

# **The Mexican Film Bulletin**

## **Volume 19 Number 6**

### **December 2013**

#### **Mexican Cinema in 2013**

2013 was a fairly successful year for Mexican cinema. According to IMCINE, 99 films (73% fictional features) were released during the year. One-third of the fictional films were by first-time directors, and 20% were directed by women. The total attendance in Mexican theatres increased by 12.5 percent, and the *cine nacional* accounted for about 11% of the total box-office earnings.

Five Mexican movies were seen by more than one million spectators: *No se aceptan devoluciones* (#3 overall, with over 15 million tickets sold), *Nosotros los Nobles* (#7 overall), *Amor a primera vista* (aka *Pulling Strings*, #30 overall), *No sé si cortarme las venas o dejármelas largas*, and *El cartel de los sapos*. [Note: this information comes from IMCINE, but boxofficemojo.com doesn't list *No sé si cortarme las venas...* at all.]



#### **Obituaries**

##### **Rossana Podestá**

Italian actress Rossana Podestá died on 9 December 2013; she was 79 years old. Carla Dora Podestá was born in Libya to Italian parents in August 1934. She made her



film debut in 1950. After roles in several Italian features, Podestá was cast by Emilio Fernández in *La red* (1953); she later worked for him in the Spanish-shot *Nosotros dos* (1954), and in the Mexican-Spanish coproduction *Playa prohibida* (1955), directed by Julián Soler. Podestá's international career included films such as *Ulysses* (1954) with Kirk Douglas,

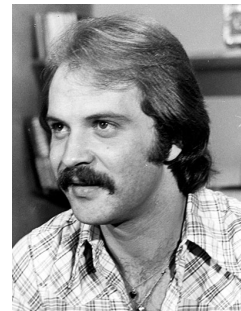
Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Santiago* (1956--with Alan Ladd), and *Raw Wind in Eden* (1958, opposite Esther Williams and Jeff Chandler). She continued to appear in Italian cinema until the mid-80s.

Rossana Podestá was married to Italian actor Marco Vicario (her co-star in *Nosotros dos* and *Playa prohibida*) from 1953 to 1976. From 1981 until his death in 2011, Podestá was the life partner of Italian journalist Walter Bonatti.

##### **Juan Peláez**

Juan Peláez, a stalwart character actor from the 1970s through the 2010s, died of complications from cancer on 23 November 2013. Juan

Fernández Peláez was born in Mexico City in December 1948; his parents were refugees from the Spanish Civil War. After studying acting at UNAM, Peláez made his professional debut in *Jóvenes en la "Zona rosa"* (1968). He worked in many films--among them *Aquellos años*, *Las noches de Paloma*, *Días de combate*, *El hombre de la mandolina*, *El fiscal de hierro*, *Licence to Kill* and *Zapata--el sueño del héroe*--over during the next 5 decades, but in the 1990s began to devote more time to *telenovelas* and mini-series. Peláez also acted in more than 100 stage plays.



##### **Karla Álvarez**

Actress Karla Álvarez Báez died on 15 November 2013 at her apartment in Mexico City, apparently after choking on some food. Álvarez was born



in Mexico City in October 1972. After initial training as a dancer, she joined the Televisa school for actors, the Centro de Educación Artística. In 1992 she made her television debut and over the next two decades became one of the more popular villainesses in *telenovelas* such as "María Mercedes," and "La mentira." She

also participated in one season of "Big Brother VIP" and appeared on other television shows, although her career was hampered by scandal due to her alleged abuse of alcohol. On the big screen, Álvarez had a role in Paco del Toro's *La Santa Muerte* (2007).

##### **Peter O'Toole**

Actor Peter O'Toole died on 14 December 2013 in a London hospital; he was 81 years old. O'Toole was born in Ireland (or perhaps England) in 1932, and began acting professionally in the 1950s after attending the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He starred in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), which shot him to international fame. Although O'Toole was nominated 8 times for Oscars, he never won the prize in competition, although he did receive an honorary



Academy Award in 2003. O'Toole officially retired from acting in 2012.

His sole Mexican film appearance came in Arturo Ripstein's *Foxtrot* (1975), a Mexican-British coproduction filmed in English on location in Mexico.

### Other Obits

Although I attempt to report obituaries as promptly as possible, not every entertainment industry passing is reported in the Mexican newspapers I read online. Several 2013 deaths I missed were:

#### Miguel Ángel Ferriz *nieto*:

grandson of the well-known Golden Age actor of the same name, actor Miguel Ángel Ferriz died on 6 February 2013 of complications from pneumonia. Ferriz was born in 1950 and made his screen debut in the 1970s, appearing in films like *El llanto de la tortuga*, *El mar*, *El cumpleaños del perro*, and *Ángela Morante, crimen o suicidio*? He was nominated for a Best



Actor Ariel in 1984 for his role in *El tonto que hacía milagros*. Ferriz had continued to work in *telenovelas* until at least 2012.

**Pepe Romay:** actor Pepe Romay (José Antonio Rodríguez Mas), best-known for appearing in numerous films directed by his father Joselito Rodríguez, died of a heart attack on 4 September 2013. Romay was born in August 1948, and in the 1950s and 1960s appeared--often with his sister Titina--in films such as *Pepito y el monstruo*, *Pepito as del volante*, *Ánimas Trujano*, *El misterio del Huracán Ramírez*, *El hijo de Huracán Ramírez*, and *De sangre chicana*. He won an Ariel as Best Child Actor for *Después de la tormenta* and was nominated two additional times. Romay also directed, wrote and produced films and *videohomes* in the '80s and '90s.



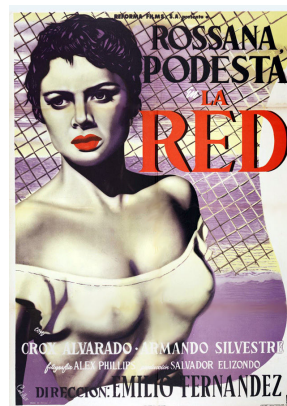
According to year-end news accounts, the following members of the Mexican entertainment industry also passed away in 2013: Jaime Brizi, Otilio Aguilar Aguilar, José Luis Ramírez Olivero, Roberto Casso, Guadalupe Márquez Ruíz, Francisco Valdez Fellove "El gran Fellove," Rodolfo Vélez, Mariano Franco Moreno, Josefina Mirón, Rocío Fernández, Rodolfo Farcurg, José García Olarte, Miguel Ángel Torres, Diego Chaires, Anita Muriel, Vicky Marty, Roel de la Serna, Blanca Morones, Alicia Ravel, José Manuel Díaz, Mario Marengo, Martha Papadimitiou, and Eloy del Carrillo. At least two of these performers--Alicia Ravel and Anita Muriel--had careers dating back to the mid-1940s. Muriel was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Ariel for her role in *El secreto de Juan Palomo*, and Ravel was married to director Jaime Salvador.



## Rossana Podestá Films

**La red** [The Net] (Reforma Films, 1953) *Exec Prod*:

Felipe Suberville; *Prod*: Salvador Elizondo; *Dir*: Emilio Fernández; *Scr*: Emilio Fernández, Neftalí Beltrán; *Photo*: Alex Phillips; *Music*: Antonio Díaz Conde; *Prod Chief*: Armando Espinosa; *Asst Dir*: Jaime L. Contreras; *Film Ed*: Jorge Bustos; *Art Dir*: Jesús Bracho; *Makeup*: Elda Loza; *Dialog Rec*: Luis Fernández; *Music Rec*: Rafael Ruiz Esparza



**Cast:** Rossana Podestá (Rossana), Crox Alvarado (Antonio), Armando Silvestre (José Luis), Guillermo Cramer (Cmdte. Jesús Rivera), Carlos Riquelme (sponge buyer), Margarito Luna (friendly man in cantina), Armando Velasco (priest), Lilia Fresno, Emilio Garibay (policeman), Antonio Bribiesca (Macario, guitarist), Manuel Vergara "Manver" (cantinero), Hernán Vera (shopkeeper), Rogelio Fernández (lustful villager)

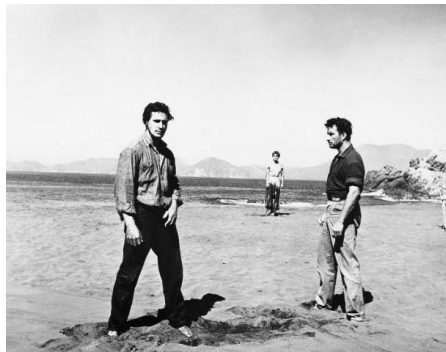
**Notes:** although Italian actress Rossana Podestá did not precisely make her film debut in *La red*, this tropical melodrama helped establish her as a "sexy" international star. Her costume--*extremely* flimsy blouse, tattered skirt--was prominently featured in advertising for the picture. Podestá, Alvarado, and Silvestre have very little dialogue in *La red* (the film was recognised at the Cannes Film Festival for "Best Visual Narration")--Podestá may have been post-dubbed, since her spoken Spanish has no discernable "foreign" accent.

Antonio and José Luis are surprised in the midst of a burglary attempt; José Luis is wounded and tells Antonio to leave him behind and escape. Antonio returns to the isolated, cliff-top hut he shares with Rossana. They make their living by selling the sponges Antonio harvests from the sea--Rossana is the only one who goes into the nearby village to buy supplies, although the villagers are friendly and not disposed to inform the authorities. One day José Luis arrives, having escaped from the penal colony on the Islas Marias. Rossana is not happy to see him, explaining to Antonio that she once had an affair with his partner in crime. Antonio strikes Rossana, prompting her to decide to leave--however, José Luis insists that *he* be the one who goes.



Stopping in the village for a drink, José Luis confronts several policemen/bounty hunters, and kills them both, but is badly wounded himself. The villagers dispose of the bodies and take José Luis back to Antonio & Rossana's

hut, where he gradually recovers from his injuries. He and Rossana fall in love, which precipitates a fight between Antonio and José Luis. Rossana tosses their rifles off the cliff into the sea to prevent either man (but especially



Antonio) from using them, but Antonio—who loses the argument—goes into town and steals a rifle from a storekeeper. He returns to the hut and spots José Luis and Rossana on

the beach. Antonio shoots and kills Rossana but is then shot to death by police commander Rivera, who followed him from town. José Luis picks up Rossana's body and walks into the surf.

Without a lot of dialogue, there isn't a lot of character development in *La red*, and we aren't given any detailed back-stories of the protagonists. While José Luis is off-screen, Antonio seems like a pleasant enough fellow and Rossana appears happy to be with him, but the film tips the scales in José Luis's favour by (a) having Antonio physically abuse Rossana, (b) making José Luis act in a more or less noble fashion (agreeing to leave, then later



defending Rossana against a lustful villager). Also, while Crox Alvarado was a leading man in a number of movies from the mid-40s into the early Fifties, he was not as conventionally handsome as

Armando Silvestre and when the two are seen together, Alvarado looks much more brutish.

Unfortunately, the director's apparent desire to tell his story with a minimum of dialogue (although this doesn't necessarily seem artificial or forced, and there's no attempt to convey some of the more complex plot points visually) results in scenes which go on too long and become repetitive and boring. For example, Antonio and José Luis dive for sponges (handing them to Rossana, perched on rock) in a sequence that feels as if it goes on *forever*. Apparently, this is intended to convey Rossana's dilemma, torn between two lovers. In another, awkward scene, Rossana and Antonio laugh together at nothing, in a very forced and clumsy attempt to show how happy they are together, or something.

The performances in *La red* are satisfactory. The paucity of dialogue holds down the melodrama a bit, although Crox Alvarado chews the scenery ferociously in the latter sections of the picture. Rossana Podestá is more difficult to evaluate: occasionally (such as in the

forementioned "laughing" scene) she seems stiff and amateurish, but most of the time she's adequate or slightly better, when she's not just an attractive blank slate upon which the desires of the other characters are projected.

After his first two films as a director (photographed by Jack Draper), Emilio Fernández worked with cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa on 20 of his next 22 films, including his most famous pictures (*María Candelaria*, *La perla*, *Río Escondido*, etc.)—Alex Phillips



shot 1945's *Pepita Jiménez* (the only Fernández movie not set in Mexico, until *La rosa blanca* in 1953), and Jack Draper was reunited with the

director for the rare Fernández comedy, *Acapulco* (1951).

One would think Figueroa would have been the natural choice to shoot for *La red*, given that the majority of the film was filmed on actual locations, but for some reason Alex Phillips was hired as the director of photography. His work is actually quite good, and while Gabriel Figueroa would work with Emilio Fernández again, their almost exclusive relationship was broken.

[Ironically, Figueroa—who had won 4 Arieles for his work with Fernández—took home the prize in 1954 for *El niño y la niebla*, directed by Roberto Gavaldón, winning over Phillips for *La red* and Agustín Jiménez for *El bruto*.]

Alex Phillips' work on *La red* is nothing to be ashamed of: perhaps he includes fewer of the self-consciously artistic "silhouettes against the sky" that were Figueroa's trademark (although there are in fact a few of these in the movie), but the camerawork is still fine. The natural scenery provides an evocative background for the human melodrama.

Emilio Fernández remade *La red* as *Erótica* (1978), his final film as director. Rebeca Silva, Jorge Rivero, and Jaime Moreno replaced Podestá, Silvestre, and Alvarado, respectively. The second version follows the plot of the first very closely, adds colour photography and some (although not a huge amount) of nudity, but is not an especially memorable picture. *La red* was widely distributed internationally in the Fifties, including a USA release by Fine Arts Films as *Rosanna*.



**Nosotros dos** [We Two] (Diana Films-Unión Films, 1954) *Prod*: Salvador Elizondo; *Dir*: Emilio Fernández; *Scr*: María Luisa Algarra, Enrique Llovet, Emilio Fernández; *Photo*: Alex Phillips; *Music*: Isidro Maiztegui; *Prod Chief*: José María Rodríguez; *Asst Dir*: José María Espinosa; *Film Ed*: Antonio Gimeno; *Art Dir*: [Francisco] Pina y López; *Sound Engin*: Antonio Alonso



**Cast:** Rossana Podestá (*María Pedrosa*), Marco Vicario (*Beto Áviles*), Tito Junco (*Lupo Áviles*), José María Lado (*Carlos Áviles*), Irene Caba Alba (*Francisca Pedrosa*), Félix Fernández (*old drunk*), Santiago Rivero

(*judge*), Julio Gorostegui, Jesús Rancáño, Julia Delgado Caro (*Antonia*), Félix Briones (*mayor*), Elvira del Real (*Socorro*), Emilio Rodríguez (*customer*), Anibal Vela, Ángel Álvarez (*customer*), Julia Caba Alba?

**Notes:** after *La red* (1953), Emilio Fernández's directorial career began a noticeable decline. For the first



time, he ventured outside Mexico to make films, working in Cuba (*La rosa blanca*), Spain (*Nosotros dos*), Argentina (*La Tierra de Fuego se apaga*), and Guatemala (*Paloma herida*). These movies—and those he made in Mexico in the latter half of the Fifties and early Sixties—were not necessarily bad, but they failed to achieve the same critical and popular success as his previous projects.

Shot in and set in Spain, *Nosotros dos* is a very interesting film which has little or no “Mexican” flavour. Fernández imported his Italian star from *La red*, Rossana Podestá, actor Tito Junco (who plays a Spaniard and could have easily been replaced by a Spanish actor), and cinematographer Alex Phillips, but the rest of the cast and crew were Spanish, with the exception of Italian actor Marco Vicario (Podestá's husband, not so coincidentally).

Francisca Pedrosa and her grown daughter María return to Francisca's home village in Spain after the death of her husband. Francisca learns her wealthy father is dead; she inherits his properties, although Carlos Áviles sues, claiming the dead man had agreed to sell out to him, then arranged to have him robbed of the purchase price. In revenge for losing the lawsuit, Carlos refuses to sell the



Pedrosas anything from his shop, the only one in the village. Francisca retaliates by opening a store and bar of her own, infuriating Carlos. Meanwhile, María helps care for the family flock of sheep, and in doing so comes in contact with Beto, the younger son of Carlos Áviles. They fall in love. Lupo, Beto's brother, learns of the romance and forces himself on María one night (it's unclear if “anything” serious happened before they're interrupted by Francisca). Francisca dies; Carlos forbids Beto to attend the wake, but

Beto later marries María. Lupo comes to the shop on their wedding night and tries to sow dissent between the newlyweds. A fight breaks out between the two brothers—María shoots and wounds Lupo to save her husband. Beto is unsure if María married him for security or for love. To prove her point, María gives away all the contents of the shop. Beto and María prepare to face the future alone.

*Nosotros dos*, while it has certain elements of standard melodrama—the “Romeo and Juliet” romance is a familiar



one—confounds expectations in other ways. Francisca and María win their court case at the film's outset, for example: in another film, they'd lose and the film would revolve around their efforts to reclaim their inheritance.

Additionally, the village itself welcomes the newcomers, and instead of “everyone against the two women,” the conflict is between the Áviles family (especially the bitter patriarch, Carlos) and the two Pedrosas, with the villagers remaining more or less neutral (doing business with both families). One might have expected more physical confrontations, sabotage, violence, but the whole feud is played out in a very civilised manner, and even Lupo's brawl with Beto at the end seems to be the result of excessive drinking.

These factors result in a somewhat understated film, more of a drama than a melodrama (that is, conflict internalised rather than externalised). The backstory is only hinted at, rather than clearly stated, and the relations between the characters are complex. Whether Carlos was telling the truth about being cheated by Francisca's father is immaterial: he refuses to accept the judge's verdict as just, and persists in his grudge against the two “outsiders,” when it would have been more logical to simply go on with his life. Carlos browbeats (and literally *beats*) his son Beto, while the older Lupo seems to passively accept his father's direction. Francisca is a resilient woman, uncowed by the hostility of the Áviles and determined to succeed. María is innocent—in one sequence, she spots a “sick” sheep and runs to Beto for assistance, only to discover the animal was pregnant and is about to give birth to a lamb.

The only major aspect of the film which rings false is when Beto begins to doubt María. He's stuck by her despite his father's opposition, but after they're married the statements of his father and Lupo affect him, and while he maintains he loves María, he's unsure if she loves him or if she's manipulating him for her own goals. Even after she divests herself of her “wealth” (the contents of her



shop), he hesitates before declaring his confidence in their future as a couple. This feels a little out of character since Beto has previously been stalwart and unbending in his support of María.

The performances in *Nosotros dos* are very good on the whole, although ironically supporting players Irene Caba Alba (as Francisca) and José María Lado (as Carlos) are most impressive, with Rossana Podestá and Marco Vicario turning in satisfactory but comparatively bland work. Tito Junco doesn't have much to do in the first half of the picture, but gets several good scenes in the latter sections.

The production values are adequate. The film appears to have been shot largely on location, and the vistas of the arid Spanish countryside are impressive: there are a few nice bits of scenery, but mostly this is a harsh land and the photography reinforces this concept. Unlike, for example, *La red*, there aren't many artistic compositions showing the majesty of nature.

*Nosotros dos* is a solid drama that makes excellent use of its Spanish setting. While some recognisable Emilio Fernández themes can be discerned, this film is a distinct departure from his Mexican movies.



**Playa prohibida** [Forbidden Beach] (Diana Films-Unión Films, 1955) "Fernando de Fuentes presents..."



Prod: Salvador Elizondo; Dir: Julián Soler; Adapt: Julián Soler, Juan Antonio Bardem; Story: Juan Antonio Bardem; Photo: Alex Phillips (and Manuel Merino, uncredited); Music: Isidro Maiztegui; Prod Chief: José María Rodríguez; Asst Dir: Gervasio Banciella; Film Ed: Antonio Gimeno; Art Dir: E. Torre de la Fuente, Pina y López; Sound:

Jaime Torrens, Gabriel Basagañas; Makeup: Fernando Florido

**Cast:** Rossana Podestá (*Isabel*), Carlos López Moctezuma (*Luis Muñoz*), Marco Vicario (*Juan*), Fernando Rey (*Arturo Ruiz Castro*), Alfredo Mayo (*Nicolás Varón*), José Nieto (*Matías Varón*), Santiago Rivero (*police inspector*)

**Notes:** *Playa prohibida* reunited Rossana Podestá with her *Nosotros dos* co-star Marco Vicario (and cinematographer Alex Phillips, who'd shot both *La red* and *Nosotros dos*), but her third and final Mexican (or Mexican-Spanish) film was directed by Julián Soler rather than Emilio Fernández. [Some sources suggest Juan Antonio Bardem was set to helm the picture before being replaced by Soler.] Although there are some echoes of

both *La red* (notably the beach setting) and *Nosotros dos*, *Playa prohibida* is actually a whodunit with a tricky narrative structure rather than a melodrama, and thus not especially suited to the directorial style of Fernández. Julián Soler, on the other hand, was a competent journeyman director of various genres and turns in an acceptable job here.

A group of children find a man's body on a beach; they flag down a passing motorist, Arturo. He uses the telephone at a nearby gas station—operated by Juan—to call the police. Arturo is a screenwriter in search of "inspiration." He spends the night at the gas station and Juan tells him his story...



Juan, a newcomer to the region, wanders onto the "forbidden beach" owned by the Varón brothers. He spots Isabel, a timid young woman reputed to be "strange" (i.e., mentally challenged), but eventually overcomes her shyness. They fall in love, but the Varóns—relatives of Isabel—forbid the two young people from meeting. A curious stranger, Luis Muñoz, arrives and camps on the beach with the consent of the Varóns. He's an itinerant photographer who informs Juan he's stumbled upon a "gold mine." Juan discovers Isabel in Luis's tent, apparently against her will; a struggle ensues and Juan shoots Luis. He hands over the pistol to Arturo.

Arturo later meets Isabel and she tells her side of the story. Her cousins the Varóns accused her of killing her father by pushing him off a cliff, telling her that she was in a mental fugue state and thus doesn't remember the crime. They forbid her to visit the village or speak to strangers "for her own protection." When Muñoz arrives, he exerts a mysterious hold on the Varón brothers, and they order Isabel to "be nice" to him in his camp on the beach. However, the sleazy photographer makes advances and Isabel shoots him.

Arturo thus has two "confessions" to the crime, but the pistol hasn't been fired! The police inspector reveals that Muñoz drowned. Arturo locates the murder victim's stash of photographic negatives: while taking scenic pictures of the coast, he accidentally recorded the murder of Isabel's father by the Varón brothers, and was blackmailing them. The brothers convinced Isabel she was the killer so they could control the family estate, which otherwise she would have inherited. Luis was drowned by the Varóns as well,



when he began his blackmail scheme. Juan frees Isabel from her cousins' captivity; the brothers pursue them but are shot by the police.

The three different versions of the death of Luis Muñoz in *Playa prohibida* are each partially true, although Juan



and Isabel both lie in an attempt to take the blame (and thus clear the other person, who they believe was the actual killer). One cannot help but imagine scripter Bardem was influenced by

*Rashomon* and its varying-viewpoint structure. The plot is reasonably entertaining and not completely transparent, although it seemingly promises more than it ultimately delivers (the grand mystery of the mysterious man murdered on the "forbidden beach" is nothing more than the Varón brothers hoping to inherit some land).

Unlike *La red*, Rossana Podestá stays modestly covered-up throughout *Playa prohibida*, and in fact has relatively little to do. Fernando Rey, as the amateur detective, and Carlos López Moctezuma as the sleazy photographer (who progressed from girly photos to innocuous postcards of landscapes, then became a blackmailer) are the most interesting characters in the film. The production values aren't bad--the majority of the movie seems to have been shot on location, with some interiors done in studios in Madrid. However, Alex Phillips has little opportunity for the type and amount of artistic photography present in both *La red* and *Nosotros dos*.

*Playa prohibida* is a compact and moderately entertaining mystery/crime film, although sold as another sexy melodrama a la *La red*.

[Note: *Playa prohibida* (1983) was not connected to this film in any way.]



## A Christmas Story



### Regalo de reyes

[Gift of Kings]

(Prods. Arzoz/Films Victoria, 1942) Prod:

Rafael Arzoz

(uncredited); Dir: Mario

del Río; Scr: [Alfonso]

LaPena & [José] Díaz

Morales; Photo: Ross

Fisher; Prod Chief: Enrique Hernández; Asst Dir: Mario de Lara; Film Ed: Juan José Marino; Art Dir: Jorge Fernández; Camera Op: Jesús Hernández Gil; Sound: Eduardo Fernández

**Cast:** Sara García (*doña Esperanza*), David Silva (*Enrique Hidalgo*), Miguel Ángel Ferriz (*Juan Hidalgo*),

Pituka de Foronda (*Lucha Santurce*), Rafael M. Lara (*Armando Santurce*), Asunción M. Casals (*Sra. Santurce*), José Pidal (*Bautista*), Amparito Morillo (*Magdalena*), Leopoldo Ortín "Chatito" (*Alberto Santurce*), Narciso Busquets (*Pedrin Hidalgo*), Jorge Landeta, Arturo Soto Rangel (*sec'y. of organisation*), Francisco Pando (*man at meeting*)

**Notes:** "rich vs. poor" is a traditional motif in cinema, and Mexican films are no exception. *Regalo de reyes* somewhat undercuts this theme by have the "poor" family (a) live in a mansion right next door to the "rich" family, (b) not appear to be very "poor" at all (although they don't have a servant, horrors!), at least compared to the *very* poor



denizens of numerous other Mexican movies of the era. Still, everyone *says* they're poor, and they can't afford a bicycle as a Christmas present for the youngest member of the family, so I suppose "willing suspension of disbelief" applies and for the sake of the story we will stipulate

that they are, in fact, "poor." Or at least poor-er than their neighbours.

The wealthy Santurce family--father, mother, grown daughter, spoiled adolescent son--live next door to the "poor" Hidalgos (widowed father, grandmother, grown son, adolescent son). Juan Hidalgo is an inventor but can't find anyone willing to invest in his revolutionary invention, so he barely makes ends meet working in an office. His elderly mother hasn't lost faith in him, but Juan is ashamed that he can't buy his young son Pedrín the bicycle he wants for Christmas.

[Cultural note: in Spain and Mexico, the "Three Kings"--rather than Santa Claus--were traditionally credited with bringing gifts at Christmastime (after all, they brought presents to the baby Jesus). The title of this movie could colloquially be translated as "Gift of the Magi," except then it might be confused with O. Henry's story.]

Juan's older son Enrique is an engineer, but apparently makes little or no money, since he can't contribute to the bicycle fund and owns only one suit. Said suit is splashed with mud by the automobile driven by Lucha Santurce; she laughs at Enrique's appearance and outrage, but is subsequently ashamed of her behaviour. In finest movie



tradition, this means the couple will fall in love. Lucha helps make up for her *faux pas* by providing a bike for Pedrín.

Doña Esperanza asks her neighbour, Sra. Santurce, if her industrialist husband will grant Juan an interview about his invention. Sr. Santurce agrees, but doesn't think Juan's idea is feasible, and vehemently rejects the idea that Enrique and Lucha could ever become romantically involved. Juan finds another backer for his invention, which uses petroleum rather than coke to create steel, and



will soon become rich. However, this means ruin for Santurce, whose fortune is largely based on coal mining (coke is produced from coal): now the shoe is on the other foot, and Santurce begs Juan for assistance. When

Juan doesn't act, Santurce is charged with misappropriation of funds and jailed. Encouraged by his mother, Juan agrees to sell his patent and use the money to free Santurce from prison, on Christmas Eve (a year after the first Christmas depicted in the movie).

*Regalo de reyes* is fairly linear and predictable, although there is a comic sub-plot dealing with the Santurce's sexy maid Magdalena and their dour, long-suffering butler Bautista. Magdalena says every butler in every house where she's worked has fallen in love with her, but Bautista (who constantly complains about his liver) resists her charms, fearing marriage and the birth of a child who might conceivably be as obnoxious as Alberto Santurce. In the end, of course, Magdalena gets her way and they clinch.

The performances in *Regalo de reyes* are adequate. Sara García plays a fairly early version of her "Grandmother of Mexico" role, constantly telling her son how talented he is, comforting her grandsons, and generally being a selfless saint who is "never wrong" (according to Pedrín). Rafael M. Lara is rather good as the snobbish Santurce, and José Pidal and Amparo Morillo are amusing in their roles. Narciso Busquets, although 11 years old when the film was made, is forced to act as if he were much younger, whining about his bicycle and bursting into tears at inopportune moments. In one scene, he's invited to Alberto's Christmas party (by Lucha) and when Alberto boasts about his family's Christmas tree--which is huge and well-appointed--Pedrín cries and demands to be taken home to his grandmother (the Hidalgo's Christmas tree is a spindly shrub, a predecessor of the tree in "A Charlie Brown Christmas"). Alberto is played by Polo Ortín (although billed here as "Chatito," referencing his father Chato Ortín), who was also teamed with Busquets in *Los dos pilletes*.

Pituka de Foronda, the half-sister of Gustavo and Rubén Rojo, was not conventionally pretty, but she was a lively and attractive actress who worked in a relatively small number of 1940s films (she later returned to

television in the Sixties and would appear from time to time in *telenovelas* until shortly before her death in 1999). Her character's romance with Enrique Hidalgo is quite perfunctory and certainly not the focus of the film at all (the Magdalena-Bautista sub-plot is more prominent), but the "Romeo and Juliet" aspect does contribute a bit to the progression of the narrative.



*Regalo de reyes* was the first film directed by Venezuelan Mario del Río, whose cinematic career was brief and undistinguished. His direction is competent enough, and there are a number of nice tracking shots which give the picture a fluid look, without really qualifying as a distinctive style. The sequence in which Juan's steel-making process is tested for the first time stands out as well, with dramatic chiaroscuro lighting on the faces of



Juan, Enrique, Pedrín and doña Esperanza as they observe the blast furnace. The sets are substantial enough and although most of the film focuses on the Hidalgo and Santurce households, a few scenes take place elsewhere and look fine.

*Regalo de reyes* is not an especially memorable or important film, but it's adequate entertainment.



### Tribu [Tribe]

(Miguel Contreras Torres, 1934) *Dir*: Miguel Contreras Torres; *Photo*: Alex Phillips, Gabriel Figueroa; *Music*: Max Urban; *Prod*: Chief: Juan Duque de Estrada; *Art Dir*: Engineer I. Contreras; *Film Editor*: José Marino; *Sound*: Rodríguez Hnos. & J.B. [sic] Kroger



**Cast:** Medea de Novara (*Leonor*), Miguel Contreras Torres (*Tumitl*), Alfredo del Diestro (*Governor Alfonso del Moral*, *Duke of Pardo*), Julio Villareal (*Capt. Bazán*), Rosita Arriaga (*Duchess Elvira*), Eduardo Arozamena (*Zotil*), Carlos Villatoro (*Capt. De Tena*), Manuel Noriega (*Fray Juan de Oviedo*), Guillermo Calles (*Tumitl's counselor*), Emilio Fernández (*Itzul*), Manuel R. Ojeda, A. Guerrero Tello, Victorio Blanco (*Spanish soldier*), El Tigrecito "Yobina"

Notes: Mexican cinema of the Thirties and Forties



featured a significant number of *auteurs*, some well-known (Juan Orol, Emilio Fernández) and others not-so (Juan J. Ortega). One of the most notable was Miguel Contreras Torres, who produced, directed, wrote, and (often) acted in a large number of feature films from the 1920s through the 1960s. The vast majority of his projects dealt with Mexican

history and/or folkloric topics, and most of his pictures of the Thirties and early Forties starred his wife, Medea de Novara, and featured many of the same actors (Alfredo del Diestro, Julio Villareal, etc.).

*Tribu*, while not specifically set in Mexico (a printed



prologue says it could take place in "any country") is obviously a tale of the Spanish conquest of Mexico (the indigenous people speak the Zapotec language) and the subsequent intermingling of Spanish and indigenous peoples. Other films took up the "Romeo and Juliet" theme of "conquest romance" between representatives of the different races, among them *La Virgen morena* (1942, "Aztec" Abel

Salazar and Spaniard "Blanca," played by Amparo Morillo) and *Chilam Balam* (1955, "Mayan" Lucy González and Spaniard Carlos Baena).

In the 16th century, Santa Fe de Otul is the headquarters of the Spanish *conquistadores*, led by Governor del Moral. Attempts to establish contact with a mysterious tribe of indigenous people have been fruitless, and several Spanish soldiers have been killed by poisoned arrows. Military leader Bazán wants to wage war on the native people, but the governor--supported by his daughter Leonor--wishes to exhaust every possibility for a peaceful *rapprochement* before resorting to violence. The Spaniards learn the tribe's chief has died and hope to make friends with his successor, Tumitl, although witch doctor Zotil is hostile to the foreign invaders.



Tumitl is friendly and reasonable, and develops a friendship with Leonor. This makes Captain de Tena, a soldier who's also interested in Leonor, jealous. [However, in her journal Leonor says she could never be interested in de Tena, because he's not a member of the nobility, as she is.] Captain Bazán is still suspicious of the natives, and when several more Spaniards are killed while panning for

gold, he presses for war. Leonor is abducted by Zotil and his adherents (who number about two people, it seems), but is rescued by Tumitl. On their return trip to Santa Fe de Otul, Leonor and Tumitl's party are forced to take shelter during a storm. Tumitl comforts the frightened Leonor, they embrace and...fade to black.



Leonor is restored to her family, but Zotil and his men murder Tumitl with a poisoned arrow.

*Tribu* is fairly interesting and well-produced, but the plot is predictable and unfolds very slowly. Everyone speaks and acts in an extremely deliberate fashion, as if the film was taking place under the sea or on some planet with twice the gravity of Earth. To make matters worse, Tumitl speaks only Zapotec until late in the movie (when he picks up a few words of Spanish), so his dialogue has to be laboriously translated by Itzul (whose Spanish is pretty basic itself).

One facet of *Tribu* which is somewhat at odds with traditional *conquista* stories is the depiction of the Spaniards as reasonable and peace-loving. Even Captain Bazán is only reacting to hostile acts by the natives, and does not (as one might expect) commit some atrocity on



his own, deferring to the Governor's repeated orders to resort to armed force only when absolutely necessary. The missionary priests, personified by Fray Juan de Oviedo, don't harshly pursue their goals of turning the indigenous people into Christians: in one scene,

Leonor's mother quizzes Tumitl about his people's worship of idols (and why they don't accept the Christian God), but Fray Juan gently suggests that this topic be postponed until a future time. In an understated but suggestive scene, Tumitl gives Leonor a present and she attempts to reciprocate by handing him a crucifix on a necklace, but he refuses to accept it.

The film instead places the blame on witch doctor Zotil, who dislikes whites and opposes Tumitl's conciliatory attitude. In retrospect, Zotil can be viewed as an indigenous "patriot" but in the context of the movie he's depicted as a subversive, sinister force trying to disrupt the peaceful coexistence (for the moment) of the tribe and the *conquistadores*.

The production values of *Tribu* are not especially impressive. The film doesn't look cheap, but there is certainly no spectacle on display. Tumitl's throne room boasts a huge stone idol, but otherwise he and his people seem to live in simple grass huts. Santa Fe de Otul is represented by a building or two (someone's house in real life, most likely) and some interior sets, and the "jungle"



sequences occur in very park-like lands. The costumes are rather good, on the other hand, and while there aren't hordes of extras, in most cases there are enough to make a good impression.

*Tribu* isn't a great or profound film, and the pace is rather glacial at times, but it's an interesting cinematic artifact.



Trivia note: although it doesn't reach the astounding total of *Refugiados en Madrid* (1938), which counted 13

former or future directors in its cast and crew (not including the actual director of the movie itself), at least eight people who worked on *Tribu* had or would later direct feature films of their own: Emilio Fernández, Guillermo Calles (both shown in the above shot with Contreras Torres), Alfredo del Diestro, Julio Villareal, Manolo Noriega, Carlos Villatoro, Alex Phillips, and Eduardo Arozamena.

Miguel Contreras Torres was one of the pioneers in making dual versions of his films, one in Spanish and the other in English (a practice he continued into the '60s, when René Cardona Jr. also began doing it). An English-language version of *Tribu* was allegedly produced, but apparently never released.



## Father-Son Action Films from Rubén Galindo

**Lobo salvaje** [Savage Wolf] (Prods. Galubi-Dynamic Films, 1983) *Exec Prod:* Pedro González; *Prod:* Rubén Galindo Jr.; *Dir:* Rubén Galindo A.; *Adapt:* Carlos Valdemar; *Story:* Rubén Galindo A.; *Photo:* Luis Medina; *Music:* Nacho Méndez; *Assoc Prod:* Teresa Ubierna; *Prod Mgr:* Samuel de la Fuente; *Asst Dir:* Rubén Galindo Jr.; *Film Ed:* Carlos Savage; *Prod Design:* Rodolfo Galindo; *Sound Ed:* José Li-Ho; *Union:* STPC

**Cast:** Miguel Ángel Rodríguez (*Frank "Lobo" Ventura Jr.*), Armando Silvestre (*Montana*), Fernando Casanova (*Gordon*), Narciso Busquets (*Frank Ventura Sr.*), Tony Bravo (*Joe Treviño*), Arlette Pacheco (*Karis*), Juan Peláez (*Agent Gavito*), Claudio Báez (*Dany*), Alfredo Leal (*prosecutor Leonel*), Rubén Benavides (*Danna Massini*), Baltazar Guzmán (*Mario Villeli*), Carlos Pouliot (*judge*), Nina



Kovaris (*Nina*), José Dupeyrón (*Robertson*), Arturo Bonilla (*Tony*), Julio Lerma (*Martín*), Sergio Lerma (*Pedro*), Alfredo [sic, Marcelo] Villamil (*newscaster Marcelo Villamil*), Norma Kingsberg & Leonardo Noriega (*parents of Karis*), Pedro González (*warden*), Daniel Robles (*Sam Moreno*)

**Notes:** the basic premise of *Lobo salvaje* is outrageous but is rather quickly forgotten as the film becomes a constant string of chases and gunfights. This doesn't mean the picture is very good--in fact, it gets a little boring at times--but at least the dumb basic idea isn't constantly thrown in the audience's face.

Gangster Danna Massini is on trial in Texas, but the witnesses against him are being systematically executed by his henchmen. Prosecutor Leonel has one last hope: 4 criminals in federal prison in Arizona could testify against Massini, but he "doesn't have time" to go through all the legal niceties to have them sent to Texas.



So he decides to help them escape from prison! Veteran police officer Frank Ventura--for some unknown reason--has intimate knowledge of the penitentiary where the quartet currently resides, so Leonel has him draw up a plan, but insists Ventura is too old to shepherd the escapees across the state (the trial is being held in Brownsville, located at the southernmost tip of Texas). He later changes his mind and agrees Ventura is the man for the job.

However, Ventura's son Frank Jr., known as "Lobo" to his friends, overhears the conversation between his father and the prosecutor. Lobo is a motorcycle-riding layabout, with a pregnant girlfriend, and is constantly chaffed by his father for not making something of his life. Lobo has his friends hold his father hostage and takes Frank Sr.'s place on the mission (unknown to the prosecutor). He's inserted into the Arizona prison as a convict, then learns the 4 prisoners--Sam, Montana, Gordon, and Joe--don't want to escape! They fear Massini will have them murdered if they try to testify. But when Sam is poisoned in the mess hall, the others agree to go with Lobo--cellmate Dany comes along for the ride.



Outside the prison, FBI agent Gavito is waiting with a van. Massini's men pursue them, killing Gavito, wrecking the van, wounding Joe (he later dies), and killing Dany (even though he's not one of the potential witnesses). Montana and Gordon try to flee but Lobo forces them to continue. Arriving at the courthouse, they run one final gamut of gangsters: Frank Sr., having escaped from his captors, is there to help, but Gordon is mortally wounded.

Lobo, Frank Sr., and Montana burst into the courtroom,



only to be told that they missed the judge's deadline by 15 minutes. Massini is found innocent. Montana grabs Lobo's pistol and shoots the gangster to death. Lobo, realising he's become a "real man" at last, embraces his father and then collects his pregnant girlfriend (who's

leading an aerobics class at a health club), presumably to do the right thing by her.

A combination of *The Narrow Margin* and *The Defiant Ones*, *Lobo salvaje* begins with the ludicrously flawed idea that a Texas state prosecutor would have 4 federal convicts escape from prison to testify in a trial. Couldn't he have made *legal* arrangements earlier? (To be fair, he didn't know his other witnesses would all be gunned down by Massini's thugs, but this wasn't entirely unexpected.) All ethical and legal issues aside, the script then makes the escape seem easy (and it is *not* pre-arranged with the



guards) because Frank Ventura knows a "secret" way out of the prison (and his son knows it too, because Frank wrote it all down). Then, the four convicts are to be driven across the Arizona-Texas border and all the way to Brownsville in a white van (what, nobody ever heard

of renting a private plane?), with one FBI agent and one policeman providing security? (As it happens, the FBI agent is killed early and the policeman is replaced by his completely untrained son.) Fortunately, Lobo is apparently a "natural" at such things, because he fends off dozens of gunmen and eludes numerous death-traps (in one scene, he shoots two parked cars with a pistol and they *both* explode in flames!), including an attack by a helicopter and one by a boat. How Massini's men know where the fugitives are at any given moment is inexplicable, but it doesn't matter, Lobo foils their puny attempts to kill his wards...uh, except that he loses 3 of the 4 convicts on the way, but hey, it only takes one to testify, and...oh, wait...they miss the deadline so he doesn't even succeed in that.

*Lobo salvaje* at least has the decency to begin with a few moments of characterisation (after a scene in which Massini's henchman crash into a house and murder a witness): the prosecutor and Frank have several good conversations where the older policeman insists he is *not* too old to carry out the mission; Lobo bitches to his pals about his pregnant girlfriend, then meets her and urges her to have an abortion (she refuses, of course); and Lobo and Frank Sr. have an argument about the son's shiftless lifestyle. These sequences, like the action scenes that follow, do a good job of obscuring the silliness of the whole plan.

Shot on location in Texas (where everyone speaks perfect Spanish), *Lobo salvaje* is reasonably well-produced and acted. It's nice to see bit player Marcelo Villamil have a slightly larger role than usual, and Leal, Busquets, Silvestre, Casanova and Rodríguez turn in solid performances. The pacing is not as slick as it could be, and the action scenes are noisy but not very elaborate or spectacular.



Special mention should be made of the music score by Nacho Méndez, which is so eclectic that one suspects it might be library music. The music isn't bad, it's just extremely varied, stylistically.

Trivia note: despite the flimsy premise, it was apparently good enough to be used--uncredited--for *A sangre y fuego* (1988), an action film written and directed by Gilberto de Anda. In this version, the protagonist (Valentín Trujillo) is a policeman, the setting is changed to Mexico, and all of the convicts are killed, so that it's the policeman who shoots the gangster after the trial. Juan Peláez also appeared in this film, albeit in a different role than he did in *Lobo salvaje*.



### Narco terror (Prods. Galubi-Dynamic Films, 1985)\*

Exec Prod: Raúl Galindo Ubierna;

Prod: Rubén

Galindo Jr.; Dir:

Rubén Galindo;

Scr: Carlos

Valdemar; Story:

Rubén Galindo;

Photo: Tony de

Anda; Music:

Chucho Zarzosa;

Prod Mgr:

Ricardo

Martínez; Asst

Dir: Carlos

Durán; Film Ed:

Carlos Savage;

Camera Op:

Agustín Meza;

Makeup: Victoria

Celis; Re-rec:

Ángel Emiliano Trejo; Sound Ed: Javier Patiño

\*lobby cards for the film list the production companies as: Prods. Galubi, Prods. Torrente, and Dinamic Films Inc. (the "Inc." suggests the latter company was based in the USA, since Mexican films use the initials "S.A." for "Sociedad Anónima")

**Cast:** Eduardo Yáñez (*Roca Durán*), Alfredo Leal (*Arturo Durán*), Juan Gallardo (*Bernardo Treviño*), Felicia Mercado (*Maura Treviño*), Juan Verduzco (*Morris Serur*), Raúl Meras [sic] (*Ramiro Mortera*), Claudio Báez (*Meneses*), Roberto Montiel (*Mario Cortés*), Leo Villanueva (*Mando*), Fabián Aranza (*Reyes*), Gabriela





Goldsmied (*Clavel*), Vicky Conti (*Vicki*), Alfredo Gutiérrez (*Rico*), Carlos González (*Joel*), Yirah Aparicio (*Gaviota*), Juan Jaramillo (*Castaño*), Ricardo González, ?Roy de la Serna (*Monada*) [note: the end credits contain numerous errors, some of which I have corrected above. For example, Raúl Meraz is credited as "Cortés" (wrong), Roberto Montiel as "Chamo" (wrong), and Fabián Aranza as "Casco" (wrong). Some of the other character names above may also be incorrect, especially for the supporting players. Also, the "Alfredo Gutiérrez" in this movie is not the familiar character actor known as "El Turco," but rather the stuntman/actor known as Alfredo "Tarzan" Gutiérrez.]

**Notes:** *Narco terror* contains a number of exciting action sequences, but the script is otherwise skimpy and illogical, with little or no character development.

Arturo Durán is a banker for the Mafia, who steals their plan for narco-trafficking "Operación Alacrán." Head gangster Bernardo Treviño, whose daughter Maura is



coincidentally engaged to Durán's son Roca, orders a hit on the renegade banker. Arturo and Roca flee together, killing numerous gunmen as they go. The criminals pursue them to Valle de Bravo, where Arturo is mortally wounded. Before he dies, he tells Roca where to locate a diskette

containing details of Operación Alacrán, including the names of the main *mafiosos*. First retrieving his father's .45 calibre pistol, Roca sets out to execute the gangsters, saving Treviño for last. Tipped off by Roca, the police raid a rendezvous where drugs are being transferred. Roca confronts Treviño but is shot from behind by Maura, trying to defend her father. Although wounded, Roca kills Treviño and is then taken into custody by the police.

The script of *Narco terror* is not much more than a template for a series of shoot-outs. As the film opens, Arturo and Roca practice target-shooting with their pistols, providing at least some minimum explanation for their later prowess with firearms (considering they're a banker and a university student, respectively). However, most of the rest of the movie makes very little sense. Arturo



doesn't seem to have a plan after defecting from the ranks of the Mafia, and he insists that Roca go ahead and marry Maura, even though she's the daughter of chief gangster! Roca refuses, choosing to accompany his father as they

flee...a short distance from Mexico City to Valle de Bravo, where they hang out in nightclubs, practically begging to be spotted by their pursuers. Roca has a one-night stand with a female mud-wrestler, who's later abducted by the Mafia and forced to reveal their identity (and is then shot

to death). So apparently Roca isn't worried about being faithful to his fiancée during his escape...

Arturo is killed and Roca is also wounded, tumbling into a river. He's rescued by aspiring writer Clavel, who nurses him back to health, falls in love with him, and lends him her car so he can continue his mission. How long his recovery takes is not clear, and Clavel never appears again (I guess she didn't get her car back, either). Roca recovers his father's (5.25 inch) diskette and--in an amusing display of mid-Eighties computer technology--opens a text file containing about 3 paragraphs of information about the ringleaders of "Operación Alacrán." Of course, this is all he needs, because the script helpfully makes sure his victims are all easily accessible, beginning with the gangster carrying his father's .45 automatic (which Roca prefers to his own puny revolver).

Roca blasts his way through hordes of bodyguards in order to reach the gang bosses. By the time he gets to Ramiro Mortera, Roca is so cocky that he calls and announces his arrival in advance! Only Bernardo Treviño eludes instant assassination, because his daughter Maura uses her feminine wiles to distract Roca, thus setting up the final showdown.

There is little or no character development in *Narco terror*. An early montage sequence cuts between Roca practicing *fútbol americano* and Maura idly shopping, but if this was intended to set up some sort of contrast between them, nothing is ever made of it. Maura effectively vanishes during the middle section of the movie, and aside from a passing remark that he's studying architecture, Roca has no personality other than "avenging son."

Given this minimal level of characterisation, one should not expect too much from the performances, but in most cases the actors were seasoned professionals and handle



their limited chores effectively. Eduardo Yáñez is handsome and athletic, Felicia Mercado is attractive (she has typical Eighties' big-hair, but she should have gone with darker lipstick), Juan Gallardo is slickly evil, and so on. One

of the interesting things about *Narco terror* is the attention paid to the crew of supporting actors and stunt men playing Mafia "soldiers"--there are plenty of gun-toting mobsters around for Roca to shoot (at times the movie resembles a video game) and, as mentioned earlier, these scenes are filmed and edited effectively.

Overall production values are adequate: as with the majority of Mexican films of this era (especially action movies), it appears to have been shot entirely on actual locations. When Roca attacks Ramiro Mortera's place of business (some sort of food distribution company), a large black bar appears on the top of the screen in one shot, obscuring (probably) the real name of the company painted



on a wall (in the TV version, at least; I don't know if this appeared in the original theatrical release or not).

Slick and superficial, but not boring.



## Ramón Obón and his Sinister Dolls

*La muñeca de Rosy quedó viva . . . ¡Porque de ella no salía ni una gota de sangre!*



**La muñeca perversa** [The Perverse Doll] (Prods. AGS S.A./Columbia Pictures, 1969) "Adolfo Grovas S. presents"; *Dir.*: Rafael Baledón; *Scr.*: Ramón Obón Arellano\*, León Roberto García, Rafael Baledón; *Photo.*: Fernando Álvarez Garcés; *Music.*: Raúl Lavista; *Asst Dir.*: Javier Durán E.; *Script Clerk.*: Damián Acosta E.; *Film Ed.*: Felipe Marino; *Art Dir.*: Octavio Ocampo; *Decor.*: Jesús Rodríguez; *Makeup.*: Graciela González; *Camera Op.*: A. Lara Alvarado; *Lighting.*: F. Tepozte Gaeta; *Sound Supv.*: Engineer Carlos Jiménez; *Dialog Rec.*: Consuelo J. Rendón; *Re-rec.*: Engineer Heinrich Henkel; *Music Rec.*: Ricardo Saldivar; *Union.*: STIC; Eastmancolor

\*although Ramón Obón Arellano is credited on-screen, this was the full name of Ramón Obón Sr., who died in 1965. His son, Ramón Obón Jr. (Ramón Obón León), is credited in most print sources as the co-scripter of this film.

**Cast:** Marga López (*Elena*), Joaquín Cordero (*Ricardo Montenegro*), Lilia Michel (*Julieta Montenegro de Rovel*), Ofelia Guilmáin (*doña Isabel*), Rosangela Balbó (*Leticia*), Norma Lazareno (*Rosi\*\**), Carmen Montejo (*Jenny*), Roberto Cañedo (*Dr. Federico Rovel*), Ana Gram (*Luisita*), Salomón Laiter (*Larry*), Armando Acosta (*man at morgue*), María Rosa Serral, Carlos Martínez Baena (*Professor*), Jesús Gómez, Carmen Serral, Norma Elena Alarcón, José Luis Caro (*coroner*), Regino Herrera (*gardener*), Rubén Márquez & Mirón Levine (*men who sell land to doña Isabel*)

\*\* Lazareno is billed as "Rosi" on the opening credits, but other sources--including publicity for the film's theatrical release--spell her name "Rosy."

**Notes:** this psychological thriller reunites performers from Carlos Enrique Taboada's recent popular fantasy films--López, Cordero and Lazareno from *El libro de piedra*, López and Lazareno from *Hasta el viento tiene*

*miedo*--both produced by Adolfo Grovas. However, *La muñeca perversa* has no supernatural aspects, dealing instead with a sort of "Bad Seed Who Sprouted," teenage serial killer Rosi. It was 5 years before the film got a Mexico City release date, playing for a week in 1974, but while this isn't as good as the Taboada duo, it's not a bad picture overall.

The title is somewhat misleading: there *is* a doll which appears from time to time in the movie (Ricardo gives it to Elena for "good luck," then Rosi inherits it and clutches it from time to time), but it has no supernatural powers and in fact plays a very peripheral role at best in the plot. The "perverse doll" actually refers to Rosi herself.

[Although the narrative features a number of flashbacks, as usual we won't attempt to reproduce these in the synopsis.] Ricardo marries Elena after sabotaging her career as a fashion designer "for her own good." This failure exacerbates her dependence on alcohol, and the hostile reaction of Ricardo's mother doña Isabel to the marriage doesn't help. Ricardo and Elena build a new house next to his mother's mansion, and have a child, Rosi. As time goes by, Rosi facilitates her mother's addiction, giving her brandy obtained (in exchange for sex) from Rosi's boyfriend Larry. When the estate gardener discovers how Elena has been getting her liquor, Rosi murders him with a sickle to prevent exposure. She then blames Elena for the crime (by the simple process of handing her mother the murder weapon and then telling everyone "she did it!"); Elena is sent to a mental hospital and subjected to electroshock treatments. Some time later, she escapes.

Meanwhile, Rosi has begun to eliminate the other members of her family, poisoning her grandmother and pushing her aunt Jenny down a flight of stairs (Jenny does



not die, but is confined to a wheelchair). Rosi gives her aunt Julieta--married to Dr. Federico Rovel, a noted psychologist--a sleeping potion, then chases Julieta's little daughter Luisita throughout the house with a cleaver! Rosi also stabs Larry (who's returned to blackmail her into more sex) with a pair of scissors, drowns her aunt Leticia in the bathtub, and causes a huge crystal chandelier to crash down on Jenny, finishing her off. Finally cornering Luisita, Rosi prepares to administer the *coup de grace* but is stopped by her mother.

When Ricardo and Federico return to the house, they discover the carnage (Julieta and Luisita are alright though) and see Ricardo's modern house next door in flames. Inside, Elena and Rosi wait for death.

Norma Lazareno has one of her best roles in *La muñeca perversa*. She'd been acting in films since the mid-Fifties (and was in fact 30 years old when she starred in *La muñeca perversa*, but doesn't look it), but had been mostly cast in minor parts and ingenue roles. In the 1970s she began to specialise in playing downtrodden wives and girlfriends in melodramas, although she was also a femme fatale--albeit a less murderous one--in 1971's *La satánica*. In *La muñeca perversa* she's excellent as the scheming Rosi, fawning over her father and pretending innocence, while revealing her maniacal nature to her victims. The film doesn't explain Rosi's motivations, other than (perhaps) a desire to have her father's love all to herself (although this doesn't explain why she wants to kill her aunts and her little cousin), maybe a slight nod to *The Bad Seed*. Mostly, she just seems to be crazy and evil.



In one effective scene, the drugged Julieta stumbles downstairs and tries to telephone for help. Rosi waits until the desperate woman has made the connection, then calmly sits down

and severs the phone line with her scissors. Later, she taunts the paralysed Jenny by dragging the woman's wheelchair out of her reach; then, as Jenny agonisingly crawls towards the telephone (which doesn't even work, although she doesn't know it), Rosi waits until her aunt is underneath the chandelier, then lets it fall, crushing her to death.

The other performances in *La muñeca perversa* are satisfactory. Marga López has relatively little footage, and Joaquín Cordero doesn't have much to do, but Lilia Michel (married to director Rafael Baledón) and Rosangela Balbó make the most of their substantial roles. Ofelia Guilmáin only appears in a couple of scenes but is excellent in her usual "horrible mother/mother-in-law" part. Future director Salomón Laiter plays the lustful Larry effectively.

Although Rafael Baledón disparaged his own directorial career later in life, in fact he was a better than average director and *La muñeca perversa* benefits from his work behind the camera. Much of the film is shot from low angles--when Ozu did it, critics raved, but nobody seems to have noticed Baledón's work. A fair amount of suspense is generated in the scenes of Rosi "at work," and only two scenes stand out as sub-par. First, the sequence in which spectators at a fashion show heckle Elena's designs is awkward and unbelievable (women in evening gowns and men in tuxedos at a public event would act like this?), even if it's explained that Ricardo set it up so Elena would fail. The concluding sequence is terribly protracted and clumsy: Baledón repeatedly cuts from shots of an expressionless Elena and Rosi in the burning house to Ricardo moaning and whining as he watches the house "burn" (a poor effect--the house is clearly *not* on fire). After the third or fourth set of such shots--Elena and Rosi,

long shot of the house, Ricardo looking on--the viewer simply wants the movie to *end*. However, on the whole the film holds one's interest, in large part due to the gleefully sinister main character.

Curiously, given the tenuous Carlos Enrique Taboada connection, the noted writer-director received co-screenplay credit on *La víbora* (1994), directed by Raúl Araiza, which borrows some basic elements from the earlier movie: a young woman has her alcoholic mother sent to a mental hospital, then begins to systematically murder the other members of her family. Her mother returns at the end of the movie to put an end to her daughter's crimes.



**Morgana** (Prods. Gonzalo Elvira-Televisa-Groupo Inbursa, ©2012) *Exec Prod:* Gonzalo Elvira Álvarez; *Prod:* Gonzalo Elvira y Sánchez de Aparicio; *Dir-Scr:* Ramón Obón;

*Photo:* Carlos Aguilera, Héctor Maeshiro, Alberto Lee; *Music:* Alejandro Giacomán; *Prod Mgr:* Patricia Reiguero González; *Asst Dir:* Lourdes Álvarez Martínez; *Film Ed:* Mónica Romero Arrieta; *Spec FX Makeup:* Juan Manuel Méndez, Carmen Cervantes; *Makeup:* Josefina Arellano;

*Direct Sound:* Manuel Rincón; *Union:* STIC

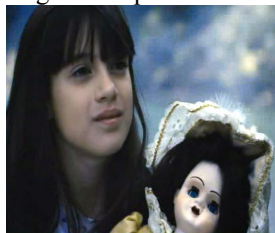
**Cast:** Siouzana Melikian (*Morgana*), Lilia Aragón (*Aunt Carolina*), Irán Castillo (*Daniela*), Luis Felipe Tovar (*Agustín*), Alejandra Adame (*Sofía*), Alejandra Toussaint (*Mercedes*), Eugenio Becker (*Gustavo*), David Ostrosky (*Morgana's father*), Abraham Stavans (*librarian*), Ana Julieta Récamier (*Morgana as a child*), Mateo González Osés Obón (*Mateo*), María Luisa Coronel (*blind woman*), Madame Récamier (*disc jockey-singer*), Alida Flores Castro (*servant*), Francisco Pérez Nieto (*father of Mercedes*)

**Notes:** Ramón Obón León (aka Ramón Obón Jr.) followed his father's career path, beginning as a screenwriter and then turning to direction (although the senior Obón managed to direct only one film, *Cien gritos de terror*, before his death in 1965). Obón Jr. made his directorial debut with the horror film *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* (1987), but helmed only a few other features (the most recent being 1994's *A ritmo de salsa*) before "retiring" from the cinema to devote his time to his law practice (he also wrote three novels). The success of the remake of *Hasta el viento tiene miedo* prompted producer Gonzalo Elvira Álvarez (a friend and legal client of Obón) to suggest a return to directing for Obón, with *Morgana*.



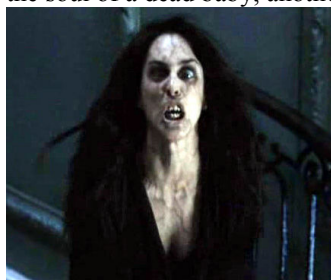


A slick, good-looking film, *Morgana* suffers from a deliberately-paced, cluttered, unfocused and not very original script. As counter-intuitive as it may seem,



Obón's direction is better than his screenplay. For example, there are almost too many "monsters" in the narrative, which dilutes the effectiveness of any of them: there's the ghost of a young woman (who occasionally morphs into a

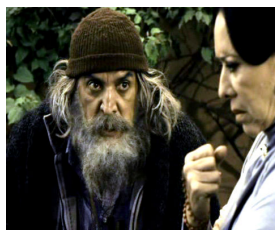
cadaverish creature); a creature that lurks beneath the surface of a lake and grabs, Creature of the Black Lagoon-style, at the protagonist as she swims (this is supposed to be the aforementioned cadaver-version of the first ghost, but it's presented in a different fashion and thus *seems* like a different monster); a creepy doll allegedly inhabited by the soul of a dead baby; another ghost or spirit or



something, of a blind woman, who lurks outside a haunted house; and a character who is possessed by the first spirit and gets all demonic in appearance and demeanour. These appear in alternating scenes and

although they are all linked, the sheer variety of supernatural menaces makes it difficult to focus on the main one.

Morgana, approaching her 21st birthday, lives in a large mansion on the shore of Lake Avándaro with her aunt Carolina. Her mother is dead and her father travels frequently on business. Morgana suffers from depression and is under the care of psychiatrist Daniela; she has



nightmares about being abducted as a little girl by a ghost who takes her out on the lake. Morgana's boyfriend Gustavo isn't very supportive, and when her friend Sofia arrives to spend some time, Sofia isn't too helpful either.

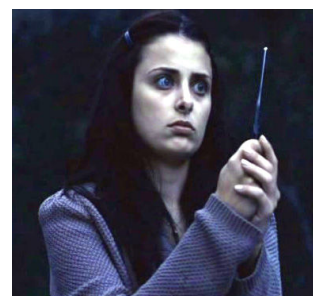
Morgana discovers she's

pregnant, although she's always been careful to use birth control. Carolina thinks Morgana is going insane--although the older woman herself sees a ghostly figure in the house--while gardener Agustín fears supernatural forces are at work. Morgana re-discovers a doll her father had purchased for her as a little girl; she eventually takes the doll to the basement and locks it in a suitcase, because it upsets her.

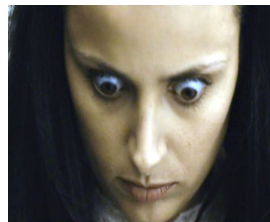
Eventually the story unfolds: a century before, a young woman named Mercedes lived in a neighbouring house (now a ruin) and became pregnant out of wedlock. Her parents took the baby away after it was born, walling it up alive in a secret basement passage. Mercedes rowed out in the middle of the lake and committed suicide by slitting her wrists. Mercedes' vengeful spirit possesses Daniela (who unwisely ventures into the ruined mansion), tossing

Sofia off a balcony and commanding Morgana to row out onto the lake and kill herself. Just before she does, Carolina and Agustín--who have exhumed the dessicated corpse of the baby--confront

Daniela/Mercedes and say a few prayers, which somehow defuse the situation. Mercedes is at peace, Morgana doesn't cut her wrists, Sofia will recover, Daniela returns to normal, and all is well.



*Morgana* builds up a fair amount of suspense (although the pacing is rather slow) but the ultimate reveal--the ghost who just wants her baby back--is overly conventional and the climactic skimpy amateur-exorcism scene is weak. There are some nice scenes, such as the one in which



Morgana is slicing limes and gets an urge to cut her wrists: this is somewhat undercut by Siouzana Melikian's risible facial expressions and bulging eyes, but it's still reasonably effective. As so often happens in such movies, the back story is hidden for the first half of the

picture and then suddenly the mystery is too easily explained (apparently Agustín knew a lot of it already and then Daniela gets fairly complete details from a library).

The production values are good, with excellent photography (by three credited cinematographers) and a top-notch score by Alejandro Giacomán. The film *looks* quite good, technically. The acting varies in quality. Siouzana Melikian is marginally adequate and Eugenio Becker is slightly less than that (to be fair, he's given some terrible dialogue). Lilia Aragón seems to have morphed into Isabela Corona, while a bearded Luis Felipe Tovar looks like a combination Manuel Ojeda and Gabby Hayes (seriously, he's unrecognisable), but both of these actors are professionals and turn in solid, enjoyable performances.

*Morgana* isn't a bad film--certainly not as bad as some online reviews would suggest--but it's not very scary or especially memorable in any way.



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