2014 Ariel Awards

The 55th Ariel Awards ceremony was held on 28 May 2014 at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. La jaula de oro was the evening’s biggest winner, earning 9 awards, including Best Film and Best First Work. Heli, which had tied La jaula de oro for most nominations (14) took home only one prize, Best Direction. Ciudadano Buelna and Cinco de Mayo: La Batalla received two Arieles each, in technical categories. In addition to the career achievement Arieles de Oro presented to director Arturo Ripstein (whose appearance at the ceremony marked an apparent end to his long feud with the Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas) and actor Ernest Gómez Cruz, there was an homage to actor Ignacio López Tarso, also present.

[winnners in BOLD]

Best Film:

La jaula de oro by Diego Quemada-Diez
Heli by Amat Escalante
Los insólitos peces gato by Claudia Sainte-Luce
Club Sándwich by Fernando Eimbcke
No quiero dormir sola by Natalia Beristain

Best Direction:

Amat Escalante for Heli
Diego Quemada-Diez for La jaula de oro
Fernando Eimbcke for Club Sándwich
Claudia Sainte-Luce for Los insólitos peces gato

Best Actress:

Adriana Roel for No quiero dormir sola
Dolores Heredia for Huérfanos
Arcelia Ramírez for Potosí
María Renée Prudencio for Club Sándwich
Ximena Ayala for Los insólitos peces gato

Best Actor:

Brandon López for La jaula de oro
Armando Espitia for Heli
Luis Gerardo Méndez for Nosotros los Nobles
Harold Torres for La cebra
Jesús Padilla Rodríguez for Workers

Best Co-Starring Actress:

Lisa Owen for Los insólitos peces gato
Rebecca Jones for Tercera llamada
Sonia Couoh for Potosí

Mariana Gajá for No quiero dormir sola
Linda González for Heli
Rodolfo Domínguez for La jaula de oro
Ricardo Blume for Tercera llamada
Gerardo Taracena for Potosí
Juan Eduardo Palacios for Heli
Dagoberto Gama for Nómadas

Best Original Screenplay:

Amat Escalante & Gabriel Reyes for Heli
Diego Quemada-Diez Gibran Fortela & Lucia Carreras for La jaula de oro
Claudia Sainte-Luce for Los insólitos peces gato
Gabriela Vidal & Natalia Beristain for No quiero dormir sola
José Luis Valle for Workers

Best Adapted Screenplay:

María Renée Prudencio & Francisco Franco for Tercera llamada
Gary Alazraki, Patricio Saiz & Adrián Zurita for Nosotros los Nobles
Miguel Núñez for Levantamientos

Best Photography:

María José Secco for La jaula de oro
Lorenzo Hagerman for Heli
Martín Boege Paré for Ciudadano Buelna
César Gutiérrez for Workers
Diego García for Fogo

Best Editing:

Paloma López Carrillo & Felipe Gómez for La jaula de oro
Natalia López for Heli
Marina Rodríguez for Tercera llamada
Óscar Figueroa Jara for Workers
Octavio Iturbe for Miradas múltiples

Best Original Music:

Leonardo Heiblum & Jacobo Lieberman for La jaula de oro
Jesús Echevarría for Huérfanos
José Miguel Enriquez for Workers
Gustavo Mauricio Hernández Dávila for Halley
Daniel Hidalgo Valdés for El alcalde

Best Sound:

Matías Barberis, Raúl Locatelli & Jaime Baksht for La jaula de oro
Sergio Díaz, Catriel Vildosola & Vincent Arnardi for Heli
Samuel Larson, Gabriel Coll & Miguel Ángel Molina for Ciudadano Buelna
Matías Barberis, Pablo Tamez & Jaime Baksh for Tercera llamada
Raúl Locatelli for Halley

Best Production Design:
Daniela Schneider for Heli
Lorenza Manrique Mansour for Ciudadano Buelna
Gabriela Santos del Olmo for Workers
Bárbara Enriquez for Los insólitos peces gato
Carlos Jacques for La jaula de oro

Best Costumes:
Mayra Gabriela Juárez Vanegas for Ciudadano Buelna
Nohemi Gonzalez for La jaula de oro
Adela Cortáz y Jerildy Bosch for Tercera llamada
Daniela Schneider for Heli
Alejandra Dorantes for Huérfanos

Best Makeup:
Adam Zoller for Halley
Iñaki Legaspi for La jaula de oro
Roberto Ortiz for Ciudadano Buelna
Jorge Fuentes for Heli
Iñaki Legaspi for Tercera llamada

Best Special Effects:
Alex Vázquez, José Luis Pérez & Carlos Ochoa for Heli
Alejandro Vázquez for Cinco de mayo: La Batalla
Jorge C. Farfán Barros for Ciudadano Buelna

Best Visual Effects:
Gustavo Bellón for Halley
Charly Iturriaga for Cinco de mayo: La Batalla
María José Santa Rita for La jaula de oro
Juana Nogales, Ana Rubio, Andrés Martínez Rios, Eduardo Villadoms & Rodrigo Echevarría for Heli

Best First Work:
La jaula de oro by Diego Quemada-Diez
No quiero dormir sola by Natalia Beristain
Halley by Sebastián Hofmann
Quebranto by Roberto Fiesco

Best Feature Documentary:
Quebranto by Roberto Fiesco
El alcalde by Emiliano Altuna, Carlos F. Rossini & Diego Enrique Osorno
Lejanía by Pablo Tamez Sierra
Miradas múltiples by Emilio Maillé
La huella del Dr. Ernesto Guevara by Jorge Denti

Best Fictional Short:
Estatuas by Roberto Fiesco
Música para después de dormir by Nicolás Rojas
Inframundo by Ana Mary Ramos

Best Documentary Short:
Un salto de vida by Eugenio Polgovsky
Conversaciones de un matrimonio by Gilberto González

Best Animated Short:
Lluvia en los ojos by Rita Basulto
La casa triste by Sofía Carrillo
Electrodoméstico by Erik de Luna
Un día en familia by Pedro González
¿Qué es la guerra? by Luis Beltrán

Best Iberoamerican Film:
Gloria by Sebastián Lelio (Chile-Spain)
Wakolda by Lucia Puenzo (Argentina)
15 años y un día by Gracia Querejeta (Spain)
Anina by Alfredo Soderguit (Uruguay)
Melaza by Carlos Lechuga (Cuba)

Ariels de Oro:
Arturo Ripstein
Ernesto Gómez Cruz

Special Homage:
Ignacio López Tarso

CANACINE Awards

CANACINE (the Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica y del Videograma) held its annual awards ceremony on 30 April 2014 in Mexico City. Nosotros los Nobles won Best Film, Best Actor (Luis Gerardo Méndez), Best Actress (Karla Souza), Best Newcomer-Male (Juan Pablo Gil), and a special award for Best Selling Mexican Film on Video. Other awards went to Amat Escalante (Best Director, Heli), Best Newcomer-Female (Loreto Peralta, No se aceptan devoluciones), Best Documentary (Vuelve a la vida), Best Mexican Short (La banqueta) Best Song (“Cuenta hasta diez” from No sé si cortarme las venas o dejármelas largas ) and a special career award for Silvia Pinal.

No se aceptan devoluciones was also recognised for Top Mexican Box-Office Film of 2013, Best Publicity Campaign, and Biggest-Grossing Mexican Film in History (in Mexico and the USA). La jaula de oro was cited as Mexican Film with the Most International Prizes, and Alfonso Cuarón won an award for his artistic and technical contributions to international cinema.

Obituaries

Sergio Bustamante

Actor Sergio Bustamante died on 22 May 2014 in Puebla after suffering a heart attack. Sergio Emilio Edgardo De Bustamante y Arteaga Roa was born in Mexico City in October 1934. He began acting professionally in the 1950s, and appeared in numerous films and television series, often as a villain. He also worked on the stage, dubbed numerous TV programs and films, and even had a successful career as a pop singer in the 1950s and early 1960s!

His final telenovela work came in 2011, and his last film was Acapulco la vida va (not yet released). Bustamante’s notable films included Una golfa, Todo por...
nada, El principio (for which he won a Best Co-Starring Actor Ariel and a Diosa de Plata), Durazo—la verdadera historia, Santa sangre, Los demonios del desierto, and Playa azul.

He is survived by his widow, Lourdes Sosa, two daughters, and his son, actor Andrés Bustamante (Andrés García de Bustamante Caballero, aka “El Güiri Güiri”).

Martha Hyer

Actress Martha Hyer died of natural causes on 31 May 2014 in Santa Fe, New Mexico; she was 89 years old. Hyer was born in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1924; after graduating from Northwestern University, she became an actress and model, gradually progressing from bit parts to female leads in low-budget features, and substantial roles in larger films. She received an Academy Award nomination for Sabrina (1954). Hyer was married to director Ray Stahl in the early 1950s, and to producer Hal B. Wallis (from 1966 until his death in 1986).

Hyer made a number of films internationally, beginning with several Japanese-shot features in the early Fifties (Oriental Evil and Geisha Girl, The Scarlet Spear (Africa), Pyro...the Thing Without a Face and La mujer del otro (both Spain), Due marines e un generale (Italy, with Buster Keaton & Fred Clark, aka War Italian Style), etc. Her sole Mexican film was Cuernavaca en primavera (1966).

Luis Ernesto Cano

Comedian Luis Ernesto Cano was found dead in his Mexico City apartment on 2 May 2014; he had been suffering from cancer but the immediate cause of death was a heart attack. Cano was 51 years old (although some sources cite December 1960 as his month/year of birth, which would have made him 53). He began acting professionally in the late 1970s, and was a member of the cast of the popular 1980s television program “Cachún cachún ra ra!” In later years he was closely associated with Germán and Freddy Ortega, “Los Mascabrothers,” working on the program “La parodia” and in their stage productions. Although best-known for his TV work, Cano appeared in several films and videohomes, including Transplante a la mexicana and Más vale amada que quemada.

Recent Films

Nosotros los Nobles [We the Nobles] (Alazraki Films/Warner Bros. Pictures*, 2012) Exec Prod: Raymundo Diaz-González, Mark Alazraki, Moisés Chiver; Prod: Leonardo Zimbón, Gaz Alazraki; Assoc Prod: Carlos Alazraki, Sergio Berger, Simón Bross, Yadira Orozco; Co-Prod: Ignacio Famanía, Gonzalo Ruiz de Velasco; Dir: Gaz Alazraki; Scr: Gaz Alazraki, Adrián Zurita, Patricio Saiz; Story: Gaz Alazraki, Mark Alazraki, Vivián Sadovich; Inspired by Orig Story: Alfonso Torrado Estrada (“El gran calavera”); Photo: José Casillas; Prod Design: Alejandro Martínez, Rubén Bross; Film Ed: Jorge “El Porri” García; Music: Benjamín Schwartz; Sound Design: Alejandro de Icaza; Prod Mgr: Rodrigo Calderón; Asst Dir: Laura Pesce; Direct Sound: Enrique Ojeda; Makeup Design: Francisco Barón; Unions: ANDA, STIC

*©La Familia Florentino Films

Cast: Gonzalo Vega (Germán Noble), Luis Gerardo Méndez (Javi Noble), Juan Pablo Gil (Cha Noble), Karla Souza (Bárbara Noble), Ianis Guerrero (Luchito), Carlos Gascón (Peter), Mario Haddad (Anwar Kaim), Mary Paz Mata (Margarita), Alberto Zeni (Juan Pablo), Octavio Garay (Tavo), Marcela Girado (Mara), Ana Karina Guevara (Carmen), Octavio Castro (El Duende), Adriana Olivera (Iurma), David Gaytán (Bernardo), Mariana Villavazo (Iliana), Luis Calvillo Anza (Sébas), Mariana Braun (Prof. Lucia), Mark Alazraki (Pollo), Mossy Santini (Ana Paula), Hugo Albores (El Diputeibol), Gaz Alazraki (Santiago), Cynthia Alazraki (clothing shop mgr), Raúl Ortiz (doctor), Carlos Alazraki (director of Architecture faculty), Francisco Aguirre (Judge Molinar), Alfredo Barrera (don Rodrigo), Raúl Penayos (chamán)

Notes: Nosotros los Nobles, one of the major box-office successes in Mexico in 2013, is an acknowledged remake of Luis Buñuel’s El gran calavera (1949), although obviously updated and revised. In fact the basic premise of Nosotros los Nobles—a rich man pretends to have lost his fortune so his wastrel children will learn to fend for themselves—had been used before in cinema, notably A Successful Calamity (1931), a George Arliss vehicle (itself based on a 1917 play by Clare Kummer), whereas in El gran calavera it’s the children who convince their father that the family is broke (so he can recover from the stress that caused his heart attack).
This is a pleasant film, slickly-made and well cast. It’s thoroughly predictable (and not just because it’s a remake), but that’s not a major flaw. There are one or two amusing lines, nothing amazingly laugh-provoking, but overall it provides solid entertainment.

Construction magnate Germán Noble is a widower with three grown children. Javi, the eldest, has been tapped to take over his father’s company, but prefers to work on independent projects (which always fail). His hipster brother Cha, allegedly an architecture student, spends his time on various “New Age” activities, as well as smoking dope and having sex with his female professors (the last two acts get him expelled). Bárbara (“Barbie”) is self-centered and snobbish; she’s engaged to Peter, two decades her senior, who is fairly obviously a fortune-hunter. The Noble children come together when their father suffers a mild heart attack, but immediately resume their selfish lives when they learn he’s going to survive.

Germán and his business partner Anwar collaborate on a scheme to convince the 3 younger Nobles that the family has gone bankrupt and are also being pursued by police for fraud. They hide in Germán’s late father’s home, a derelict house in a shabby Mexico City barrio. With the assistance of Lucho, nephew of the family’s long-time nanny, Javi is hired to drive a pesero (a small commuter bus) and Barbie goes to work as a waitress in a restaurant/cantina (where Lucho is the head cook). Cha gets a job as a bank teller, although he has to sleep with the female manager to keep his position.

The young people gradually acclimate to their new lives, but Peter discovers the truth and swoops in with a story of how he “saved” the family business (Germán can’t contradict him because he’d have to admit his plan). If Barbie marries him, Peter will have access to her trust fund, which he needs to finance a restaurant. At the last second, Germán, Javi, Cha, and Anwar arrive to stop the marriage ceremony, although Germán is forced to confess the whole story. His children leave angrily. However, as the film concludes, Barbie, Javi, and Cha are living in the renovated house in the barrio: Javi finally has a business of his own (a repair shop for busses), Cha has an age-appropriate girlfriend, and Barbie and Lucho are a romantic couple. Germán arrives on Barbie’s birthday (the film opens on her birthday, so the events of the story take place over a year’s time) and is welcomed inside.

There’s never anything threatening or scary about Nosotros los Nobles: their dilapidated house is a wreck but it’s not infested with rats (in fact, Barbie gradually makes a pet of a cat who wanders in), nor is the barrio shown to be dangerous or poverty-stricken (in fact, it’s not really shown at all). Sure, Cha has to sleep with his boss to keep his job, but (a) he admits it’s not so bad, (b) she isn’t unattractive or significantly older than he is, and (c) he already has a history of such relationships (in fact, he’s the aggressor when we see him with his professor). Javi has a difficult time as a bus driver, but eventually makes friends with his chief rival (who, coincidentally, reads the same self-help book Javi is never without) and is accepted as “part of the gang” of working-class drivers. Barbie does her waitressing with ill humour until Lucho explains to her that her tips are based on her attitude, and she soon adjusts.

The script does toss in several odd and instantly-dismissed bits of characterisation: Javi is dyslexic and Barcelona is bulimic, but these appear in one scene each and are only used to “prove” Germán hasn’t been spending enough time with his children (although his defense—that he had to be father and mother to them after their mother’s death, and that he had to run a huge company to pay for their upbringing—seems reasonable). There’s no clear evidence that Javi, Cha, or Barbie have any serious personal problems: they’re spoiled and rich, that’s about it.

There isn’t a lot of socio-political commentary in Nosotros los Nobles. Javi makes a brief reference to “the crisis” and the difficulty getting a job, and there are a couple of passing mentions of PEMEX (the national oil company) and the state government in Chiapas (where Germán’s company hopes to build a highway), but nothing overt about bribes or corruption (Javi’s bus has false license plates but this only comes to the attention of the transit police after he nearly has an accident right in front of them).

Some xenophobia does appear, although it’s mild. “Peter” (real name, Pedro) has a Spanish accent and is assumed to be Spanish (his proposed restaurant also has a Spanish theme), but it’s later revealed he was born in Cholula in the state of Puebla, so his “Spanish” act is pretentious at best. “Cha” (for Charlie, aka Carlos) and “Barbie” (for Bárbara) are also Anglicised names, and Barbie in particular frequently uses English words or expressions, although these significantly decrease as she reconnects with her Mexican roots. Anwar is of Middle-Eastern extraction but this is almost irrelevant (in one amusing bit, someone is trying to locate Anwar but doesn’t know his last name—“How many Anwars can there be?” he asks): he’s Germán’s partner and friend, and is depicted
as reliable and level-headed (and punches Peter in the face at the abortive wedding; when asked why Peter is on the ground, he says “His blood pressure must have dropped”).

However, Nosotros los Nobles is more concerned with issues of social class than national origin, albeit once again in a “light” manner. While the moral of the film is “working productively is better than being idle rich,” few truly working-class characters have significant roles in the film. Lucho is an entrepreneur: he’s a chef, caterer, owns the pesero that Javia drives, and alludes to other business activities. His aunt is a long-time servant of the Nobles but is treated as a practically a member of the family (or at least a trusted friend), and in return considers Javi, Cha, and Barbie “her children.” Javi’s fellow bus drivers and the restaurant workers have relatively little footage, although none are portrayed negatively.

Additionally, while their nearly year-long Adventure in Gainful Employment changed the lives of the Nobles for the better, it should be noticed that (as far as we can surmise) none of the three young adults remained in their menial positions: certainly Javi isn’t driving a bus anymore (his new business is feasible because it’s based on actual need, rather than a wacky idea catering to the upper-class), it’s unlikely Barbie is still a waitress, and presumably Cha doesn’t work in the bank now, because he’s got a girlfriend and she wouldn’t let him sleep with his boss, would she? (Particularly since he doesn’t need the money, being rich again)

This is not to imply that Nosotros los Nobles is dishonest or seriously flawed, because it isn’t. It’s glossy humor blanco (there is some very minor sexual humour) and delivers satisfactory entertainment. All of the performances are fine, production values are adequate (it’s a contemporary comedy, so no need for elaborate sets or special effects), and the time passes pleasantly.

Heli (Mantarraya-Tres Tunas-FOPROCINE-Le Pacte-unafilm-Lemming Film, 2013) Prod: Jaime Romandía; Assoc Prod: Amat Escalante, Carlos Reygadas; Co-Prod: NoDream, CONACULTA, Ticomán, Iké Asistencia, ZDF/arte; Line Prod: Nicolás Celis; Dir: Amat Escalante; Scr: Gabriel Reyes, Amat Escalante; Scr Assistance: Zümrüt Cavusoglu, Ayhan Ergürsel; Photo: Lorenzo Hagerman; Music: Lasse Marhaug; Prod Mgr: Karina Blanco; Asst Dir: Laura Pesce;

Film Ed: Natalia López; Art Dir: Daniela Schneider; Makeup: Jorge Fuentes “Jarri”; Sound Design: Sergio Díaz; Direct Sound: Catriel Vildosola; Mexican-Dutch-German-French co-prod

Cast: Armando Espitia (Heli), Andrea Vergara (Estela), Linda González (Sabrina), Juan Eduardo Palacios (Beto), Reina Torres (Det. Maribel), Ramón Álvarez (Evaristo), Gabriel Reyes (Det. Omar), Félix Alberto Pegueros Herrera (Cndte.), Kenny Johnston (foreign advisor), Laura Saldaña Quintero (Rosalinda), Agustín Salazar Hernández (baby Santiago)

Notes: Heli went into the 2014 Ariel Awards ceremony tied with La jaula de oro for the most nominations, but came away with only one prize, Best Direction for Amat Escalante. Escalante had previously received the Best Director award at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, and Heli also performed well at other festivals, but is not what one would call a “feel-good” film with a lot of popular appeal. It opened in Mexico in August 2013 with only 30 copies and earned just over $300,000 (148th on the annual list, according to boxofficemojo.com); the film is being released in 3 cities in the USA in June 2013. However, it’s clear the filmmakers did not set out to make a commercial “hit,” preferring to take (yet another) look at the effects of narcotrafficking on the Mexican people.

A far amount of the critical attention paid to Heli concentrates on the violent scenes, principally an extended torture sequence in which several characters are beaten with a cricket bat (or something similar) and one has his genitals set on fire. This takes place in a house belonging to members of a drug gang, and three adolescent boys are seated in the same room, playing video games, as the two men are abused (a woman periodically wanders in and out, and can be seen through a doorway in the home’s kitchen). One of the boys refuses to take a turn beating a hostage (although another participates); a third says “what did he do?” to deserve the torture, only to have his companion (playing a hand-held device) reply “Who knows?”

Although the violence is graphic (with full-frontal male nudity, another relative taboo in cinema), it’s not bizarre, gory or stomach-turning in the Saw/Hostel manner. The contrast between the domestic setting and the events occurring in the house encapsulates the film’s point: narco violence is part of daily life for many Mexicans.

Heli works at the Hirotec factory in Guanajuato, making automobile parts. He lives in a small house outside the city (“commuting” each day via bicycle), with
his father Evaristo, Heli's wife of one year (Sabrina), their infant son, and Heli’s 12-year-old sister Estela. Estela's boyfriend Beto is a police cadet several years older than she: they believe they are in love, but Estela wisely refuses to have sex before marriage, fearing pregnancy (she’s still in school).

Beto steals several large packages of drugs from the police warehouse (periodically, the seized narcotics are burned) and hides them on the roof of Heli's house. He plans to sell the drugs so he and Estela can run away and get married. Heli finds the drugs and destroys them (tossing them into a watering hole in the countryside) but Beto’s theft is discovered and the police raid Heli’s house. Evaristo is shot to death, while Beto is beaten and burned while Heli is only beaten. Beto dies and his body is strung up on a bridge, to give passing drivers a message.

Heli is released and goes home, but Estela is still missing. Heli doesn’t tell the police the whole story, and they suspect he or his father was involved in criminal activity. Eventually, the stress affects Heli’s job performance and his relationship with Sabrina, and he confesses the truth to Detective Maribel. Estela comes home, pregnant and traumatised: she can’t speak but draws Heli a map showing where she had been held. Heli visits the house and kills the man he finds there; this apparently leads to the aforementioned torture scene. Beto is beaten and burned while Heli is only beaten. Beto dies and his body is strung up on a bridge, to give passing drivers a message.

Amat Escalante has been around for a while (Heli is his third full feature), so perhaps it’s unfair to suggest Carlos Reygadas (Batalla en el cielo, Stellet licht) as an “influence” on his film-making style, but Reygadas has served as associate producer on all of Escalante’s features and Escalante was an assistant director on Batalla en el cielo, so there is almost certainly some shared sensibility between the two men. Heli features long, leisurely shots, especially of barren landscapes, relatively graphic scenes of nudity and sex, naturalistic settings, non-“name” performers, etc., which are all elements of Reygadas’ style as well. Heli is well-produced and acted: it probably didn’t cost much to make (IMDB estimates $1 million) but it looks professional and the mise-en-scene is perfectly appropriate for the story being told.

Not much really happens in Heli, but the film isn’t boring, nor especially disturbing. The subject matter and the plot are unpleasant and we don’t like to see sympathetic characters undergo pain and anguish, but the alleged visceral impact of the film on viewers is mostly lost on me. The ending is curiously “happy,” or at least not horrible: Estela lies peacefully on the sofa with baby Santiago, the room is sunny, a breeze blows the curtains, and from another room we hear Heli and Sabrina making love. Of course, Estela will need psychological counseling and probably have an abortion, and Heli regained his “manhood” by murdering a man (who may or may not have been directly connected with Estela’s abduction and rape), but for the moment all seems calm.

Jamón

Serial Excitement

Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror [The Skulls of Terror Return] (Prods. Ezquerra, 1943) Prod: Carlos Ezquerra; Dir: Fernando Méndez; Scr: Fernando Méndez, Elvira de la Mora; Story: Juan Roca; Photo: Ross Fisher, Agustín Jiménez; Music: Elias Breeskin; Songs: Ernesto Cortázár, Felipe Bermejo; Prod Chief: Fidel Pizarro; Asst Dir: Roberto Gavaldón; Film Ed: Mario González; Art Dir: José Rodríguez; Camera Op: Jesús Hernández; Sound: B.J. Kroger; Sound Op: E. Caballero, Stunts: El Fakir Harry [Harry Wieckede]

Cast: Pedro Armendáriz (Rolando), Tito Junco (El Cuervo), Chicote (Chicote), Agustín Isunza (Leandro Rocha), Alicia de Phillips (Nora), Crox Alvarado (Juan), Víctor Junco (José), Carlos Múzquiz (Luis), Adalberto Gutiérrez (El Mozo), Salvador Quiroz (Don Ramón López), Isabel Polak (servant), Esther Luquín (Lupe), Max L. Montenegro (Tuerto), [Alfonso Jiménez] “kilómetro” (Tripa), Chel López (Texano), Jorge Arriaga (Pifas), Manuel Pozos (Cristóbal “El Caminante”), [José] L. Murillo (El Tordillo), Trio Calaveras, José Torvay (don Pancho), Stefan Verne (Gastón, mine foreman)

Notes: only two sound serials were produced in Mexico, Las Calaveras del Terror and El Enmascarado de Plata, and—ironically—neither was shown in chapter-play form in that country (El Enmascarado de Plata was exhibited in the USA as a serial, and it appears Las Calaveras del Terror was, as well). Las Calaveras del Terror, which went into production in January 1943, was conceived as a 12-episode, 25-reel serial (many serials had a longer first chapter, and then 2-reel later episodes), which would add up to approximately 250 minutes of runtime, but was apparently only released in a three-hour feature version in Mexico. It was subsequently cut into...
two films for television release, *Las Calaveras del Terror* and *Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror*. 

*[Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror is, as of this writing, available for viewing on YouTube in six parts. The video quality is not good, but beggars can’t be choosers.]*

Producer Carlos Ezquerro and director Fernando Méndez had plans for additional serials, but Ezquerro’s death in November 1943 put an end to this project. It’s not known if Ezquerro’s passing was the reason *Las Calaveras del Terror* was never shown as a serial (the feature version premiered in 1944), or if Mexican exhibitors simply didn’t warm to the concept.

Curiously, another individual associated with *Las Calaveras del Terror* also died prior to the movie’s release. El Fakir Harry (sometimes billed as El Fakir Harris, real name Harry Wieckede) came to Mexico in the mid-1930s. His act involved various stunts including having needles, nails, or spikes driven through parts of his body. Harry—of Swiss heritage but born in India in 1910—appeared in *El circo trágico* (1938) and allegedly worked as a stuntman in other Mexican films in addition to his stage work. *On Las Calaveras del Terror* he’s credited for “Acts of Danger and The Test of Fire”—the latter was a full-body fire “gag” that is shown briefly during the credits of *Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror*, but apparently took place in the first half of the story, since it’s not seen in this version otherwise.

At the end of August 1943, Harry announced that he would be “crucified”—spikes were driven through his feet and his left hand—and he’d be on exhibition for 100 days. However, after several weeks his health had deteriorated to the point where the spikes had to be removed and he was taken to a hospital. Soon after his release, Harry subsequently collapsed and died, on 21 September 1943. [Although his death was attributed to an embolism, rumours abounded, and his tragic death is still remembered in Mexico. The “Esperanza” episode of the 1972 anthology film *Fe, esperanza, y caridad* contains a fictionalised version of Fakir Harry’s death, and blames his corrupt promoter.]

*Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror* is quite exciting and well-produced, with plentiful action, numerous extras, excellent location shooting and substantial sets. The plot is minimal—and the story essentially picks up in the middle, so if viewers hadn’t seen the first movie, a fair amount is left unexplained—but the constant action unreels at a break-neck pace. There is very little characterisation, particularly of the “other” Calaveras (aside from Pedro Armendáriz as Rolando): much more attention is paid to the villain and his henchmen and to comic relief Chicote than to any of the subsidiary heroes.

In the first film, villainous *hacendado* and mine owner El Cuervo attacks a group of prospectors who have an claim to a valuable “lost” mine. Years before, El Cuervo’s father had murdered two of the original 5 men, now his son has killed the rest. However, Chicote survives the massacre and gives the sons of the prospectors—Rolando, Luis, El Mozo—3 (of 6) parts of a map showing the location of the mine. Don Ramón has another part. Rolando, Luis, El Mozo, José (don Ramón’s son), and Juan disguise themselves as “Las Calaveras del Terror” to defeat El Cuervo. After numerous adventures, they capture the villain and he is lynched by irate townspeople for his crimes.

As the second film begins, Lupe arrives with another part of the map that belonged to her late father. However, El Cuervo reappears, alive, and attempts to hang Rolando in the town square, only to be foiled when a Calavera shoots the rope. El Cuervo reassumes command of his gang, based in his fortified hacienda. [It’s later shown that he is the dead El Cuervo’s twin brother, who retrieved his brother’s corpse and switched clothes with him.]

The rest of *Las Calaveras del Terror* consists of almost nothing more than action sequences (and set-ups for action sequences), alternating between 4 locations: don Ramón’s hacienda, El Cuervo’s hacienda, the secret hideout of Las Calaveras (inside a mountain, behind a moveable stone wall, and protected by a pit of quicksand), and one of El Cuervo’s mines (not the gold mine represented by the map, a different one). Sometimes El Cuervo’s gang and Las Calaveras (or their civilian alter egos) coincide at a location and a brawl breaks out, at other times one group leaves, the other arrives, and then a chase ensues. Las
Calaveras and El Cuervo are each trying to obtain all six parts of the map of the lost gold mine.

Among the cliff-hangers:
Las Calaveras confront El Cuervo in his home, but he triggers a trap door that sends them down a chute into a subterranean room, which has spiked walls that begin to close in on the men (they escape when elderly Cristóbal, a “mystery” man who wanders the countryside, opens an exit door).

Nora, don Ramón’s daughter, and Lupe (the daughter of one of the murdered miners) are captured in El Cuervo’s mine and are subjected to sexual harassment by Gastón, the brutish foreman; they’re “rescued” by the arrival of El Cuervo, who then proceeds to grope Nora himself! Eventually they’re saved by Chicote and Las Calaveras. However, four of the Calaveras are trapped in a chamber that fills up with smoke (gas?), while Rolando single-handedly battles Gastón and El Cuervo. Rolando is pushed down an elevator shaft and nearly crushed by a descending elevator (but isn’t killed; he and Chicote rescue the other Calaveras).

El Cuervo and his men burn a bridge to prevent Las Calaveras from following them. Rolando swings across the chasm on a rope, but is subsequently knocked out, tied up, and tossed in a river to drown. He wakes up, frees himself from his bonds, and swims to safety.

Las Calaveras decide to explode El Cuervo’s storehouse of gunpowder, but are locked inside by the villains. Unable to extinguish the burning fuse (for some reason), they luckily discover a trap door in the floor and get out before the explosion.

Towards the end of the film, the townspeople are roused to action by don Ramón (irritated by El Cuervo’s theft of parts of the map), and attack El Cuervo’s hacienda, setting it on fire (in one of the movie’s rare lapses, a terrible miniature of the buildings is shown in several shots: fire, water, and smoke can’t really be miniaturised and this looks like someone put a lit cigarette just out of camera range and let the smoke waft across the model). El Cuervo and two of his men escape, and pursue Rolando, who finally has the entire map. One of El Cuervo’s henchmen knows about the secret entrance to the Calaveras’ hideout, and they follow Rolando inside. However, El Cuervo stumbles into the quicksand pit and—despite his pleas for assistance, which Rolando ignores—sinks out of sight to his death.

As the film concludes, Rolando announces to the town that the gold mine has been located and everyone dances!

Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror is difficult to evaluate because it represents only half of an already-truncated feature-length version of a six-hour serial. As mentioned above, there is very little “dramatic” plot—a vague and brief reference to a love triangle (Rolando, Nora, Luis) is made, but immediately resolved (Luis falls for Lupe), and Rolando hardly shares any “private” scenes with Nora anyway (she and Chicote briefly disguise themselves as Calaveras to rescue the others in one scene, and Rolando sends Chicote away so he can be alone with Nora afterwards, but that’s it).

Las Calaveras themselves have nice costumes and their own proto-Batcave, but Rolando is clearly the leader (even when they’re riding across country, he is about three lengths ahead of everyone else) and the rest are indistinguishable, in disguise or not. The action sequences are good enough, but the fights are typical clumsy arm-flailing (although a couple of times someone is hoisted into the air and tossed). Aside from Republic Pictures, which had the best fight choreographers and stunt men in the world, few film-fights of the Thirties and Forties—in any nation’s cinema—are memorable (they’re either clumsy and/or under-cranked to speed up the action, which makes them look even more fake), so this isn’t a specific criticism of Vuelven las Calaveras del Terror or Mexican cinema in general.

But other than this, and the one unfortunate miniature mentioned before, this film is put together in a slick and exciting fashion, helped in no small measure by the musical score, the use of realistic exteriors, substantial sets, and (when needed) sufficient extras. Hopefully someday the first feature will also surface (or even the original serial, although that’s rather unlikely).
Trivia note: although produced by Carlos Ezquerro, the cast and crew feature many technicians and performers usually associated with Raúl de Anda, from Fernando Méndez down to José L. Murillo.

Martha Hyer in Mexico

Cuernavaca en primavera (Tres comedias de amor) [Cuernavaca in Springtime (Three Comedies of Love)]

(Prods. Bueno, 1966) Exec Prod: Javier Torres L. de Guevara; Prod: José Luis Bueno; Dir: Julio Bracho; Scr: Adolfo Torres Portillo, Julio Bracho; Photo: Rosalío Solano; Music: Manuel Esperón; Prod Mgr: Alfredo Vilana; Prod Chief: Alberto A. Ferrer; Asst Dir: Julio Cahero C.; Film Ed: Jorge Bustos; Art Dir: Jorge Fernández; Camera Op: Urbano Vázquez; Lighting: Antonio Solano; Makeup: Sara Mateos; Sound Supv: James L. Fields; Sound Engin: Luis Fernández; Music/Re-rec: Galdino Samperio; Sound Ed: Teódulo Bustos V.; Recordist: José F. Baena; Union: STPC; Eastmancolor

Cast: “El Nido de Amor”—Martha Hyer (Martha Quinn), Tamara Garina (Aunt Mary), Guillermo Murray (Alberto Cantú), Carlos Riquelme (licenciado), Agustín Isunza (hotel mgr), Luis Lomelí (Alberto’s friend), Bernardo Díaz, Claudia Albuquerquè (bikini girl); “El Mago”—Elizabeth Campbell (Kiria), Germán Robles (Ali Al Raschid), Rogelio Guerra (Kiria’s lover), Víctor Alcocer (nightclub emcee), Lola Casanova (singer); “El Bombón”—Mauricio Garcés (Mauricio), Rosa María Vázquez (Bombón), Nadia Haro Oliva (Mauricio’s wife), Elda Peralta (Mauricio’s mistress), Julio Monterde, Rosa Mondragón, María Wagner, Enrique Peña, Arturo Silva, Fernando Saucedo, Los Monjes (band)

Notes: Cuernavaca en primavera was a followup to Guadalajara en verano, in the sense that both films contained several fictional stories interspersed with a lot of tourist-style footage of their respective cities. However, Cuernavaca en primavera separates its multiple tales into three discrete episodes, whereas Guadalajara... had a single narrative with an ensemble cast participating in varied sub-plots. The first film was rather more interesting, since its premise (a group of foreign students attending summer school in Guadalajara) was relatively novel: the three tales in Cuernavaca... are conventional romantic comedies that just happen to be set in Cuernavaca. The multi-story format makes Cuernavaca... look like just another of the many similar films produced in the latter half of the Sixties by Interfilms and other companies, and the presence of Mauricio Garcés in the third episode reinforces this resemblance.

However, Cuernavaca en primavera is of curiosity value for the presence of Hollywood actress Martha Hyer, and the always-welcome presence of Elizabeth Campbell (who’d also been in Guadalajara en verano). None of the stories is especially outstanding and there is rather too much music, but the production values are adequate and the views of Cuernavaca are at least something different.

“El Nido de Amor”—wealthy Martha Quinn and her aunt Mary arrive in Mexico to claim a house she inherited, but learn they can’t move in until some legal questions are resolved. They finally rent the “Love Nest,” a special bungalow tree-house at a luxurious hotel. Alberto, a gung-ho insurance salesman, mistakenly thinks Aunt Mary is the rich woman and Martha is her secretary-companion: he romances Martha in the hopes that she’ll convince her aunt to buy an insurance policy from him. Although Martha and Alberto fall in love, Aunt Mary thinks Alberto is a fortune-hunter, and Martha reluctantly agrees to leave Mexico after signing the policy. Alberto learns the truth. In a bizarre and unbelievable scene, Martha—departing on a large commercial airliner—looks out the cabin window with binoculars and—from thousands of feet in the air—sees Alberto tearing up the policy! She smiles...

The basic premise of this story is overly familiar—mistaken identity, someone falling in love with a “poor” man/woman, only to discover he/she isn’t poor after all—and the episode is padded out with extensive scenes of Cuernavaca, Lake Tequesquitengo, and various other historical and folkloric attractions, as well as several fairly long musical numbers (including one featuring the title song “Cuernavaca en primavera” sung by several uncredited performers).

The characters aren’t very well developed or even consistently portrayed. Martha is a modernist painter and starts off with a rather shrewish personality, but this is discarded fairly quickly as she succumbs to Alberto’s attentions. Alberto seems to be fixated on selling the insurance policy but this phase also lasts only a couple of minutes, and then he turns into a sincere suitor, briefly and unconvincingly reverting to his money-hungry self when he learns the policy has been signed. Why this invalidates his feelings for Martha isn’t clear, since he obviously is not using her just to get to her aunt.
Martha Hyer is adequate in her role, speaking some accented Spanish but also a lot of English. She only makes one major “funny” error, calling Cuernavaca “Cuerna-cow,” and being corrected by Aunt Mary. Hyer was in her early 40s when she appeared in the film and while she’s still attractive, it’s clear some care was taken in closeups and although she exposes her legs, her costumes seem to have been designed to minimise exposure of her waist and hips. Claudia Albuquerque has a very minor role as a young woman guest in Martha’s hotel: several decades younger than Hyer, she has no hesitation in displaying her body in a skimpy bikini, which only makes Hyer’s cover-up costumes more noticeable.

Tamara Garina and Guillermo Murray are satisfactory, as are Carlos Riquelme in a minor supporting role as Martha’s Mexican lawyer, and Agustín Isunza in a brief cameo as a hotel manager.

"El Mago"—magician Ali is performing at a resort nightclub in Cuernavaca. He’s accompanied by his beautiful wife Kiria, of whom he is fiercely protective. As part of his act, Ali is locked in a large trunk and requires 8 minutes to escape: each night as he begins the stunt, he notices a handsome young man in the audience get up and leave. Ali is convinced this man is having an affair with Kiria (and he's right). Surprising the couple strolling through the hotel gardens one day, Ali is told that the man is Kiria’s cousin, who wants to become a magician. Killing two birds with one stone, Ali puts the suspect in his act, but then spies another young man depart when his trunk trick commences! And so on...

This is a one-joke story and the shortest of the three.

It's fairly amusing, with Elizabeth Campbell wearing a variety of revealing costumes and Germán Robles dashing about in a jealous fury, but is nothing particularly special.

"El Bombón"—Mauricio is on vacation in Cuernavaca with his wife. However, his longtime mistress is also there. The two women meet and an uneasy truce develops, because they are both jealous of Mauricio’s attentions to the much younger "Bomboncito." Confronting her in her room as she's taking a shower, they demand to know what Mauricio sees in someone who isn't cultured, intelligent, well-mannered, and so forth. "This," she replies, opening her towel to reveal her (presumably) spectacular body (the audience only sees her from behind and from the waist up). Wife and mistress conspire to eliminate the unfaithful Mauricio, getting him drunk and pushing him into the hotel’s swimming pool to drown. A year later, they meet again at his grave, only to discover they are once again sharing a lover! This man also gets the champagne and murder treatment.

The premise of wife & mistress teaming up for revenge on the man who betrays them both is not new (and continues to appear in the cinema, for instance 2014’s The Other Woman), and "El Bombón" adds nothing new. Surprisingly enough, Mauricio García is not the center of attention here: the story focuses on Nadia Haro Oliva (the wife) and Elda Peralta (the mistress), with minor attention paid to Rosa María Vázquez (the young woman), who is mostly sexy window-dressing. Haro Oliva and Peralta are both quite good, exchanging barbed insults when they first meet but later becoming friends after uniting against the common enemy (first, the "bombón," and then Mauricio).

The pace is very slow, with the thin plot stretched out to twice what would have been a reasonable length, and there aren't even any "sightseeing scenes" (as in the first episode) to break up the monotony.

Cuernavaca en primavera isn't a bad film, but it is only mildly entertaining at best on an objective scale. However, any film featuring Elizabeth Campbell is probably worth watching at least once.

Sergio Bustamante Films

Ratas de vecindad (Sin destino) [Neighbourhood Rats (No Future)] (Cineprods. DMA, 1988) Prod: David Moya Ayala; Dir: Alberto Mariscal; Scr: Christian Bennet; Photo: Antonio Ruiz; Music: Luis Alcaraz; Prod Mgr: Luis Felipe Guzmán Paez; Prod Chief: Luis Lobato Rubalcava, Carlos Eduardo Chamlati Serra, Adán Palacios Ávila; Asst Dir: Roberto Sala; Film Ed: Antonio López; Camera Op: Febronio Teposte; Sound Engin: Roberto Martínez; Makeup: Victoria Celis; Re-rec: Ricardo Saldivar

Cast: Ernesto Gómez Cruz (Héctor Malagón Ruiz), Myrrha Saavedra (Julieta), Ana Luisa Peluffo (Mariana), Sergio Bustamante (Malaguíñas), Margarita Narváez "La...
become a policeman (since corrupt cops make a lot of 
back his loan. Cano is fired from his job: he decides to 
bankrupt chiefly due to his
prostitute who lives in Héctor's apartment block, cares for 
to gambling and alcohol). Unable to afford medical help 
for his wife and food for his family, on the spur of the 
moment Héctor steals a bag 
of groceries in the market but 
is caught and sent to the local delegación. He's eventually released after telling his sad tale, but his wife has been taken to the hospital, where she loses her baby (she later dies herself). Julieta, a 
prostitute who lives in Héctor's apartment block, cares for 
his daughter and urges Héctor to rebuild his life.

Also residing in the vecindad is prestamista Malaquías, 
who loans money to his neighbours at usurious interest 
rates. He lives with his grown daughter Lorena, who is the 
girlfriend of Cano, a marijuana-smoking mechanic.

Plumber Román, a client of Malaquías, spies on Lorena 
through her bedroom window and robs his clients to pay 
back his loan. Cano is fired from his job: he decides to 
become a policeman (since corrupt cops make a lot of 
money) but needs to pay a large bribe to get the position. 
He kills Malaquías and makes off with a large sum of 
money and various pieces of jewelry hocked by the older 
man's clients; after he leaves, Román arrives to ask for 

Notes: a number of derivative genres and sub-genres 
appeared in Mexican cinema of the 1980s. These included 
sexy-comedies, rural action films (often with narco 
elements), biker-punk movies, and urban melodramas set 
in Mexico City, a sub-genre one might call chilango cine. 
Certainly films set in working-class neighbourhoods of the 
capital had been made as early as the 1930s and 1940s--the 
classic Nosotros los pobres is one example--and continued 
to be made in virtually every subsequent decade, but in the 
Eighties these took on a rather grittier (not to necessarily 
say more "realistic") tone. Ratas de vecindad is one 
example of this trend, a reasonably competent tale of the 
poor and not-especially honest 
habitants of a particular D.F. 
neighbourhood (the film was shot in Coyoacán).

Héctor Malagón Ruiz lives 
in a shabby vecindad with his 
pregnant wife Mariana and 
their 3-year-old daughter. He is 
a civil engineer who once ran 
his own company but went 
bankrupt chiefly due to his 
hubris (oh, and dual addictions 
to gambling and alcohol). Unable to afford medical help 
for his wife and food for his family, on the spur of the 
moment Héctor steals a bag 
of groceries in the market but 
is caught and sent to the local delegación. He's eventually released after telling his sad tale, but his wife has been taken to the hospital, where she loses her baby (she later dies herself). Julieta, a 
prostitute who lives in Héctor's apartment block, cares for 
his daughter and urges Héctor to rebuild his life.

Also residing in the vecindad is prestamista Malaquías, 
who loans money to his neighbours at usurious interest 
rates. He lives with his grown daughter Lorena, who is the 
girlfriend of Cano, a marijuana-smoking mechanic.

Plumber Román, a client of Malaquías, spies on Lorena 
through her bedroom window and robs his clients to pay 
back his loan. Cano is fired from his job: he decides to 
become a policeman (since corrupt cops make a lot of 
money) but needs to pay a large bribe to get the position. 
He kills Malaquías and makes off with a large sum of 
money and various pieces of jewelry hocked by the older 
man's clients; after he leaves, Román arrives to ask for 

another loan and is surprised in the room by Lorena, who 
accuses him of killing her father. Román knocks her out 
and flees. Then Héctor shows up (he needs a loan to pay 
his wife's funeral expenses) and is arrested for the crime.

One of the other residents saw Cano leaving with the 
loot, but refuses to get involved. Julieta 
confronts Cano, accusing 
him of the crime: she kills 
him but is in turn shot to 
death by her angry pimp 
(he'd stopping 
prostituting herself in 
order to care for Héctor's 
daughter), although 
before she dies she returns fire and kills him as well!

Meanwhile, Lorena recovers 
consciousness and identifies 
Román as the man who struck 
her; the felonious plumber is 
struck by a car and dies while 
 fleeing from the police. 
Héctor is released from jail 
and rejects an offer to work 
for the "Czar of Crime," 
preferring honest work. 

There are some interesting socio-political aspects to 
Ratas de vecindad. For melodramatic purposes, the idea of 
socialised medicine or any sort of medical assistance for 
the poor is ignored: not only does Héctor not seek medical 
attention for his gravely-ill, pregnant wife because he has 
no money, when she's finally taken to the hospital in 
critical condition, the doctor gives Héctor a list of 
expensive medicines he is supposed to buy for her!

The justice system is also depicted in an ambivalent 
manner. Although the magistrate (agente del Ministerio 
Público) shows mercy on Héctor and releases him on the 
robbery charge, after Héctor is subsequently charged with 
murder he is brutally tortured by police agents Jimmy and 
Negro (who do the same thing to Pantera, a "fence" who 
befriends Héctor in jail). The fact that the sleazy Cano is 
able to buy his way onto the police force (as a judicial, or 
plainclothes agent) with the intention of using his position 
to make money is another example of official corruption. 
However, later in the movie a new police commander is 
transferred to the local unit: he has Jimmy and 
Negro arrested for 
 depriving Héctor of his 
constitutional rights, 
and makes a speech 
saying the police force is 
being purged of 
agents who abuse the 
public, which sounds 
good but probably didn't convince too many audience 
members at the time. Additionally, the "Czar of Crime" is
incarcerated in the same prison as Héctor and Pantera, but has a luxurious room with comfortable furniture, a television, etc., and dresses in a silk robe: he tells them "in here, money can buy anything--except freedom."

*Ratas de vecindad* has some clumsy aspects but there are also a number of effective bits of characterisation. Héctor is the protagonist but is not without flaws. In addition to his gambling addiction (shown) and alcoholism (mentioned but not shown), in a flashback sequence he berates a subordinate for embezzling company funds--even though the man pleads for mercy and explains that he had serious family problems--and allows the man to go to jail rather than give him another chance. He also leaves his ailing wife and young daughter alone, spending all night in a card game (admittedly trying to win enough money for a doctor, but failing). He later tries to earn money carrying packages for customers at the market, but is beaten and robbed of half his earnings by toughs who control the package-carrying concession!

One of the most bizarre and offensive aspects of the film is the depiction of Malaquías (the Spanish version of Malachi) as a greedy Jewish stereotype. Jewish stereotypes are not very common in Mexican cinema (some of the traditional mannerisms and traits were assigned to other groups, such as Lebanese and Spanish immigrants), but Malaquías is an extreme example. Not only is he a greedy money-lender, he's physically filthy, has horrible table manners, speaks broken Spanish with a thick accent, is penurious to an extreme degree (even when it comes to his daughter and himself), and considers his neighbours/clients to be his social inferiors. Sergio Bustamante really pulls out all the stops here, creating an extremely unpleasant character, albeit not any sort of outright villain (there's no suggestion that he cheats people or is involved in illegal activities, he's just money-crazed).

The performances of the rest of the cast range from good (Ernesto Gómez Cruz, Alfonso Munguía) to adequate (Myrrha Saavedra, Julio Ahuet, etc.) to somewhat crude. Saavedra (whose first name is subject to a variety of spellings--in fact, the film's poster spells it differently than the on-screen credits!) had a modest career in '80s films and TV, and continues to work (mostly on television) today. She's attractive enough, with a distinctive face. Curiously, although this film was rated "C" (roughly equivalent to an "R") for its theatrical release, there is no nudity on display in the video release version (and may not have existed in the original, although this is unknown).

Alberto Mariscal's direction is satisfactory, although there are a few awkward bits. For example, when Cano confronts Malaquías, he lightly taps him with a pipe, drawing blood: Malaquías waits a few seconds, then collapses, at which point Cano strikes him again, repeatedly (out of the frame). Then, a minute later, Lorena accuses Román of murder and he hits her with a pipe or a wrench or something. More effective are the torture scenes, which include the use of a cattle prod, beatings, and shaking up a bottle of carbonated water and shooting the liquid into the victim's nasal passages (this is only implied, not shown). The pacing is good throughout, with no slow spots or time-wasting interpolations (like musical numbers). Production values are good--it's unclear how much, if any, of the film was shot on sets and how much was actual locations, but the overall *mise-en-scene* seems realistic enough.

The script isn't bad at all, adding a number of brief scenes which flesh out the drama, including a couple of sequences in which Cano smokes dope with his pals, and a scene in which three bums, having found the stolen money Cano hid in an empty lot, buy a case of wine and a large quantity of food and have a "picnic" on the sidewalk (where they're promptly caught by the police).

*Ratas de vecindad* isn't a classic, but it appears to have been made with some care and is reasonably interesting and entertaining.

Los demonios del desierto [The Demons of the Desert] (Cin. Rodríguez, 1990) Exec Prod: Manuel Nava; Prod: Roberto Rodriguez R., Roberto Rodriguez E.; Dir: Luis Quintanilla R.; Sc: Carlos Valdemar; Photo: Mario Becerra; Music: Susana Rodriguez; Music Collab: Carlos Muciño Rodriguez; Theme Music: Grupo Clap; Asst Dir: José Amezquito; Film Ed: Ángel Camacho Leppe; Art Dir: Rubén Piña; Camera Op: Silvano Zúñiga; Action Co-ord: Alejandro de la Peña; Makeup: Maria Eugenia Luna; Sound Op: Jesús Hernández; Union: STIC Cast: Mario Almada (Capt. Tony Montana), Fernando Almada (Carlos), Lina Santos (Linda), Sergio de

**Notes:** *Los demonios del desierto* was rather obviously inspired by previous Mexican biker-punk movies, such as *Siete en la mira, Intrépidos punks*, et al. The production values are adequate, the basic idea is good, the script has some interesting aspects, and the cast is solid, but while it's entertaining, the film is somehow too bland and lacks a real "edge."

Padre Damián rules a religious cult located in the Mexican desert. The members are mostly bikers, but Damián is aided by Gringo (a cowboy-hatted gringo) and Samantha, who appears to be a young and attractive indigenous bruja. The cult waylays unwary travelers, robbing and murdering them, occasionally sparing teenage boys who are brainwashed into joining the group (in the opening sequence, a drugged David is ordered to kill his own mother, and he does). The police are unable to locate Damián's headquarters, hidden deep in the desert in the ruins of an old hacienda (or possibly a monastery).

Police captain Tony Montana is married to Linda, whose sister Julia has just become engaged to Tony's widowed brother Carlos, another police officer. When the two young women visit seamstress Catita to pick up Julia's wedding gown, they are assaulted by the bikers: Catita and Julia are killed, and Linda is abducted. Tony and Carlos set out to rescue her and destroy the cult.

Linda and José María, another hostage whose parents and grandfather were murdered by Damián's followers, escape and are reunited with the two policemen, but all are recaptured by the cult. Tony and Carlos are tortured, then given a 2-hour head start before Damián and the others set out to hunt them down; Linda and José María join them (again!) and they eventually ambush and kill their pursuers until only Damián, Gringo, and henchman Bolko are left. Gringo is shot to death by Damián when he attempts to leave, and Carlos defeats Bolko in hand-to-hand combat.

Damián is about to kill them when José María fires a crossbow bolt into the cult leader's neck (the crossbow was taken from one of the dead bikers). But Damián's body vanishes in a gust of wind, and he suddenly reappears on the bluff behind them, riding a black horse and laughing diabolically.

The supernatural ending not only represents a sudden and illogical twist, it also contradicts much of what we've learned about Damián throughout the film. Although he's an evil, insane cult leader, he shows no signs of being the Devil or having any occult powers (and in fact his cult, although vaguely described, doesn't have many visible "Satanic" trappings or rituals). He's attracted to Linda (which makes Samantha jealous), a human emotion; he also has doubts and fears, particularly when Samantha reads Tarot cards and predicts danger or failure.

Consequently, the twist ending is annoying and pointless rather than chilling.

There are some other plot holes, but nothing major enough to remark upon. Scripter Carlos Valdemar has written well over 150 film and videohome scripts since the early 1970s, the majority of them in the action, horror, and related genres. *Los demonios del desierto* gives the villains more personality than the protagonists—the Almada brothers basically play their usual roles and Lina Santos is just a woman-in-peril—which is rather refreshing. In addition to the rather complex figure of Padre Damián, there is also Samantha, his assistant and advisor, but who obviously wants to be his lover as well: her jealousy impacts the plot several times, and she winds up being shot to death by Damián after she releases Linda to join Tony and Carlos in the desert. Even some of the minor characters get a moment or two to shine: biker Pelos is gay, youthful biker Andrés and his girlfriend are conflicted about the murders committed by the cult, and punk-haired biker Tania is sexually aroused by violence, for instance.

Luis Quintanilla Rico began working in films as a production manager and later got the opportunity to direct, helming various Eighties and Nineties features with minor success. His films don't display much style but are technically competent. In *Los demonios del desierto* a few decently outré scenes are sandwiched between numerous flatly-shot and -executed sequences. A more dynamic director could have improved the overall effect of the picture significantly, but Quintanilla's work is adequate enough.
Sergio Bustamante turns in an excellent performance as Padre Damián, never yielding to the temptation to chew the scenery in an unbridled manner. Even when Damián is preaching to his cult or berating someone angrily, he always exhibits self-control. Bustamante, his head shaved and wearing an all-white outfit (except for glimpse of a black dickie under his clerical collar), is the center of attention throughout. This is one of his best roles, although relatively unsung because it's in a "commercial" rather than an "art" film.

Lourdes Sosa plays "Samantha"--I've no other information on her, but I'm assuming this is the same person who later married Sergio Bustamante. She is quite good, conveying irritation, jealousy, and other emotions deftly. She's certainly more accomplished in her role than most of the other actresses in the film, although to be fair the script doesn't give the others as much to work with. The rest of the cast is adequate. As noted above, the Almadas were apparently just pointed in the direction of the cameras and told "Do what you usually do." They're fine, they're iconic, but this is Padre Damián's film from first to last, and the Almadas are essentially supporting players.

The production values are satisfactory. Most of the film was shot on location, and the ruined hacienda or whatever is quite impressive in the long shots. A real-life motorcycle club was recruited to play Damián's cult, but there aren't quite enough of them to really look menacing (and despite their numbers being significantly reduced prior to the climactic sequences, the total number of bikers never seems to vary). The action sequences are mostly slow, clumsy, and tepid. There is a little blood and one split-second topless shot of a biker chick, but for the most part the film is fairly tame in the sex and violence categories.

Los demonios del desierto could have been a cult classic if it had been more stylish and more outrageous. As it stands, it's reasonably entertaining but--aside from the splendid performance by Sergio Bustamante--is not especially memorable.

◆◆◆