they're married he has the decency to be a "gentleman" about it: the film makes a point to mention that they spend their wedding night apart, and one imagines their marriage remains platonic afterwards as well.

Chano Urueta doesn't display too many of his directorial tricks in *Recuerdo de aquella noche*. He does utilise a lot of low-angle shots for no apparent reason, but the only noticeable bit of "style" occurs when the blind Gilberto enters the room where a murder has occurred: all that is shown is a closeup of Gilberto's face, surrounded by darkness. This isn't technically his point of view, but it is a nice way to illustrate his isolation and inability to see the details of the room and the people in it.

The production values are adequate although--like *El deseo*, made the following year with much the same cast and crew--it takes place largely on studio sets and has a small cast. Tuero is fine in the lead, portraying Gilberto as, respectively, a tormented young man who fears he'll be blind for life, a rich fop who thinks money can buy anything, an agitated husband married to a virtual robot, and an amateur detective. Tina Romagnoli is very beautiful but her role requires to do no more than keep a straight face and talk in a monotone; Paco Fuentes, as usual, is quite good, while Tony Díaz and Salvador Lozano are satisfactory in support.

*Recuerdo de aquella noche* is not entirely satisfactory as a mystery and/or a psychological thriller, while its credentials as a "romance" are very weak. However, it's not without entertainment value.



# El deseo [The Desire] (CIMESA, 1945) Prod:

V[icente] Saisó

Piquer; Dir-Scr-

Adapt: Chano Urueta;

Orig. Novel:

Herman[sic]

Sudermann ("Der

Wunsch"); Photo:

Agustín Jiménez;

Music: Jorge Pérez H.;

Prod Mgr: Luis G.

Rubín; Asst Dir:

Enrique Cahero; Film

Ed: Alfredo Rosas;

Art Dir: Manuel

Fontanals; Decor:

Pablo Galván;

Makeup: Sarita Herrera; Camera Op: Enrique Wallace;

Lighting: Carlos Nájera; Sound Dir: H.E. Randall; Dialog

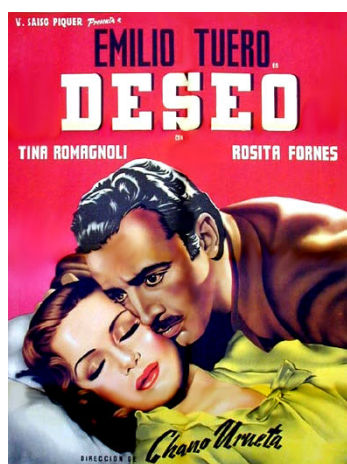
Rec: N. de la Rosa; Music Rec: Manuel Esperón

**Cast:** Emilio Tuero (*Roberto*), Rosita Fornés (*Olga*),

Tina Romagnoli (*Marta*), Jorge Mondragón (*doctor*),

Natalia Ortiz (*Roberto's mother*), Agustín Sen (*Roberto's*

*father Aurelio*), José Goula (*Marta's father*), Aurora



Walker (*Marta's mother*), Manolo Noriega (*first doctor*), David Valle González (*lumber foreman*)

**Notes:** *El deseo* is a strange and gloomy film; it's difficult to imagine this appealed to many people at the time of its release, with its minimalist plot and nihilistic conclusion.

As the film opens, Olga returns to her home and writes



a letter to her friend, a doctor. [flashback] Sisters Olga and Marta are both in love with their cousin, Roberto. However, Olga realises Roberto prefers Marta, and hides her own feelings. Roberto delays an open declaration of

love for Marta because he isn't financially able to marry her and Marta is too "delicate" to stand a long, uncertain engagement. Roberto leaves to manage his business interests (he owns a large ranch which supplies lumber), and his absence causes Marta to have a nervous breakdown. Olga and Roberto correspond in secret, so Roberto will know how Marta is faring. When he learns she's been ill, he informs his parents of his intention to marry Marta immediately. Roberto's mother opposes the match--Marta is too weak and too poor--and convinces Marta's parents to withhold their consent as well. At her father's request, Marta turns down Roberto's proposal, but



Olga convinces Roberto to push forward. Roberto and Marta wed.

They return to his country home. Marta becomes pregnant. Roberto's mother criticises her for

being lazy, and Marta pushes herself until she collapses. She gives birth to a child, and Olga arrives to help. Marta's health declines further. Still in love with Roberto, Olga finds herself wishing for her sister's death, but is terribly guilt-stricken by these thoughts. Marta does die. Olga agrees to help care for Roberto's child, but leaves the house every day before he returns. One day they meet and confess their love for each other.

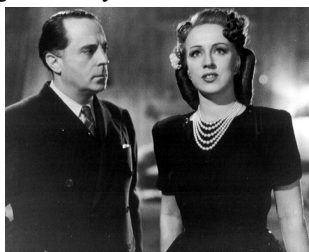
Olga decides she is unworthy of marrying Roberto due to the "sin" of having wished for her sister's death. She concludes her letter and sends it to the doctor. When he receives it, he rushes to the house and finds her dead of an overdose. Roberto is bereft once again.

Not much really happens in *El deseo*, which has a running time of about 94 minutes. There isn't much overt

conflict—aside from a few scenes of Roberto's horrible mother being mean to Marta and Olga and trying to run Roberto's life--and the internal conflict is largely restricted to Olga's voiceover agonising. Marta is attractive but extremely languid, even when she's not confined to her deathbed, while Roberto is weak-willed and self-pitying. The performances are adequate: *El deseo* was the first Mexican movie for Cuban actress-singer Rosita Fornés and she acquits herself well, while everyone else is satisfactory without being notable (some of this is attributable to the script, while provides little raw material for the actors to work with).

As an aside, this is one of the relatively few foreign-literature adaptations of the era that was set in contemporary Mexico, although the only concrete evidence of this is the presence of modern automobiles in several scenes. The setting has no relevance to the story and the extremely insular nature of the movie—shot mostly on dark, oppressive, interior sets with a very small cast—gives the whole picture a sort of surreal, timeless feel.

Chano Urueta has a reputation as a director of wild, eccentric films—such as *El barón del terror* and *El espejo de la bruja*—but not all of his work is so outré. *El deseo*,



aside from its overwhelmingly oppressive air, does contain a few directorial flourishes: in one brief scene, Olga converses with herself in a mirror, and her mirror image talks back



to her! This was presumably accomplished via double-exposure, and the scene is technically quite effective. Urueta also shoots Marta's death-bed scene with a Dutch tilt and from a slightly elevated angle, making it seem like Marta's bedroom is located on a sinking ship.

*El deseo* is an odd, downbeat picture. None of the characters is ever happy: Roberto is constantly worried about his business; Marta is insecure, ill, and depressed; Olga represses her own feelings for the sake of Roberto and Marta. At the end of the film, Roberto and Olga admit their feelings for each other and plan a life together, but Olga immediately chooses suicide over the potential for happiness. Her ostensible reason is guilt over having wished for Marta's death, and apparently—after a whole film's worth of being unselfish—she doesn't care what her suicide will mean for Roberto's future life.

Not at all entertaining in the traditional sense, *El deseo* is nonetheless somewhat interesting, if ultimately depressing.

## Final Notes

Although many different companies produced the literary adaptations so prevalent in Mexican cinema between 1942 and 1946, Ramón Pereda's Pereda Films and CIMEA made almost nothing but adaptations in this era. All 13 of Pereda's movies were based on pre-existing literary works (novels, plays, stories), as were 9 of the 10 CIMEA films (the tenth CIMEA production was a remake of a French movie apparently not based on a previously-published work).

### Ramón Pereda Literary Adaptations 1943-46

#### 1943:

*El herrero* (Felipe Derblay) orig. Georges Ohnet  
*El médico de las locas* orig. Xavier de Montepin  
*Pecado de una madre* orig. Lajos Zihaly

#### 1945:

*Arsenio Lupin* orig. Maurice Leblanc  
*El agente Víctor contra Arsenio Lupin* orig. Maurice Leblanc  
*Bienaventurados los que creen* orig. Giovanni Cenzato  
*Flor de un día* orig. Francisco Comprodón  
*Espinas de una flor* orig. Francisco Comprodón  
*Memorias de una vampiresa* orig. A. Laszo [?]  
*Papa Lebonard* orig. Jean Aicard  
*Usted tiene los ojos de mujer fatal* orig. Enrique Jardiel Poncela

#### 1946:

*Festín de buitres* orig. José Echegaray y Eizaguirre  
*Rocambole* orig. Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail

### CIMEA Literary Adaptations 1942-1945

#### 1942:

*Las aventuras de Cucuruchito y Pinocho* orig. Salvador Bartolozzi

*Tierra de pasiones* orig. Miguel N. Lira

#### 1943:

*Caminito alegre* orig. Arnaldo Malfatti and Nicolás de las Llanderas

*El hombre en la máscara de hierro* orig. Alexandre Dumas pere

*Miguel Strogoff* (*El correo del Zar*) orig. Jules Verne  
*Ojos negros* [remake of a 1935 French film]

#### 1944:

*El niño de las monjas* orig. Juan López Nuñez

*Recuerdo de aquella noche* orig. Hugh Conway

*El secreto de la solterona* orig. E. Marlitt

#### 1945:

*El deseo* orig. Hermann Sudermann



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