

THE MEXICAN FILM BULLETIN

SPECIAL HALLOWEEN ISSUE

FALL 2020

Annual Halloween Issue

Although we are officially "on hiatus" in terms of regular publication, *The Mexican Film Bulletin* will continue to appear with special issues. This is our traditional "Halloween Issue," with reviews of (mostly) fantasy-oriented movies made in Mexico. However, obituaries of members of the Mexican film community are also included so that the contributions of these people will be remembered. The 2020 Ariel results appear in this issue as well.



Obituaries

TONY CAMARGO



Singer Tony Camargo died on 5 August 2020 in Mérida; he was 94 years old. Antonio Camargo Carrasco was born in Guadalajara and began singing professionally at age 16. He appeared on radio and television and in live venues; he spent 31 years with the Orquesta Jaranera de Mérida. In 1953, Camargo recorded the most famous version of the song "El año viejo" by Crescencio Salcedo. He appeared in the film *Del can-can al mambo* (1951).



RAYMUNDO CAPETILLO

Actor Raymundo Capetillo died of COVID-19 in Mexico City on 12 July 2020. He was 76 years old. Raymundo Sánchez y Capetillo was born in Mexico City in September 1943. Capetillo became a professional actor in the late 1960s, and worked steadily in films, on television, and on the stage until the 2010s. He also had a degree in economics and worked as an English teacher.



ANGELITA CASTANY

Actress, singer and dancer Angelita Castany died in Mexico City on 29 September 2020 at the age of 86. María de los Ángeles Hernández was born in Cuba in 1934. She visited Mexico on a musical tour in 1960, and remained. She married comic actor Xavier López "Chabelo" (having been married briefly in Cuba), but the couple divorced after 3 years. Castany's third husband was Italian impresario Cesar Portaluppi, who died in 2011 after 35 years of marriage.



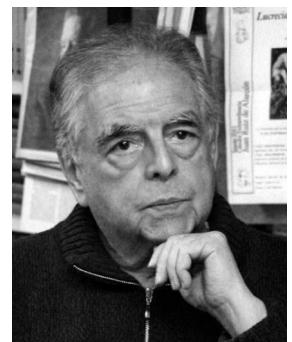
Castany (sometimes billed as Angelita Castagni or Castani) appeared in the Cuban film *Honor o gloria o la vida de Roberto Ortiz* in 1952; in Mexico, she made some brief appearances in several early 1960s movies, and later had roles in films with Cantinflas (*Por mis pistolas*), Mauricio Garcés (*El matrimonio es como el demonio*), Resortes (*El futbolista fenómeno*), etc., in addition to television work. She retired from live performing in 2009.



JOSÉ LUIS IBÁÑEZ

Theatre director and professor José Luis Ibáñez died on 4 August 2020; he was 87 years old. José Luis González Ibáñez was born in Orizaba, Veracruz in 1933 and moved to Mexico City in 1946. He became one of the most respected directors of Mexican theatre from the mid 1950s onward; he also taught at UNAM for many years.

Ibáñez directed "Los dos Elenas," a short film written by Carlos Fuentes, that was included in the anthology feature *Amor, amor, amor* by producer Manuel Barbachano Ponce for the Primer Concurso de Cine Experimental in 1965. He later directed 2 feature films in the early 1970s: *Victoria*



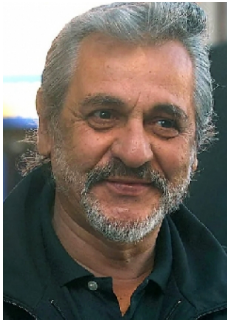
(based on a Henry James novel) and *Las cautivas* (written by Fuentes and Ibáñez).



PAUL LEDUC

Director Paul Leduc died on 21 October 2020. Paul Leduc Rosenzweig was born in Mexico City in March 1942. He studied architecture at UNAM, and worked as a film critic for the "Nuevo Cine" magazine in the early 1960s. In 1970 he directed his first feature film, *Reed, México insurgente*--which was in a 3-way tie for Best Picture and was nominated for the Best Director prize-- but most of the rest of his work in the 1970s was on documentary shorts (2 of which won Arieles). In the 1980s Leduc made features like *Frida--naturaleza viva*, which won 8 Arieles, including Best Film, Best Direction, and Best Screenplay (Leduc and José Joaquín Blanco). Other features followed, including *Como ves?*, *Latino Bar*, *Dollar Mambo*, *Cobrador--In God We Trust* (which won the Best Adapted Screenplay Ariel, and for which Leduc received a Best Director nomination) and his most recent, *Caos*. He received the lifetime achievement Ariel de Oro in 2016.

Paul Leduc was formerly married to producer Bertha Navarro; their daughter Valentina Leduc Navarro is a filmmaker as well.



JOSÉ LOZA

Actor-writer-director José "Pepe" Loza died on 12 July 2020; he was 86 years old. José Loza Martínez was born in Mexico City in November (some sources list October) 1934, and began acting in films in 1950. He appeared in numerous films from the late 1940s to the late 1990s, and worked on television into the 21st century.

Loza also wrote and directed films in the 1980s and 1990s. His son Gustavo Loza is also a film director.



MÓNICA MIGUEL

Actress, acting teacher and director Mónica Miguel died on 12 August 2020. Gloria Chávez Miguel was born in Tepic, state of Nayarit in March 1936. She studied acting at the ANDA school, and made her film debut in the 1960s in films such



as *El planeta de las mujeres invasoras*. She continued to act in films--both in Mexico and elsewhere--and on television, and directed/dialogue directed a significant number of television episodes as late as 2019.



ENNIO MORRICONE

Composer Ennio Morricone died on 6 July 2020, several days after suffering a fall; he was 91 years old.



Morricone was born in Rome in November 1928. He composed his first film music in 1960, and earned more than 500 credits over the next sixty years. Morricone received an honorary Oscar in 2007, then won an

Academy Award for his score for *The Hateful Eight* (he had been nominated for Best Score on five previous occasions).

Ennio Morricone composed the music for one Mexican feature, the 1976 version of *Pedro Páramo*; he also scored Ramón Aupart's short *Ariel Limón* (1976), the U.S.-Mexican coproduction *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, and the French-Italian-Mexican-USA coproduction *Guns for San Sebastian*.



XAVIER ORTIZ

Xavier Ortiz, a member of the popular singing group "Garibaldi," took his own life in Guadalajara on 7 September 2020. Ortiz (whose first name is sometimes spelled Javier) was born in Mexico in June 1972. "Garibaldi" was formed in 1989--members included Ortiz, Patricia Manterola (who was married to Ortiz for 4 years), Sergio Mayer, Pilar Montenegro, and others. Garibaldi starred in one feature film, *Donde quedó la bolita* (1992), which told a fictionalised story of their rise to success. After Garibaldi, Ortiz appeared in a number of films and television programs, as well as the long-running stage musical "Aventurera."

Ortiz was reportedly depressed by his economic situation due to the COVID-19 effect on the entertainment industry. He is survived by one daughter from his second marriage.



CECILIA ROMO

Actress Cecilia Romo died on 30 August 2020 of complications from COVID-19; she was 75 years old.



Romo was born in Mexico City in December 1945. She began working in films in small roles in the early 1980s, and over the next 4 decades made numerous stage and television appearances. Romo later worked in films like *El segundo aire* and *Fantasías*. She also ran a talent agency for actors, models, and announcers. Cecilia Romo was married three times and had two children.



JOHN SAXON

John Saxon, a hard-working actor who became something of a cult figure for his numerous horror movie roles, died of pneumonia on 25 July 2020. Saxon was born Carmine Orrico in Brooklyn, NY in August 1936. He took acting lessons from Stella Adler and started working in films in the mid-1950s, eventually earning nearly 200 acting credits. Saxon worked frequently in European cinema as well as Hollywood. His only Mexican film appearance was in *The Bees* (1978).



WANDA SEUX

Wanda Seux, a popular *vedette* and actress in 1970s-80s Mexican cinema, died on 2 September 2020 at the age of 72. Juana Amanda Seux Ramírez was born in Paraguay in January 1948. After working in South America as a dancer, she arrived in Mexico in the mid-1970s on a performing tour and remained there for the rest of her life. She made her screen debut in the late Seventies and worked in films until the early 1990s, as well as making television and personal appearances. Seux made a comeback of sorts in the 2000s.



Her films include *El Arracadas*, *A fuego lento*, *El macho biónico*, and *Escuela de placer*.



MANUEL "LOCO" VALDÉS

Manuel Valdés, a younger brother of Germán Valdés "Tin Tan" who became a comedic star in his own right, died on 28 August 2020; he was 89 years of age.

Fernando Manuel Valdés Castillo was born in Ciudad Juárez in January 1931, one of 9 children. 2 of his brothers entered the entertainment industry: Germán "Tin Tan," and



Ramón. Manuel, later nicknamed "El Loco" or "Loco" Valdés, worked as a film extra and dancer in films and live venues before achieving fame on television in the mid-Fifties. He would star in numerous programs--usually sketch-comedy and variety shows, but the occasional *telenovela* as well--for many years.

His TV popularity led to increased prominence in films, including some in which he was teamed up with Tin Tan, as well as star vehicles like *Frankenstein, el vampiro y compañía*, *Con quién andan nuestros locos* and *El Tigre Negro* in the early 1960s. He continued to work in films until the late 1980s, albeit mostly in ensemble casts, and did voice work for animated features in the 2000s.

"Loco" Valdés was married a number of times and had 12 children, including singer Cristian Castro (the son of Valdés and actress Verónica Castro, with whom Valdés had a brief romantic relationship) and actor-singer Marcos Valdés Bojalil (who played his late uncle Tin Tan in the film *Me importas tú...y tú*).



Halloween Film Reviews Pandemic Pictures

El año de la peste [The Plague Year] (Conacite DOS, 1978) *Dir:* Felipe Cazals; *Scr:* Gabriel García Márquez; *Collab:* Juan Arturo Brennan; *Dialog:* José Agustín, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Arturo Brennan; *Orig. Book:* Daniel Defoe ("A Journal of the Plague Year"); *Photo:* Javier Cruz; *Film Ed:* Raúl



Casso; *Art Dir/Decor:* Gerardo Hernández, Rafael Brizuela; *Camera Op:* Alberto Arellaños; *Action Coord:* Hernando Name; *Makeup:* Antonio Ramírez; *Sound Op:* Guillermo Carrasco; *Spec FX:* Marcelino Pacheco; *Union:* STIC; *Studio:* América

Cast: Alejandro Parodi (*Dr. Pedro Sierra Genovés*), José Carlos Ruiz (*Dr. Jorge Martínez Abasolo*), Rebeca Silva (*Eva Aponte*), Narciso Busquets (*Julián Arango*), Tito Junco (*President*), Ignacio Retes (*Dr. Mario Zermeño*), Eduardo Alcaraz (*Dr. Luis Mario Zavala*), Héctor Godoy (*Mayor Luis Armando Torreros*), Humberto Elizondo (*R.C. Jiménez*), Leonor Llausás (*widow of first victim, Álvaro*), Zully Keith (*Sra. Magdalena de Sierra*), Karla (*health inspector*), Arlette Pacheco (*reporter*), Daniela Romo (*Laura*), María Barber (*president's wife*), Carlos Fernández (*Bernardo Budillo*), Ramón Menéndez (*Dr. Miguel Garzón Riera*), Roberto Dumont (*Dr. Arcadio Riñón Núñez*), Martín Lasalle (*diplomat*), Francisco Llopis (*Eva's father*), Amado Sumaya [*sic*] (*general*), Héctor Tellez, César Sobrevals (*government official*), Marco A. del Prado, Alberto Isaac (*Frihjoef Hjolen, Norwegian minister of economy*), Jorge Fegan (*Quintanar*), Marcelo Villamil (*minister of finance*), Manuel Zozaya (*Dr. Everado Morell*), Luis Jasso, Enrique Marín, Laura Quiroz (*singer in Eva's father's apartment*), Sonia Aguilar (*night club singer*), Luis Mario Quiroz (*Silvia's son*)

Notes: *El año de la peste* won the Best Picture award in the 1980 Arieles, along with Best Director and Best Screenplay prizes (the film also captured Diosas de Plata in the latter categories). When I originally saw it, I felt it was rather "dry," but subsequent viewings have caused me to reevaluate it upward.

To be sure, the movie's semi-documentary tone makes it seem rather cool and detached. For example, most major characters are introduced with on-screen "typed" information: name, age, occupation. The progress of the plague is tracked by the inclusion of dates at the beginning of various sequences. This motif seems old-fashioned, especially the clacking noise (like a typewriter or computer printer) as each letter appears on the screen. Virtually all of the film was shot on location, and the film stock and sound recording give the picture a *cinema verité* feel. Additionally, the lack of closure is slightly frustrating: the film just ends, with no

dramatic resolution for the handful of characters with whom the audience has come to identify.

Although the film has some science-fiction aspects, it is really more of a medical-political drama, with some surprisingly strong anti-government sentiments (naturally the film is not specifically set in Mexico, to provide plausible deniability to the filmmakers). After some officials deny the existence of the plague and refuse to take more than minor steps to control it, a doctor says, "As long as the government bureaucrats control things for their own ends, this country will be screwed (*jodido*)."

Later, the President declares "During my term of office (*sexenio*), there will be no plague." The basic thrust of the film is not the attempts of the medical community and government to combat the plague, but rather the efforts of the government to suppress news of the epidemic to "avoid panic."

Certain aspects of the film are (unfortunately) familiar to viewers in 2020. In one early scene, a health inspector does "contact tracing" (interviewing the not-very grieving widow of the first victim). Schools are closed. There is a difference of opinion in the



government between the medical authorities and those concerned with the country's economy.

Someone says the plague will one day just disappear, as suddenly as it arrived. Other scenes are eerily evocative, including shots of a priest and two altar boys wearing respirators, police dispersing angry crowds, and mass burials of plague victims. And while we don't (so far) have hazmat-suited workers spraying yellow foam over everything, this does evoke recent memories of "PPE"-clad medical and scientific personnel.

The film begins on the crowded Mexico City subway; a middle-aged business man is suddenly taken ill and collapses. This is not the first such death, and a health department inspector is sent to interview the families of the deceased, to see if there is a pattern or commonality among them. Eventually, Dr. Sierra begins to suspect that these people are dying of the plague; he manages to convince public health official Dr. Martínez, but most of the rest of the medical establishment do not agree. Time passes, and more deaths occur. The mayor refuses to believe an epidemic is underway, but he orders the schools to close early for vacation, so many children will leave the city.

Dr. Sierra sends his wife and daughters out of the country. He eventually begins an affair with medical student Eva Aponte (the first time he visits her apartment, he brings her a copy of "Diary of the Plague Year" by Daniel Defoe but she says "I don't read English"). The government tries to isolate the sickness:

yellow-clad troops take the ill into custody, and their homes are sprayed with an antiseptic yellow foam. The government announces people are dying due to gas leaks or tainted food, not the plague. Powerful newscaster Julián Arango is co-opted into broadcasting the false news (at one point Dr. Sierra turns on his television and Arango is the only show being broadcast!).



Eventually, so many people succumb that their corpses must be collected in yellow dump trucks and buried in mass graves. A visiting Norwegian diplomat dies of the plague, causing an international incident. The President asks his cabinet if the plague should be acknowledged, but they cite economic, political, and security reasons against this step.

On Christmas Eve, the President is given a surprise party at his residence (in a nice touch, he's preparing to brush his teeth when he hears music from downstairs and goes to investigate). He says "During my term of office, there is not and will not be a plague."

Eva walks away from her father's house, where her friend Laura has apparently replaced her in her father's affections. Sierra has a flat tire and walks off in disgust through the littered streets.

The film ends with a printed title: the plague came to an end after a year or so, leaving 350,000 dead...which the government attributed to tainted toothpaste "distributed illegally by a transnational pharmaceutical consortium."(!)

It's not entirely clear what disease is involved: is the *peste* (plague) is supposed to be the bubonic plague (aka the Black Death) that caused huge loss of life in 14th-century Europe (Defoe's novel which inspired this film tells the story of a recurrence of the disease in 1600s England)? In addition to the slide show with medical images, there is one shot of a rat (fleas, often carried by rats, spread the disease) which suggests it is. However, the details of the illness in the film seem to fit the pneumonic plague, which is contagious between humans, and later in the film it's overtly stated that the Norwegian diplomat died of "*peste neumónica*" (caused by the same bacterium as the bubonic plague).

El año de la peste holds one's interest, but the conclusion provides no real closure. Some of the sequences are a bit heavy-handed (including the

forementioned slide show about the history of the plague, which concludes with some graphic medical photos of festering sores, etc.), while others are so oblique as to be incomprehensible (to me, at least). Some sequences are impressive and--as the plague progresses--there are some impressive shots of the garbage- (and corpse) strewn city. A few in-jokes appear, such as the appearance of director Alberto Isaac in a cameo role, and characters named "Silvia Turrent" (as in writer Tomás Pérez Turrent?) and "Miguel Garzón Riera" (combining cinematographer Miguel Garzón with film historian Emilio García Riera?).

The cast is strong, although many of the performers appear only briefly. Only Parodi, Silva, and (to a lesser extent) Ruiz are personalised to any significant degree, and their stories are not resolved in a traditional way. [A number of Cazals' films--including *Canoa*, made by Cazals several years prior to *El año de la peste*--also have ensemble casts and no clear "protagonist."]

The direction and overall production values are fine.

There is a "yellow" motif--the medical workers wear yellow outfits,

their disinfectant foam is yellow, buildings where plague has been detected have yellow flags or banners (a historical reference), and in one shot all the babies in a



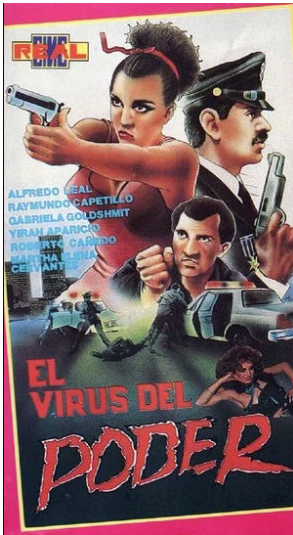
hospital nursery are wearing yellow onesies! There are only a few scenes with large numbers of extras, but these are effective--the sequence in which dead bodies are tossed into dump trucks and then buried in a large pit uses real people who are to be commended for their difficult work. It's never clearly explained why a public health crisis would result in the streets being literally covered in trash (perhaps the trash collectors are being used to collect corpses?), but these images are quite memorable.

In retrospect, *El año de la peste* is emotionally "cool," but in a deliberate way that emphasizes ideas rather than melodrama. It nonetheless holds the viewer's interest throughout.

Trivia note: in the scene with the president and his cabinet, Marcelo Villamil (playing the finance minister) is post-dubbed by someone else, while (at least) Tito Junco, Jorge Fegan, and César Sobrevals do their own dialogue.



Virus del poder*[Virus of Power] (Tolteca Films/Cine Real, 1988) *Exec Prod*: Carlos Sefchovich; *Prod*: Agustín Angulo; *Dir-Scr*: Xorge Noble; *Photo*: José Ignacio Mijares**; *Music*: Eduardo Guerrero;



Songs: Benny Corral (1), Joe Zimmer (1); *Prod Mgr:* Guillermo Orozco; *Decor/Costumes:* Isaías Nieto; *Makeup:* David Hernández; *Sound Engin:* Jorge Peguero

*[the title on the film itself is *Virus del poder*; on the video box it's *El virus del poder*. Alternate titles were *SIDA--virus mortal* and *Síndrome de apocalipsis*]

** Mijares is credited with cinematography and *realización*, which is sometimes a synonym for

"direction," but Noble is credited with *dirección*

Cast: Alfredo Leal (*govt. minister*), Gabriel Goldsmith (*Ruth*), Raymundo Capetillo (*general*), Yirah Aparicio (*Rosy*), Don Roberto Cañedo (*president*), Martha Elena Cervantes (*Rosy's mother*), Carlos Petrel (*lab director*), Blanca Nieves (*Cathy*), Arturo Mason [*sic*] (*Rul*), Martha Gasque (*Yoly*), Benny Corral (*Farfan*), Gabriela del Valle (*Rita*), Guillermo Inclán (*police chief*), Ángela Valverde & Héctor García Vázquez (*customers of restaurant*), Joaquín Díaz (*colonel*), Laura Lorena & Vanessa Cobo (*gymnasts* [not sure if this refers to the aerobics class or not]), Salvador Infante (*doctor*), Arturo Farfán (*ponk* [*sic*]), Arturo Ostos & Carlos Canto (*patrolmen*), Jorge Gallardo & John Graves (*plainclothes agents*), José Luis Ugalde (*television commentator*), Alejandro Moler (*punk*), *students:* Martha Rodríguez, Ivonne O'Hara, Celda Duarte, José Luis Delgado, Héctor Noge; *nurses:* Janet Buitrón, Martha Infante; *hobos:* Jesse Orozco, Carlos Silverio; *prostitutes:* Lizbeth Olivier, Sivia Ramírez, Olga Nidley; *clients:* Alejandro Villaseñor, Alejandro Barrios; *waiters:* Jorge Peguero, Ángel Cámara; Mario del Toro (*conductor*), Enrique Chávez (*disco patron*)

Notes: *Virus del poder* is a curious film with a number of interesting aspects, some sleaze, and surprising directorial competence alternating with gaffes. Xorge (sometimes credited as Jorge) Noble was an actor (often in villainous roles) who directed a number of direct-to-video productions in the late '80s and early '90s (IMDB cites *Infierno en Los Angeles* as a "2003" film but I have my doubts...), including a number that were made in Southern California.

Noble (who died in 2018), was actually not a bad director, although his finished films are generally not very good, for various reasons (including the budgets). *Virus del poder* apparently benefited from the cooperation of some Mexican police force, since various scenes early in the picture were seemingly shot in some sort of actual police academy. There are also other scenes which were shot in a medical lab (or Noble got

hold of a lot of realistic-looking equipment), rather than the "two test tubes and a Bunsen burner" seen in many cheap films. However, the sound recording in some scenes is atrocious, and I've been unable to decide if the whole film was shot on video or if there was a mix of film and video involved. Some of the footage is sub-par, other shots are surprisingly well-done. The cast includes a number of name performers and extras, somewhat more than the typical ultra-cheap *videohome*.

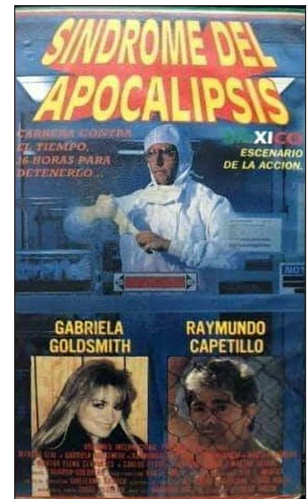
There are also a few outright bloopers. A motorcycle gang (whose numbers vary from scene to scene) is first shown speeding down a highway at night, then suddenly

pull up at a roadside restaurant in the daytime. Then, after raping and murdering everyone, they leave and are pursued by the police, who pull them over in the middle of a



field. All of the bikers (whose numbers have at least tripled since the restaurant raid) raise their hands to surrender and...after one intervening scene, suddenly the bikers are at their ramshackle "headquarters." Weren't they arrested? Or just given a verbal warning?

The events of *Virus del poder* take place over a 4-year period, yet everyone looks basically the same. The script also fumbles the basic "rules" of the virus: early on, it is stated that the virus can only be spread by "intimate contact" (i.e., sex), and it kills men much faster than women. However, for the rest of the movie the authorities quarantine men who did not have sex with (potentially) infected women, and also test women (like Rosy's mother, who certainly didn't have sex with her daughter). [To be fair, the scientists admit they don't know exactly how the virus will affect humans.] The virus is referred to as being capable of wiping out the human race, which seems unlikely, especially given the very specific means of transmission (I suppose over the long run that people will stop having sex and thus no children will be born, although "artificial insemination" is mentioned, so obviously Noble knew it existed). Furthermore, the government officials point out that 750 men and 2 women have died of the virus in 4 years, hardly a huge



death toll (and it is limited to one country, so it doesn't spread that easily).

A large part of this is due to the script using AIDS as a template for the "deadly virus" (it's never given a name). Late in the film, the president and a general discuss the need for a "cover story" so the fact that the virus was created in a military lab

won't be revealed. The general suggests the disease be blamed on promiscuous gay men, or on Africans who had sex with monkeys, both AIDS-related calumnies. The final scene of *Virus del poder* reproduces a well-known AIDS urban legend: a prostitute writes "*Bienvenidos al mundo de la epidemia mortal*" on a mirror in lipstick after having sex with two men, which is an almost literal translation of the "Welcome to the world of AIDS" tale. *SIDA--virus mortal* was an alternate title of *Virus del poder*, which reinforces the connection (although SIDA--the Spanish acronym for AIDS--is never used in the film itself).

What Noble does get right is his depiction (on a very low-budget level, with at most 4-5 people involved in the discussion) of the government's attempt to cover up and control the virus. The conversations are quite believable for the most part, until the very end, when the formerly-reasonable president suggests that the virus be deliberately spread to other countries to deflect attention

from his country!

The politicians, scientists, bureaucrats, and military and police want to protect the public, at the same time

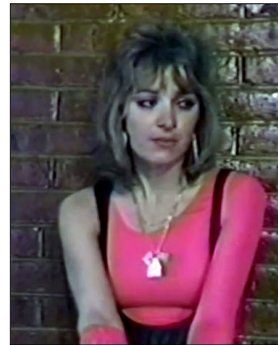
avoiding panic and saving themselves from blame. Their actions are not always legal or ethical: a young woman is abducted and used as a guinea pig (she dies), two policemen are held in quarantine for a year and then ordered to leave the country to avoid suspicion, and of course the virus itself was deliberately created as a potential military weapon.

The film begins as 40 military cadets attend a conference on future military advances. An officer says "missiles are old hat" and biological weapons will be useful in the future. Unfortunately, the conference is being held in a facility that also houses a laboratory (with



shockingly bad security), and cadets Rosy and Rul sneak into a lab and have sex. While doing so, they break open some test tubes containing a virus and are infected. The authorities know the lab was breached but don't know which of the cadets were the culprits, so they test them all regularly for three years. At the end of 3 years, Rul falls ill and dies, but Rosy flees.

She is unfortunately in a café when it's attacked by a biker gang. Beaten and raped, she convinces leader Farfan to spare her life, and joins the group. Among the biker chicks are Ruth, Cathy, and Yoly. Their promiscuous lifestyle means the male bikers all contract the virus and die. The 4 women elude the authorities, but



Rosy eventually dies of the virus. The police raid a nightclub where the remaining 3 women are partying: Ruth escapes, Yoly kills some policemen and is shot to death, and Cathy is captured. She is forced to become a guinea pig for a vaccine, but dies. Ruth is raped by three bums and becomes a prostitute. As the film concludes, she

deliberately infects two "clients" and then leaves.

Virus del poder takes place in the nation of "Definitely Not Mexico"--a flag with stars and stripes (but not the U.S. flag) appears prominently in many scenes, and the personal names given to some characters are not overtly Latin (many characters have no names, however). Sure, everyone speaks Mexican Spanish and the film was shot in Mexico but that proves nothing!

Oddly enough, the film starts off in a very sleazy manner--Yirah Aparicio has a nude sex scene, later some of the bikers are

sporadically "punk" in dress and there are several rapes and murders--but mostly backs off from this for the rest of its running time. The virus kills its victims slowly and decorously--they become weak, cough, and then die--rather than coughing up blood or exploding or melting or something.

The performances are, on the average, adequate. Some of the actors are better, some are worse, but no one stands out as horribly inadequate or amazingly good.

Virus del poder falls into an awkward middle ground, neither sleazy exploitation nor serious drama. Given the budget, one suspects Xorge Noble would have had more success if he'd concentrated on the former, but it seems he probably would have preferred the latter.



Attack of the Killer Lampshade

Profanadores de Tumbas* (Grave Robbers)
(Fílmica Vergara-Cinecomisiones, 1965) Prod: Luis



Enrique Vergara C.;
Dir-Scr: José Díaz Morales;
Story: Rafael García Travesí;
Prod. Chief: José Rodríguez A.;
Prod. Mgr: Roy Fletcher;
Photo: Eduardo Valdéz [sic];
Asst. Dir: Angel Rodríguez;
Music: Jorge Pérez Herrera;
Music Dir/Arr: Armando Manzanero;
Songs: Armando

Manzanero (2); Film Ed-Sound Ed: José Juan Munguía;
Cam. Op: Dagobied Rodríguez; Cam Asst: Manuel Tejada;
Decor: Daniel Mercado Díaz; Makeup: Armando Islas;
Dialog Rec: Jesús Sánchez; Music Rec--Dubbing--Re-rec: Salvador Topete; Unions: STIC-ANDA***

Cast: Santo (*Santo*), Gina Romand (*Marta*), Mario Orea (*Dr. Toicher*), Jorge Peral (*Carlos Resendiz*) Jesús Camacho (*hunchback*), Jessica (Munguía) (*Jessica*), Fernando Osés (*henchman*), "Lobo Negro" [Gmo.Hernández] (*Gorila*; *Orea's double*), "Bigotón" Castro (*Insp. Mendoza*), Estela Peral (*Estela Resendiz*), Jorge Fegan (*violinist*), Martha Lasso Rentería, Fernando Saucedo (?*artist*), "Frankenstein" [N. León] (*curio shop manager*), Quasimodo** [Victor Castilla Sancha] (*first ring opponent*), Juan Garza (*second ring opponent*), Julio Ahuet (*spy*), Leonor Gómez (*spectator*), Los Chavales (*singing group*)

* there is a secondary title on the main title screen (and posters): *Los traficantes de la muerte*. This is actually the title of the second episode. The usual practice was to have the first part's title = the feature title; the "episode" titles are listed as *Profandores de tumbas*, *Los traficantes de la muerte*, and *Locura asesina*. The latter two are given separate title cards within the film (around the 30- and 60-minute marks), making the main title screen even more perplexing.

**some sources claim this is Jesús Camacho's character name, so he's basically in the credits twice--this is incorrect, although the mistake is understandable (hunchback, Quasimodo, I get it). Quasimodo is the first

wrestler El Santo meets in the ring, a wrestler whose real name was Víctor Castilla Sancha, who also wrestled as "King Kong," "Torito arandino" [he was born in Aranda de Duero, Spain], "El Ciclón del Caribe," and "The Hunchback." As far as I can tell, Camacho's character (as well as that of Fernando Osés) has no character name in the film.

***García Riera indicates *Profandores de tumbas* and at least one other Vergara production were partially shot at Estudios América, while others are listed as only being shot "on location," including *El Barón Brákola*, which was shot back-to-back with *Profanadores de tumbas* beginning July 1965. The América studios are not credited on-screen.

Notes: the Vergara films made by El Santo and Blue Demon in 1964-65 are interesting curiosities with a distinctive look and feel that's very different from films made at either the Churubusco-Azteca or América studios. *Profanadores de tumbas* has a number of sequences apparently shot on sets, but they're significantly smaller and cheaper in appearance than similar films made on the América sound stages. While some of the crew are familiar industry names, others--like cinematographer Eduardo Valdés--have very few credits on non-Vergara pictures, suggesting these films were made on the margins of the industry, perhaps by technicians who mostly worked on television programs, commercials, or similar productions. [The poor quality of existing copies of the movie actually make it look like a kinescope or ancient videotape of a 1960s Mexican television broadcast.]

Most of the original Vergara productions were distributed theatrically by Columbia Pictures, although there is some evidence (based on promotional materials) that a number of them were released independently first and later picked up by Columbia (some were also re-released later by minor distributors such as Películas Coloso).



For some reason, *Profanadores de tumbas* was not released in the early 2000s on DVD when Rise Above Entertainment issued *Atacan las brujas*, *El Barón*

Brákola, and *El hacha diabólica*. [I actually worked on these DVDs and don't remember if I ever learned why *Profanadores de tumbas* wasn't included, although I suspect it may have been a technical issue in getting a decent print, rather than some legal problem.] Even today, there is apparently no legal, professional version of the film readily available (although bootlegs of TV broadcasts are easy to come by).

Mad scientist Dr. Toicher (whose face is partially scarred, although this is never mentioned) is trying to revive dead bodies stolen from graves. However, his efforts have been unsuccessful due to the poor quality of the corpses he has obtained to date. Meanwhile, Santo, after reading newspaper reports of the crimes, checks out his extensive library of relevant material: books (or possibly scripts for his movies) entitled "Evil Geniuses," "Human Vampires," "Stranglers," and "Grave Robbers." A delivery boy brings a present from Santo's soccer-



playing friend, Carlos--a lamp with a strange shade: pictures of bizarre, contorted faces, and a large human heart. Plugging the lamp in, Santo is assailed by a

strange noise which drives him to his knees. Santo manages to turn the lamp off, and discovers that the designs are painted in "human blood!"

The lamp was created by a hunchback aide to Toicher: "I wanted to help you out by capturing Santo. Then I thought you would let me have his thyroid," which would cure his condition (caused by Toicher's experiments).

Santo asks Carlos if he sent him the lamp; his friend denies it. Santo says he didn't really think so, it was just a trick to get him to accept the package. They go back to his apartment to look at the bizarre device but it is gone.

The next evening, Santo is wrestling at the arena. Carlos and his girlfriend, singer Marta, are in the audience, as are Toicher and his hunchback aide. Toicher wants Santo, Carlos and Marta's corpses for his experiments. Toicher plans to trap Santo, tipping him off over the phone that he can catch the grave robbers at midnight at the municipal graveyard.

Episode 2: "Los traficantes de la muerte"

Meanwhile, the employees of the nightclub where Marta works receive an invitation to visit a special curio shop. The maitre d' buys some paint ("the perfect color to paint human flesh," the effeminate shop manager says); the violinist buys a new violin; Marta buys a wig. As they leave, the store manager calls Dr. Toicher.

That night, Santo falls into Toicher's trap, and is buried alive in a newly-dug grave. Although Toicher wants Santo's body to experiment on, he and his men

don't wait around to collect it, and when the grave robbers have gone, Santo digs himself out. [Toicher and his men also leave another body behind: it's never explained who this is--there's a still showing Gorila hitting the man with a shovel, but in the film itself the scene opens with the man already unconscious or dead on the ground. One assumes it's the cemetery watchman, since when a disguised Santo approaches, Toicher says "it's another guard!"] Santo asks Interpol to check on Toicher, whose name was helpfully printed inside his hat that got buried with Santo. When Interpol sends an agent to meet Santo with information, Toicher's men kidnap (and presumably kill) him.

The nightclub violinist is rehearsing--he and a pianist are playing classical music while a dancer does a modern dance--when his violin suddenly seems possessed: the strings try to strangle him, and the violin hops around and finally explodes!

Toicher orders the hunchback to stick Santo with a poisoned needle during a wrestling match. However, the hunchback accidentally injects Santo's opponent instead. The man goes wild, then collapses and dies. Santo finds a needle mark that proves the man was poisoned. Toicher orders the hunchback killed for his failure, but his aide begs for one more chance: "The killer wig will help us."

Marta, wearing the wig, performs at the club, and the wig comes to life and starts to strangle her. Santo, disguised as a nightclub customer, jumps in to save her (he squishes the wig, which leaves a wet stain on the floor!). Toicher and his gang are in the club (apparently Santo didn't recognise them from before) and a brawl breaks out, but the criminals escape when someone turns out the lights.

Episode 3: "Locura asesina"

The artist paints a portrait of a young girl with the special paint--the picture is horrible and begins to leak blood. Marta, the violinist, and the painter all complain



to Inspector Mendoza, telling him of the curio shop where they purchased the evil devices. Toicher and his men are busy destroying used-up corpses when the shop manager calls to say the police are outside. Toicher

orders him to lock the doors and windows and wait for help. Then, he blows up the shop by remote control (off-screen). "What about the manager?" "Don't get sentimental," Toicher snaps.

Toicher says he will try ONE MORE TIME to capture Santo, and if this fails, he'll put his inept henchmen in the disintegrating chamber. They plant the killer lamp in Santo's apartment, and then--pretending to be Santo--call Carlos and tell him to bring Marta to the apartment. The lamp knocks Carlos and Marta out, and Toicher and his men carry them off. Santo arrives and is nearly overcome by the lamp, but manages to wrestle it to the ground and destroy it.



Santo goes to the hideout, is knocked out by an electrified grid, then thrown in an airtight chamber where he will die in three minutes. Toicher prepares to operate on Carlos and Marta, promising the hunchback a new thyroid gland as a bonus. Santo escapes from the chamber and kills the doctor's henchmen (one is snatched up by a huge belt assembly and ripped to shreds, the other is pushed into a vat of boiling liquid). Toicher wants to see what is going on, but the hunchback insists the doctor continue the operations (he really wants that thyroid!). Toicher stabs him. Santo fights Toicher [it's pretty obvious that Guillermo Hernández doubles for Mario Orea in the majority of this sequence] and the mad doctor is finally killed, falling into his own body-disposal furnace. The police arrive. Mendoza: "All criminals have to pay for their crimes: It's an end no criminal can escape." Carlos: "Especialmente since Santo is on the job fighting evil, wherever it may be." THE END

The performances in *Profanadores de tumbas* are generally entertaining, if not always subtle. Mario Orea (possibly a relative of actor Guillermo Orea?) goes full-on as the choleric Dr. Toicher, while Nothanael León "Frankenstein" camps it up as the curio shop manager (dropping his effeminate mannerisms and manner of speaking when reporting to Toicher).

As noted above, *Profanadores de tumbas* has a very distinctive look, with its combination of shabby sets and interesting locations. Toicher's laboratory is located in some sort of factory, with giant belt-driven machinery, a

wooden vat full of liquid, large pipes, stacks of cardboard boxes, and so on. The exterior shots aren't as impressive--a lot of scenes are shot on one street outside of Santo's house, and the "municipal cemetery" has about 10 wooden crosses in a tiny lot. The wrestling sequences, on the other hand, were shot in an actual arena with real crowds, and the sequence in which Juan Garza goes berserk, attacks the referee, and leaps out of the ring is quite effective as a result. [As an aside, the numerous battles between Santo and Fernando Osés and Guillermo Hernández are satisfactory, if variable.]

Santo doesn't have much of a personality here, but we do get to see his rather unimpressive home: it apparently consists of only a couple of rooms, but does have a gigantic communications center so he can talk to Interpol. [And, as we've seen before, Santo does sleep in his mask.] In a gimmick that was used a few times in later films, Santo impersonates someone by wearing a life-like mask over his regular mask (in the nightclub); he also disguises himself twice by wearing a floppy hat and *serape*.

Trivia notes: Estela Peral plays the sister of Jorge Peral's character--one imagines this was their relationship in real life as well. Neither of the Perals had much of a film career aside from this picture, although Jorge Peral--who's fine in this picture--has several additional film & theatre credits in this era. The poster for *Profanadores de tumbas* was done by Ruiz Ocaña, but the art on the Columbia lobby cards is signed "Peral," which is probably just a coincidence.

It's shame *Profanadores de tumbas* has not been released widely in an upgraded, legal version, because wider exposure would probably elevate this to the status of a camp classic.

Considerably revised from the original review in MFB Volume 1 Number 1!



Bad Bugs and Bad Birds



The Black Scorpion (Amex Prods.--Frank Melford-Jack Dietz Prods./Warner Brothers, 1957) *Prod:* Frank Melford, Jack Dietz; *Dir:* Edward Ludwig; *Scr:* David Duncan, Robert Brees; *Story:* Paul Yawitz; *Photo:* Lionel

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Lindon; *Music*: Paul Sawtell; *Asst Dir*: Ray Heinze, Jaime Contreras; *Film Ed*: Richard L. Van Eger; *Art Dir*: Edward Fitzgerald; *Special FX Supv*: Willis H. O'Brien; *Animation*: Pete Peterson; *Sound*: Rafael L. Esparza; *Electronic Music*: Jack Cookerly; *Orch*: Bert Shefter; *Scorpion Puppet*: Wah Chang; *Additional FX*: Ralph Hammeras; *Mexican Co-Dir*: Rolando Aguilar (uncredited)*; *Script Supv*: Carlos Villatoro (uncredited)

*Union rules required a Mexican co-director on international films shot in Mexico, although this was basically "featherbedding" and in practice the Mexican co-director probably did very little (this is not to be confused with the Mexican assistant director, in this case Jaime L. Contreras, who may have actually served a purpose on the set).

Cast: Richard Denning (*Hank Scott*), Mara Corday (*Teresa Álvarez*), Carlos Rivas (*Arturo Ramos*), Mario Navarro (*Juanito*), Carlos Múzquiz (*Dr. Velazco*), Pascual García Peña (*Dr. José de la Cruz*), Fanny Schiller (*Florentina*), Pedro Galván (*Padre Delgado*), Arturo Martínez (*Major Cosío*), Quintín Bulnes (*lineman*), José Chávez Trowe (*train engineer*), Roberto Contreras (*Chumacho*), Ángel Di Stefani (*electrocuted officer*), Jaime González Quiñones (*boy in San Lorenzo*), Leonor Gómez (*villager*), Bob Johnson (*all voice-overs*), Margarito Luna (*crane operator*), Héctor Mateos (*military man*), José L. Murillo (*military man*), Manuel Sánchez Navarro (*Víctor Esteban*), Isabel Vázquez "La Chichimeca" (*villager*), Enrique Zambrano (*Cayetano*, *phone company man*), Fernando Curiel (*Pio*)

Notes: after World War II, Hollywood began to shoot films with some frequency in Mexico, a practice which continues to this day. Notable early examples include *Tarzan and the Amazons*, John Ford's *The Fugitive*, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *Captain from Castile* (which has a tangential connection with *The Black Scorpion*). Some of these films were co-productions, others were simply Hollywood movies shot completely or in part in Mexico. It's unclear if *The Black Scorpion* was a U.S.-Mexican co-production or not (sources differ --the AFI Catalog says it was), despite the name of the



nominal production company. Relatively few of the shot-in-Mexico films were fantasy-oriented, possibly a function of (a) the low budgets of many of these movies, and (b) the presence of more experienced special effects technicians in the USA. *The Beast of Hollow Mountain* and *The Black Scorpion* are two exceptions (and, while its live-action footage was shot in Hollywood, the special effects for *The Giant Claw* were

done in Mexico). The two films are curiously linked: both are "giant monster" movies using stop-motion animation, both had a Willis O'Brien connection, and both have almost entirely Mexican casts, aside from the leading male and female roles (plus Carlos Rivas, born in the USA but bilingual). However, *The Beast of Hollow Mountain* was in Cinemascope and DeLuxe color, whereas *The Black Scorpion* was produced on a much smaller budget, and even that seems to have not been sufficient: sources indicate the special effects were not completed due to lack of funds, resulting in several scenes in which a blank (black) traveling matte of the final giant scorpion rampages through Mexico City, bereft of the actual animated scorpion image!



[It's probably a coincidence that a number of the same Mexican performers appear in both movies--bilingual actors like Fanny Schiller and José Chávez Trowe worked on numerous English-language productions during their career. Mario Navarro's Mexican cinema career was relatively brief, but he made at least 5 shot-in-Mexico movies in 6 years. Carlos Múzquiz, often cast as gangsters and other criminals in Mexican cinema, must have appreciated his roles in *The Black Scorpion* and *A Life in the Balance* (1955), in which he played a respected scientist and a police official, respectively.]

The Black Scorpion begins with documentary footage of the appearance of a "new" volcano in Mexico. [In real life, the Parícutín volcano suddenly showed up in Michoacán in 1943, growing to a height of over 1,000 feet before ceasing activity in 1952. Parícutín can be seen in *Captain from Castile* and the independent colour feature *The Angry God*.] Geologists Hank and Arturo travel to the remote region to investigate the phenomenon. On the way, they discover a wrecked farmhouse, a dead policeman, and a live baby. They take the baby to the town of San Lorenzo, where the inhabitants of the region have gathered. Teresa Álvarez, who owns a cattle ranch nearby, invites the two scientists to stay at her home. Several telephone repairmen are killed by giant scorpions. The Mexican military and Dr. Velazco arrive, and Hank and Arturo join the hunt for a fissure which may be providing the egress point for the prehistoric scorpions. The plan is to gas the monsters in their lair.

When one of Teresa's men falls into a deep crevasse, Hank and Arturo are lowered into the cave in a sort of

diving bell, unaware that annoying little kid Juanito has stowed away. The cave is full of giant scorpions and other creatures; the "bell" is wrecked and Arturo has to cling to the cable to return to the surface. [This is a suspenseful sequence, because it's very possible Arturo--since he's not the star--might die.] Hank and Juanito are also reeled in. The entrance to the cave is dynamited and the scorpion menace is ended. OR IS IT?

Hank and Teresa are having a romance when Hank and Arturo are summoned to Mexico City. Dr. Velazco and government officials say there must be another exit



from the caverns, because some giant scorpions have gotten loose. Sure

enough, scorpions raid a train, killing (and eating? It's unclear, although the dead policeman Hank and Arturo found had all of his blood drained) the passengers. Good news: the biggest scorpion kills all of the others. Bad news: he's heading for the capital! The scorpion is lured to the *fútbol* stadium where a secret weapon has been prepared: going on Hank and Arturo's information (based on what they witnessed in the cave) that the scorpions have a weak spot on their throat, an electrified harpoon will be shot into the creature. The first shot misses, and the gunner (Ángel Di Stefani, who would be the Aztec Mummy the next year) is electrocuted when he unthinkingly grabs the harpoon's cable. So, super-gringo Hank steps in and plants the harpoon right in the sweet spot, killing the monster.

The best thing about *The Black Scorpion* is the animation, which is effective albeit limited to four main



sequences--the attack on the linemen, the cavern sequence, the train attack, and the stadium finale. The giant scorpion "face" made for closeups

is ludicrously over-the-top and doesn't resemble any scorpion ever, prehistoric or otherwise.

Additionally, for fans of Mexican cinema, it's nice to see familiar faces in what must have been (compared to Mexican productions) a nice payday and the chance for some international exposure.

The script is routine, ripping off *Them!* and other giant-monster movies, with only the Mexican setting serving as a novelty. There are some definite gaps in logic and common sense, such as: how many scorpions escaped in the first place, why was the policeman

drained of blood, are the scorpions eating cattle (and people), and why does the Mexican government (and Dr. Velazco) place so much faith in Hank, who's a geologist, not an entomologist?

Other aspects of the story are standard Hollywood-plot fare, like the warp-speed romance of Hank and Teresa, and "cute" (= annoying) Juanito who risks his own life (and that of others) without suffering any consequences (fortunately for the audience, he vanishes once he, Hank, and Arturo get out of the cavern). It's also sort of funny to hear the typical American voice (Bob Johnson) who does all of the voiceover work, including "Mexican" characters like radio announcers and police dispatchers.

The Black Scorpion isn't a classic or even a cult film, but it's worth watching.



Pacto sangriento

[Bloody Pact]

(Operadora PLUS, 1990)

Exec Prod: Gabriel Elvira; Dir: José Romay; Adapt/Story: Julio Augurio, Margarita S. Rizzo; Photo: José A. Rodríguez Mas [aka José Romay]; Music: Susana Rodríguez; Songs: Julio Augurio (2), Martha Rangel (1); Prod Mgr: Carlos Lozoya; Asst Dir: Dharma Reyes; Film Ed: Grupo PLUS; Audio: Evelia Cruz

Cast: Julio Augurio (Victor López), Eric del Castillo (Rafael Puente), Roberto Cañedo (don Enrique Zaizar), Victor Lozoya (Jaime), Marco Antonio Arzate (brujo), Socorro Albarrán (Rosario), Nora Parra (Susana), José "Pepe" Romay (priest)

Notes: it's probably both a cultural and personal thing, but I'm not a fan of blood sports. Mexican cinema, on the other hand, reflects at least a portion of its national audience and has over the years (less so recently) made numerous films about bullfighting and cockfighting, and even a handful about dog-fighting (*Pelea de perros*--which coincidentally features Julio Augurio, star of *Pacto sangriento*--and *Amores perros*, to name two). Many of the bullfighting films appear to have made a conscious decision to avoid showing the actual death of the bull, which makes them somewhat more tolerable, and cockfight films usually don't dwell on the gory aspects, and in some cases the defeated gamecock is not even killed. *Pacto sangriento* doesn't subscribe to these niceties: multiple roosters were



obviously killed in this film, including one whose head is graphically ripped off by the demonic "Huracán!"

The direct-to-video *Pacto sangriento* was directed by José "Pepe" Romay, son of director Joselito Rodríguez and an actor for many years (often paired with his sister Titina) before moving behind the camera in the 1970s. He includes a song composed by his sister Martha Rangel in *Pacto sangriento* [and one suspects Susana Rodríguez is also a relative]. Julio Augurio is another second-generation Mexican film personality, the son of actor-director Julio Aldama. Augurio [who changed his professional name to "Julio Aldama Jr." after his father's death] began acting in the 1970s and in recent decades has become heavily involved in directing and acting in



videohomes, often with his brother Jorge Aldama.

Pacto sangriento has a relatively small cast of professional performers, although there are a reasonable number of extras in the *palenque*

(cockfight arena) scenes. José Romay (who has an unbilled cameo himself) apparently didn't expend a lot of time "directing" his actors: Augurio plays his role in an almost simple-minded manner; Víctor Lozoya hops around as if he's just snorted cocaine before every scene; it's too bad Eric del Castillo doesn't have a handlebar moustache, because he'd definitely be twirling it in a villainous manner if he did. Veteran Roberto Cañedo is satisfactory, as is Marco Antonio Arzate (although Arzate indulges in some sinister, hammy laughing at times), and--surprisingly, since her role is essentially "bimbo"--Nora Parra is also adequate.

The plot is a variation on "The Monkey's Paw" premise (also the basis for *Espiritismo* and *El Monje Loco*, the latter starring Julio Augurio): a demonic gamecock will fight seven times, and after the final event the owner will lose his soul. However, the script makes this more complicated than it needs to be.

Wealthy Rafael apparently got some (unidentified) favours from a *brujo*, who now demands Rafael's soul. Rafael convinces the *brujo* to allow a substitution, and an ordinary fighting rooster is dipped into a pot and becomes an ugly demonic rooster. The *brujo* says Rafael should set up 7 red candles, each one representing a cockfight. When the seventh candle goes out, a soul is due.



Fortunately for Rafael, his feckless godson Víctor and Víctor's wife Rosario come around asking for help: they'll lose their farm unless he loans them some money. Rafael instead gives Víctor the devil-rooster, even though the younger man is not knowledgeable about cockfighting. But the scrawny gamecock wins its first match, against a rooster belonging to don Enrique, and Víctor gets a cut of the winnings.

Rafael sends his mistress Susana to vamp Víctor and keep him in line, although Víctor's personality has changed for the worse and he's no longer the simple (and unsuccessful) farmer he was before. Jaime is hired to care for the rooster, nicknamed "Huracán" (in one ridiculous bit, Jaime shows up with a hat and t-shirt emblazoned with an image of the evil gamecock), and don Enrique loses several more matches to Víctor. After the third loss, Enrique pulls a gun but the devil-rooster causes him to turn the pistol on himself and commit suicide.



Unknown to Víctor, Jaime has been sneaking "Huracán" out for impromptu cockfights of his own, and thus the seventh cockfight comes around quickly. But not quickly enough for Jaime, who is killed in a hotel room by the evil rooster, which then heads to Víctor's farm and tries to kill Rosario (but she escapes). The *brujo* recovers the errant gamecock and he, Rafael, Víctor and Susana are the only audience at the last cockfight (in Rafael's barn). Víctor chooses a white rooster as the opponent ("because it's pretty").

For some unexplained reason, as the white rooster is defeating "Huracán," Víctor starts getting wounds on his body, as Rafael and the *brujo* laugh and laugh. So apparently the devil-rooster and Víctor are magically linked? But wait--Rosario bursts in and stabs the devil-rooster to death with a crucifix, which causes Rafael, the *brujo* and Susana to all die in a bloody fashion. But not Víctor. Why? Víctor and Rosario escape the barn just as it explodes in a ball of fire. The end.



The conclusion of *Pacto sangriento* is confusing: when the devil-rooster is being hurt, Víctor suffers, but when it's killed, everyone except Víctor dies?! The earlier "twist" that Jaime accelerates the end of the rooster's career by engaging in secret cockfights could have been a decent idea, but the film does nothing with it: Víctor isn't aware he has a "seven-fight limit," so his

ignorance means nothing, while Rafael can tell the number of fights that have elapsed by merely looking at his candles, so he's not surprised. All Jaime does is (thankfully) speed up the film somewhat (it's still overlong at 90+ minutes, and that includes three boring musical sequences).

Pacto sangriento was shot on location in San Cristóbal de las Casas, an officially designated "*pueblo mágico*" (magic town) in the state of Chiapas, although it might as well have been shot in Alaska for all we see of it. There is one music-video style sequence with Victor and Rosario frolicking in a waterfall, but otherwise everything is shot more or less in nondescript interiors and very limited, not picturesque exteriors.

The production values are adequate. Most of the almost certainly low budget went to the cast (with José Romay directing and shooting the film) and the photography and sound are at times murky and muddy. The demon-rooster is ugly but not actually monstrous, and the two times it attacks people (rather than other roosters) are filmed with quick cuts and oblique camera angles to suggest it's killing Victor and stalking Rosario. Sadly, it appears "Huracán" actually laid down his life for his art in the final scene, pecked almost to death by another rooster, stabbed by Rosario, and then blown up (?).

Not horrible, but fairly tedious and drab.



Deadly Dolls



Muñecos infernales* (Infernal Dolls) (Cin. Calderón, 1960) *Prod:* Guillermo Calderón Stell, Pedro A. Calderón; *Dir:* Benito Alazraki; *Scr:* Alfredo Salazar; *Orig Novel:* A. A. Merritt ("Burn, Witch, Burn!")

[uncredited]**; *Photo:* Enrique Wallace; *Music:* Antonio Díaz Conde; *Prod Mgr:* Roberto G. Rivera; *Prod Chief:* Luis G. Rubín; *Film Ed:* Alfredo Rosas Priego; *Art Dir:* Manuel Fontanals; *Makeup:* Felisa Ladrón de Guevara; *Sound:* Ernesto Caballero, Galdino Samperio; *Union:* STPC

*this film was dubbed into English and released

theatrically and to U.S. television as *Curse of the Doll People* (producer: K. Gordon Murray, director: Paul Engle). Some of the cast and crew names were altered, and the character names were changed somewhat in the dubbing. The dubbed voices are not especially appropriate, particularly the imitation-Lugosi

accent given to Luis Aragón!

**[Thanks to a 2010 email from Gary C. Myers, the original source for Alfredo Salazar's script has been identified as A. A. Merritt's "Burn Witch Burn!", originally serialised in "Argosy Weekly" in 1932 and published in book form in 1933. Merritt's novel was adapted to the screen by MGM in 1936 as *The Devil-Doll*. Mr. Myers points out that Salazar borrows "character after character, situation after situation, scene after scene and speech after speech," and that in fact *Muñecos infernales* "is certainly more faithful than the credited adaptation that is Tod Browning's *The Devil-Doll*." It's been 10 years, but finally I can give Mr. Myers credit for his sleuthing!

7 years after Mr. Myers contacted me, at least one other person made the connection: Doris V. Sutherland on the "Amazing Stories" blog (<https://amazingstories.com/2017/11/a-merritt-on-film-burn-witch-burn/>), who writes "...*The Curse of the Doll People* is a far more faithful adaptation of Burn, Witch, Burn! than Tod Browning's version. While the characters are altered, their fundamental roles in the narrative are much the same."

Cast: Elvira Quintana (*Karina*), Ramón Gay (*Dr. Valdés*), Roberto G. Rivera (*Molinar*), Quintín Bulnes (*Zandor*), Alfonso Arnold (*Tomás*), Jorge Mondragón (*Luis*), Xavier Loyá (*Juan*), Nora Veryán (*Marta*), Salvador Lozano (*Gilberto*), Luis Aragón (*Daniel*), Margarita Villegas (*Maria*), Chel López (*detective*), Norma Navarro (*Ana*)

Notes: This is a well-crafted film that could have been better, but still manages to be entertaining despite some missed opportunities. The production values are





satisfactory, and for once the "monsters" (the little killer dolls and the large zombie) are adequately made up and as a result are scary rather than laughable.

Scientists Karina and Valdés are invited to the home of one of their colleagues. Karina learned about primitive religions and the occult from her late father, a famous scientist himself. At the gathering, they hear about an expedition to Haiti : four men spied on a voodoo ceremony where human sacrifice occurred, then stole a small stone idol from the voodoo temple. Now, they are under a curse. However, one of the men—Luis—says the curse will expire at midnight, just a few moments away. Luis goes upstairs to bid his daughter goodnight: on his way back down, he suddenly grimaces in pain, falls down the steps, and dies.

At the autopsy, a small wound on his leg is discovered, but the cause of death was the fall. Karina notices a knotted string, which she recognizes as a voodoo death charm. Later, Juan is brought into the hospital in a catatonic state, and dies. Daniel, the third man, is murdered in his home by a doll with the features of the deceased Luis. The final scientist of the quartet to die is Gilberto, slain by a doll resembling Juan. Afterwards, a mysterious figure plays a flute, guiding the doll back outside.

Although the four men are dead, their families are also marked for death. Four dolls—with the facial features of the four dead men—enter Luis's house and steal back the idol. Luis's daughter comes downstairs, but is spared by the dolls. However, Daniel's girlfriend Marta is the next to die, slain by a doll in the hospital.

Karina convinces police inspector Molinar that the dolls are behind the murders. They intercept a doll intended for another victim; while driving to the police station, Molinar is stabbed by the doll, which then leaps out of the car but is run over by another vehicle!

In an eerie scene, Karina and Valdés "autopsy" the doll, which nearly places Karina under its spell (she crushes its head then burns it). Karina visits the hideout of Zandor, the voodoo priest. Using a spinning mirrored ball (such as might be



found in a disco) Zandor hypnotizes her but allows her to leave. Later, he sends several dolls to murder her at the hospital, but they are interrupted by a police guard.

Karina, Valdés, Molinar and several policemen confront Zandor in his lair. He manages to subdue them with his hypnotic powers until Karina produces a crucifix (in an odd bit, there is a wooden cross right behind Zandor the whole time!); while distracted, Zandor is stabbed by one of his dolls. The hideout catches on fire—Zandor, the dolls, and the zombie are all destroyed, but Karina and her friends escape.

Muñeco infernales is atmospheric and generally well-directed. There are some striking images, such as the scene of the big "scarecrow" zombie walking down a dark street after a murder, holding the hand of a killer doll, as if they were father and son. The budget probably wasn't very high: most of the scenes take place on a "house" set (probably used for the homes of Luis, Daniel and Gilberto), the hospital set, and Zandor's lair. The latter is elaborately decorated with an eclectic variety of "weird" objects, including an Egyptian mummy case, a large disco ball, and African masks.

The dolls--the repositories of the souls of the four murdered men-- are interesting and weird, and actually resemble the actors somewhat. The murder of Luis was accomplished by a fifth doll that Zandor had on hand, and while there is a substantial scene showing Marta's soul inhabiting a female doll, it is never shown again.



Ramón Gay, in his last screen appearance (he was killed several weeks after principal photography wrapped), takes a back seat to the statuesque Elvira Quintana. In a rather unusual move, Karina is the main protagonist who has the expert knowledge about the menace and saves the day in the end, while Valdés is "just the boyfriend" who does very little aside from tossing in some skeptical comments. There is one unfortunate reversion to (stereo)type in the sequence in which Karina is threatened by 2 killer dolls in the hospital: she wakes up when the door to her room opens and watches them come in, brandishing their deadly needles, but is apparently frozen in fear and makes no

effort to fight them or even scream for help until they clumsily knock over a table and attract the attention of a guard, who gets stabbed when he comes in. [In the comic book adaptation, discussed below, the whole scene is condensed into 2 panels, and Karina does warn the guard.] Quintín Bulnes, who usually played low-life degenerates, is a bit more dignified here as the voodoo



priest; the rest of the cast is adequate, with Roberto G. Rivera doing double duty as Molinar and the film's production manager.

As with *Espiritismo*, *Muñecos infernales* was the basis for a comic book in the "Su Película Favorita" series (number 8, October 1960). Curiously, this was a drawn version (by Eduardo Lozano González), rather than in the *fotocomic* format used for *Espiritismo*. While the *Espiritismo* adaptation differed in some significant ways from the film (indicating the film was revised prior to release, in this case to reduce the supernatural aspect), *Muñecos infernales* is more or less the same in both formats, with a couple of odd exceptions. Luis is attacked by a "little figure" that "enlarges" into the "voodoo priest" and wounds Luis with "a sword!" And yet the comic book then shows the scene in which Zandor congratulates the doll that carried out the murder! Some of the other scenes in the film are depicted in the comic but in different settings, suggesting the adaptors didn't have access to a print of *Muñecos infernales*, but rather a script and some stills. The conclusion of the comic and film are essentially the same, but the dialogue in the comic is much more extensive and religious in nature (in the film, Karina merely whips out the crucifix and says just "Christ help us!").

While there are some awkward moments and even the basic premise has flaws (one would think Zandor would have found an easier way to get vengeance on the trespassers and their families; for example, Gilberto's murder requires the audience to believe that his daughter would adore a doll that looks like Xavier Loyá's character!), *Muñecos infernales* is a satisfactory film overall, with a number of interesting and unusual aspects that make it worth watching.

Originally reviewed in MFB 2/9, but significantly revised and expanded here.



Venganza diabólica [Diabolical Vengeance]

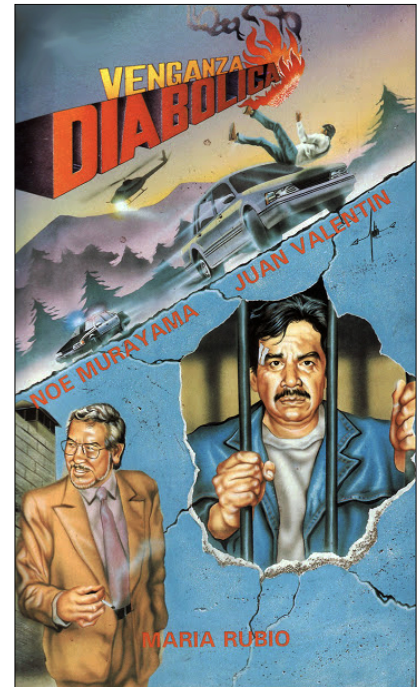
(Rool-Provisa-Metrofilms, ©1990)* *Exec Prod*: Robert Lozoya Jr.; *Prod*: Roberto Lozoya; *Dir*: Francisco Guerrero; *Scr*: Manolo Cárdenas; *Story*: Blanca Samperio; *Photo*: Moisés Frutos; *Musicalization*: LARSA; *Prod Mgr*: Joaquín Lozoya; *Asst Dir*: José Medina; *Art Dir*: Carlos Lozoya; *Camera Op*: Isidro Rosas; *Makeup*: Lourdes Gutiérrez; *Sound*: Alejandro Torres; *Sound Op*: Miguel Larraguivel, Edgar Arcos; *Union*: STIC

*[the version I have does not have company information on the print; these credits come from *Diccionario del cine mexicano 1970-2000*]

Cast: Juan Valentín (*Rubén*), Noé Murayama (*Humberto*), Marisol Cervantes (*Lilia*), Cristina Michaus (*Magdalena*), Karla Talavera (*Sandrita*), María Rubio (*Lizbeth*), Carlos Pouliot (*don Julián*), Francisco Mauri (*Román*), Fernando Pinkus (*Dr. Eduardo*), Roberto Brondo (*prison guard*), Eduardo Guzmán (?*Dr. Duval*), Roberto Lozoya (*Dr. Lozoya*), Elizabeth Daniel (?*Rubén's daughter*)

Notes: *videohomes* (direct-to-video productions) were made cheaply, mostly shot on 16mm (some were done on videotape), and as a consequence look and sound far worse than 35mm theatrical releases. This doesn't mean they can't be good in other ways--direction, script, acting--but...don't count on it. *Venganza diabólica* is a routine, not very interesting film; it's not even "so bad it's good," it's just drab. There is one very creepy aspect but other than that, it's 75 minutes (not counting the credits) which can easily be skipped.

Rubén and Humberto attend a party at the home of their co-worker Julián (who's...retiring? Unclear). They catch Julián at a Satanic altar and Humberto reacts badly, but almost immediately everyone seemingly forgets about this. Rubén, Humberto and Julián leave the party and visit a brothel, where the first two men (who are married to sisters and each have a young daughter) get drunk and fool around with some whores. On their way



home, Humberto gets distracted and hits a man with his car, killing him. Since Rubén is passed out drunk, Humberto puts his "friend" behind the wheel so he'll get the blame. When Julián protests, Humberto murders him as well.

Rubén receives a long jail sentence. In prison, he's tormented by a guard (in one unpleasant scene, the guard forces Rubén to clean a toilet with his bare hands, then urinates on him and forces Rubén to eat lunch without



being able to wash!). Cellmate Román was compelled to murder his fiancée by Lizbeth, the leader of a Satanic cult (apparently--we never see anyone other than Román as her

"follower"), but Lizbeth visits him in prison and Román hopes someday she'll arrange to have him released. Lizbeth agrees to help Rubén get revenge on Humberto, although she does warn him that it's possible this will have an adverse impact on Rubén himself.

Through a convoluted chain of events--Lizbeth gives Rubén a doll, Rubén gives it to his wife Lilia, she has her daughter give it as a birthday present to Humberto's daughter Sandrita--Sandrita is "cursed" as a punishment for Humberto. In the film's creepiest bit, the doll (whose eyes move from

side-to-side) is apparently full of little black worms which come out through her ears (!) and apparently infect Sandrita.

Sandrita gets sick and dies. Humberto and his wife are sad.



Rubén is visited by Lizbeth and Lilia in prison; Lilia says Sandrita gave the doll to her daughter before she died! Rubén strangles Lizbeth, knocks Román and Lilia to the floor, and has a vision of his (now sickly) daughter and the doll. The end!

Nothing much happens in *Venganza diabólica* and it takes forever for the demon-doll to exact its revenge. Much is made of Rubén's abuse at the hands of the guard, but the expected supernatural comeuppance never arrives: the guard is humble in the presence of Lizbeth, but doesn't cease his attacks on Rubén, and Román makes a vague, offhand remark that Lizbeth can't help him with this problem, for some reason. Consequently, all of the interactions between Rubén and the guard are irrelevant to the plot--after all, the film isn't about how terrible prison is for Rubén, it's about his "diabolical vengeance!"

As noted above, *videohomes* at their best are hampered by their technical/budget limitations, and *Venganza diabólica* has a few notable examples of this. Several shots are notably out of focus, and the sound mix is very bad in some scenes (the "background" music drowning out the dialogue). There are also some shots in which the image is rounded on the left side (rather than hard-edged), as if there was some problem with the camera lens. On the other hand, the film is shot in a relatively "professional" manner, with a variety of shots, editing, etc. (instead of the cheaper method of bland master-shots).

The performances are all satisfactory--most of the main players were veterans and handle their roles in a professional manner. It's interesting that there isn't really a "villain" in the film (aside from the prison guard), despite the presence of familiar villainous players Noé Murayama and María

Rubio (who was famous for her *telenovela* roles). Humberto betrays Rubén but is not depicted as a truly bad person and for most of the film he's a devoted father and husband;



Lizbeth is a Satanic priestess who framed Román, but her "work" for Rubén is straightforward and not done for any particular selfish reason (she has nothing to gain by helping him). Rubén would be considered the protagonist, I suppose, but his actions are hardly heroic: he seeks revenge and apparently doesn't care that he gets it by causing the death of an innocent young girl.

Trivia notes: the original screen story was written by Blanca Samperio, and "Samperio" can be seen in the graffiti scrawled on the walls of Rubén's prison cell! Also, producer Roberto Lozoya has a one-scene cameo as a doctor.

Not horrible but hardly indispensable viewing.



Theatres of Terror

El teatro del horror [The Theatre of Horror]
(Televisine, ©1989) *Exec Prod*: Eduardo Galindo Pérez C., Santiago Galindo; *Dir/Scr*: Pedro Galindo III; *Story*: Santiago Galindo; *Photo*: Javier Cruz Osorio; *Music*: Pedro Plascencia Salinas; *Prod Mgr*: Max G. Llado; *Prod Chief*: Samuel de la Fuente; *Asst Dir*: Rubén González; *Film Ed*: Antonio López; *Art Des*: Jaime Rosales; *Spec FX*: Gabriel García M., Alfred García; *Sound Ed*: Aurelio López; *Sound Eng*: Roberto Muñoz; *Makeup*: María Eugenia Luna; *Re-Rec*: René Cerón; *Union*: STIC

Cast: Rafael Sánchez Navarro (*Adolfo Degollado*), Adalberto Martínez "Resortes" (*Tomás Alvino*), María

Rebeca (Karina Diamonte), Andrés Bonfiglio (Memo Damián), George Sámamo "El Gordo" (Dionisio)



Notes: "talking head" films are not especially numerous, but there are a number of examples, including *The Thing That Couldn't Die*, *The Man Without a Body*, *La cabeza viviente*, *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, etc.

However, it seems clear *El teatro del horror* (shot in August 1989) was more directly "inspired" by the "Amazing Stories" television episode "Go to the Head of the Class" (1986), which in turn seems to have been inspired by *Re-animator* (1985). [I was alerted to this by <http://blogcinefantastico.blogspot.com/2015/02/pedro-galindo-iii-horroroso-cine-de.html>]

All 3 of these feature a severed, animated, wise-cracking head carried about by its own headless body. "Go to the Head of the Class" and *El teatro del terror* are even more closely related:

- two teen students are abused by an eccentric teacher (in both cases using Shakespeare to torment them)
- they decide to use black magic to change his personality
- their first attempt kills him
- their second attempt revives him, but because they used a torn photograph as part of the spell, he comes back to life with his head severed from his body
- the head & body then pursue the students
- at the end, the head and body are reassembled but it's evident they were once separate



El teatro del horror, twice as long as the television episode, changes the setting, adds some additional characters and a major sub-plot or motivating factor (the

severed head lusts after the female protagonist, something that's present in *Re-animator* but not in "Go to the Head of the Class"), but is still an obvious re-working of the TV show.

This dubious "borrowing" aside, *El teatro del horror* is actually an entertaining film, if a bit too long (even though it only runs 86 minutes--and this includes 2 dance numbers which are pure padding). Shot largely in the Teatro Colonial, the production values are decent (they saved money on the cast, with only 5 actors and some extras in a couple of scenes), with good

photography, an appropriate music score, and surprisingly decent "severed head" effects. Although clearly Rafael Sánchez Navarro plays his scenes with his head stuck up



through a hole in the floor (or table), the head that's carried around by the headless body is a reasonable likeness, and has eyes and a mouth that move.

Acting students Memo and Karina (and the rest of their classmates) are berated by their manic teacher, Adolfo. Karina stays after class one day and spots Adolfo practicing black magic. The interior of the ramshackle Teatro Colonial--where their classes are held--suddenly changes into a strange, ruined space--and Karina faints. She's rescued by caretaker Tomás. [This scene ends abruptly, and cuts to exterior shots of Mexico City as a telephone conversation the next day between Memo and Karina is heard on the soundtrack, suggesting post-production tampering. It's never explained how Karina got home, although later in the film she recognises Tomás and thanks him for helping her.]

At the next class, Adolfo flies into a rage when Memo forgets a line from "Hamlet," and starts strangling him! The class, obviously, ends in confusion. Memo and Karina spy on Adolfo later--he gets drunk and passes out on stage. They sneak into his dressing room, which is filled with occult objects, including a book of spells. In an attempt to change Adolfo's behaviour, the two students try a random spell from the book, although the second page has been torn out. But the spell appears to have killed their teacher. Returning to the dressing room, Karina and Memo are surprised by Tomás, who says he removed pages from the book so Adolfo wouldn't be successful in his spell-casting. The missing page says an image of a close relative of the subject needs to be used for the magic--Memo retrieves a photo of Adolfo's late wife, although it's been torn in half.

The spell works, except Adolfo's head separates itself from his body. Also, Adolfo begins amorously pursuing Karina! The rest of the film is mostly just running around and screaming. Tomás summons up Greek god Dionysus for some reason (alright, he's considered a

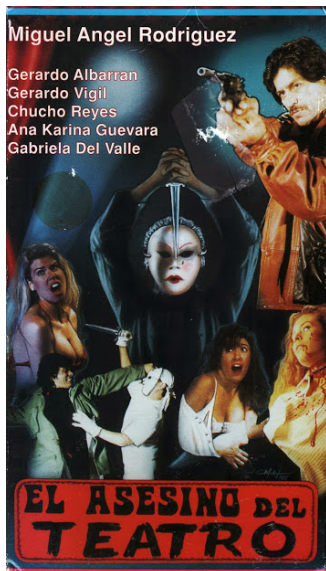
patron of the arts), but "Dionisio" just wants to eat and drink. Finally, when Karina is tied to a chair and Adolfo sets the stage on fire ("the flames of love!"), Dionisio appears, puts the fires out with rain, and Karina and Memo can finally leave the theatre.

6 months later, Memo and Karina attend a performance in which Adolfo removes his head (some women faint, the rest of the audience applauds), with Dionisio as his co-star and Tomás as the theatrical empresario. Adolfo spots Karina in the wings and says "give us a kiss!" The end.

The performances in *El teatro del horror* range from entertaining (Rafael Sánchez Navarro, literally chewing the scenery at one point) to adequate (everyone else). Resortes is his usual self, although his dance with Karina is rather self-indulgent. Andrés Bonfiglio is the straight man, María Rebeca (the daughter of actors José Alonso and Irma Lozano, who'd been on-screen since early childhood) screams a lot, and George/Jorge Sámano (who had a more extensive career--albeit in mostly minor roles--than his brief IMDB listing suggests) is satisfactory as Dionisio. Curiously, when he first appears, he speaks English but switches to Spanish at Adolfo's request.

El teatro del horror has numerous lapses in logic and coherence, and goes on rather too long, but it's not dull and the spacious locations make it look more expensive than it probably was. There is a decent amount of entertainment value to be had.

Trivia note: the *contador* (accountant) on *El teatro del horror* was Guillermo Damián, and the character name of Andrés Bonfiglio is "Memo" (short for Guillermo) Damián--a coincidence? Also, the character name of Resortes--"Tomás Alvino"--roughly translates to "Drinking Wine." "Adolfo Degollado" is more or less "Adolfo Cut-Throat" (I suppose Adolfo *Decapitado* was rejected as too literal).



Asesino del teatro

[Murderer of the Theatre] (A.V. Video S.A. & América Video, ©1996) Chief Prod: Rogelio Ramos; Prod: Jorge Aguirre; Dir: René Cardona III; Story: Karmelinda Valverde; Photo: Alberto Lee; Music: Luis Jauregui; Prod Mgr: Víctor Villa; Asst Dir: Óscar González; Film Ed: Daniel Amado; Makeup: Nelly Alamillo; Sound Engin: Noé Rincón

Cast: Miguel Ángel

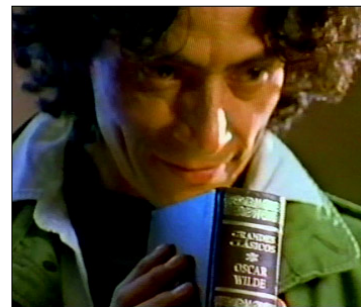
Rodríguez (*Cmdte. Ocana*), Gerardo Albarrán (*Gregory*), Gerardo Vigil (*Erick*), Chucho Reyes* (*Xavier*), Ana Karina Guevara (*Mireya*), Gabriela del Valle (*Vero*), Víctor López Limón (*Tito*), Karina Puentes (*Toña*), Adalberto Menéndez "El Charro" (*producer in flashback*), Joanydka Mariel (*Erick's mother*), Luis Tinjaero (*young Erick*), Jorge Ruelas

* credited as Jesús Reyes on end credits

Notes: a slasher film with very little slashing (one murder at the 4-minute mark, a second around 33 minutes, and an attempted killing at 60 minutes, that's it), and a non-politically correct conclusion (the killer is a gay man who murders women who are, were, or might in the future have an affair with the show's producer). There is also a supernatural "twist" which seems to contradict a fair amount of evidence seen up to that point.

A show is being prepared for the Cine Ópera, produced by Gregory and choreographed by the flamboyant Xavier. We're never shown anything but an empty stage and a sparse chorus of dancers, so the content of the "show" is vague at best. One of the dancers is murdered after leaving rehearsal. Police detective Ocana and Gregory have a long and reasonably well-staged fight when Ocana arrives to investigate, because they're both alpha-males: Gregory demands to know who Ocana is, and Ocana refuses to identify himself as a policeman until he's knocked Gregory down.

Nobody else is really singled out, except dancer Vero, and then only because she has brought her young son Tito to rehearsal. Tito wanders around and meets Erick [the "phantom" of the Cine Ópera, get it?], a young man who lives in the building (unknown to everyone else) and reads Oscar Wilde. [In flashback, we see he was the



young son of a dancer who was murdered by a producer when she rejected his romantic advances.] Dancer Toña is briefly given some character, when she flirts with Gregory, then her jealous husband

shows up and takes a swing at the producer (only to be punched himself). Toña is murdered shortly afterwards, although Gregory lies to the other dancers and says she was fired.

Toña is replaced by Mireyra, who has the magic power of making men (Gregory, Erick, even Tito) fall in love with her. The masked killer makes an attempt on her life, but she's rescued by Erick. In a final "Mexican

stand-off" (irony!) the murderer is exposed as Xavier, who snatches a pistol from Gregory and shoots Erick, and is then fatally shot himself by Ocana. Erick vanishes before their eyes: he was a ghost the whole time! (A ghost who has physical solidity and who can be "killed" by a gunshot, apparently)

The performances in *Asesino del teatro* are adequate. Miguel Ángel Rodríguez and Gerardo Albarrán have very little screen time, while Gerardo Vigil and Chucho Reyes give it the old college try, with diametrically-opposed results. Vigil acts moody and serious, while Reyes camps it up outrageously. Everyone else is fine, but they don't really have much to do.

Asesino del teatro was shot in the huge Cine Ópera in Mexico City; this cinema opened in 1949 but switched from films to concerts and other events in 1993, before closing in 1998. The facility is currently owned by the



Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, but remains closed and derelict. *Asesino del teatro*, to give it credit, uses the theatre effectively as a location, even if the photography is mostly muddy and Cardona's direction is routine. [Trivia note: some scenes for the

Hollywood film *Man on Fire* were shot in the Cine Ópera in 2003, and Gerardo Albarrán--as "Gerardo Moreno"--was the stunt coordinator for the Mexican portions of this picture.]

Asesino del teatro isn't bad and not seriously boring (it's only 80 minutes long) but nothing much happens and it isn't very interesting or entertaining.



Old Dark Houses

La casa embrujada [The Bewitched House]
(Producciones Eduardo Quevedo, 1944) *Dir/Adapt:* Fernando A. Rivero; *Story:* Norman Foster, Fu Manchu; *Photo:* Ignacio Torres; *Music:* Jorge H. Pérez; *Prod Chief:* Luis Bustos; *Asst Dir:* Valerio Olivo; *Film Ed:* Rafael Portillo; *Art Dir:* Luis Moya; *Decor:* Francisco Zarraga; *Camera Op:* Andrés Torres; *Makeup:* Felisa L. de Guevara; *Sound Eng:* Rodolfo Solís; *Sound Ed:* Lupe Marino; *Studio:* CLASA

Cast: Fu Manchu [David T. Bamberg] (*Fu Manchu*), Mary Clark (*Alicia Adams*), Carlos M[artínez]. Baena (*Inocente de los Ángeles*), Alejandro Cobo (*Manuel Beltrán*), Alfonso Bedolla (*dove salesman*), Fredy Romero (*Lucifer*), [José] Elías Moreno (*Nicanor*

Simondor), Ángel de Steffani [sic] (*Pitágoras*), María Enriqueta Reza (*Angelita*)

Notes: This film is bizarre and entertaining, but rather sloppy in spots and presents Fu Manchu quite differently than in his earlier efforts. While previous pictures focused on Fu's career as an amateur detective, acknowledging his stage and film career, in *La casa embrujada* he is identified primarily as a film actor (although he does a card trick early in the picture), and is far from the competent, intelligent sleuth of his earlier film efforts. Instead, he acts more like comic "heroes" such as Bob Hope, bumbling and even cowardly at times.



This was deliberate on the part of Fu Manchu (David T. Bamberg), since he co-wrote the screen story with Norman Foster, a Hollywood actor, writer, and director who spent some time in Mexico in the 1940s. Foster directed 4 films for the Mexican film industry at that time, and returned to make *Sombrero* in 1952 for MGM; the latter film starred Richardo Montalbán, who'd starred in 3 of Foster's Mexican pictures.

According to Bamberg's autobiography "Illusion Show," *La casa embrujada* was written as "Gooseflesh" (*Carne de gallina* in Spanish) and was to have been directed by Norman Foster. However, Foster instead directed *La hora de la verdad* with Ricardo Montalbán (although *La hora de la verdad* started shooting in May 1944 and *La casa embrujada* didn't begin principal photography until October, it's possible Foster was still



doing post-production work on his movie).

Bamberg writes: "The picture that we had written together...was turned over to one of those 'cut-in-camera' fiends

who think they need no shooting script and carry everything in their head. The result was that no one could cut it, and it was so changed around that they held it in the can for years before it was released. [note: in 1949] Fortunately, by this time, I was very far from Mexico and was in no danger of being lynched for this stinker. I saw it on television and I never got over it."

Back in 2005, BCI was planning a series of Mexican horror movie DVD releases, and *La casa embrujada* was among them. However, due to the fact that it was actually a comedy (albeit a comedy-thriller) and the quality of the master was not very good, it was axed from the schedule. However, I got a screener copy out of it, at least. (The film was subsequently shown on the Cine Nostalgia channel in Mexico and yes, the video/audio quality is not very good, although my copy is somewhat better.)

The film opens on a train: Fu is reading "Cinemanía" magazine, which has an advertisement for his latest (fictitious) film ("The Invisible Dragon") on the cover. The production company is Milagro (Miracle) Films: "If the picture is good, it's a miracle." A little boy tells Fu that he saw the film, "Did you like it?" Fu inquires. His answer is a loud razzberry from the obnoxious tot. Trying to amuse the boy and at the same time impress the attractive blonde seated across from him, Fu does a complicated card trick, but the youngster spoils the effect, and then goes on to irritate Fu's assistant Lucifer.

Lucifer tells Fu that he lost all of their money in a crooked card game. Fu boasts to the blonde that he'll take care of the card sharp; she accompanies him to another car, where Fu introduces himself as "Oglethorpe Smith," then proceeds to lose the rest of his money. Later, he discovers that he has misplaced his wallet, which contained his train tickets. Fu discovers that the blonde (Alicia) and the gambler (Beltrán) are in league with one another: she tipped off Beltrán to Fu's cards by signalling with the smoke from her cigarette. Beltrán jumps off the train to avoid capture, and Fu follows (landing headfirst in a ditch full of water).

Fu arrives in the village of Zopilote ("vulture"), in search of Beltrán. Instead, he finds Alicia and a drunken gunman named Nicanor. Nicanor locks Fu in a storeroom with Lucifer, who had gotten off the train when it stopped in town. Alicia and Beltrán are partners with Nicanor, although they do not trust each other. Meanwhile, Fu and Lucifer escape through the assistance of an itinerant vendor of doves (when they tell him they don't want to buy his dove, he says "*Está bueno*," and lets it fly away!). They walk through a driving rainstorm and arrive at a strange house (a former church).

The house is occupied by the sinister Inocente de los



Angeles (Carlos Martínez Baena wearing appalling false teeth) and his wife Angelita. When Inocente hears that Fu and Lucifer are searching for Beltrán, he

insists they spend the night. Fu is taken upstairs, while

Lucifer sits in an armchair and promptly falls through a trapdoor to the basement. Upstairs, Fu sees a sheet-covered body on the floor of his room, but Inocente tells him to ignore it. After his host leaves, Fu uncovers the corpse—it is Beltrán. Peeping through a hole in the floor, Fu hears Inocente plot his murder. He switches places with the corpse, placing his wristwatch on the dead man's arm.

Inocente and his huge brutish imbecile of a henchman (Pitágoras) come upstairs; Pitágoras clubs the body in the bed, thinking it is Fu. They carry the corpse, still covered



in a sheet, downstairs. Pitágoras comes back to get the "other" body, but Fu (wearing a sheet over his head) scares him off.

Alicia and Nicanor arrive. Constant chase scenes follow; Fu hides in a vat full of plaster and is dyed white for the rest of the film. He climbs into the bell tower of the old church, pursued by Inocente (with a rifle) and Pitágoras. Both of the villains fall to their death, while Fu is aided by Alicia. Angelita struggles with Alicia but is killed by one of her husband's own traps. Lucifer, who has overcome Nicanor in the mummy-filled basement, accidentally discovers the secret compartment where Inocente hid the money stolen from Beltrán (including Fu's money).

As the film concludes, Fu and Alicia are back on the train. Lucifer finds them some clothes to replace their ruined outfits; he sees the dove vendor, now dressed in a fancy suit. The man says he sold a dove to some tourists for 10,000 pesos, by telling them it was the Holy Spirit! The same little boy is on the train, and he squirts Fu and Alicia with ink. Fu turns to the audience: "Isn't this where we started? Well, here we finish." He and Alicia clinch.

The film has some amusing, even bizarre characters and sequences, but the action is handled in a slipshod fashion and the plot (such as it is) is vague and unsatisfying. However, the production values are adequate and the acting is generally good. Mary Clark is an attractive actress who speaks acceptable Spanish, but apparently made no other Mexican films (Hollywood actress Janice Logan had the female lead in an earlier Fu Manchu vehicle, *El as negro*). Carlos



Martínez Baena, made up to resemble Werner Krauss from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (perhaps

inadvertently) is amusingly creepy as the murderous "Inocente," and Alfonso Bedolla is hilarious in the very small role of the lackadaisical dove salesman. Overall, an amusing change of pace.

Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but *La maldición del monasterio* (1989) could almost be a deliberate homage to *La casa embrujada*: it begins on a train, features a feckless Anglo magician (Russ Tamblyn rather than Bamberg) who gets in an argument with another man and jumps off the train in the middle of nowhere; there is a strange town, a mysterious abandoned monastery (instead of a church), and a blonde *gringa* (Stacey Shaffer instead of Mary Clark). Coincidence? Only director/writer Glenn Gebhard knows for sure. (To be fair, the rest of *La maldición del monasterio* is completely different in tone and content from *La casa embrujada*).

Upgraded and revised from MFB 3/5.



El fantasma de la casa roja [The Phantom of the Red House]* (Filmadora Chapultepec, 1954)

Prod: Pedro Galindo Jr.; *Dir-Scr*: Miguel M. Delgado; *Adapt*: Ramón Pérez P.; *Story*: Cristina Lesser; *Photo*: Raúl Martínez Solares; *Music*: José de la Vega; *Prod Mgr*: Porfirio Triay Peniche; *Prod Chief*: Ricardo Beltri; *Asst Dir*: Américo Fernández; *Film Ed*: Jorge Bustos; *Prod Des*: F. Marco Chilet; *Cam Op*: Cirilo Rodríguez; *Lighting*: Carlos Nájera; *Makeup*: Sara Herrera; *Sound Supv*: James L. Fields; *Dialog Rec*: José B. Carles; *Re-rec*: Galdino Samperio; *SpFX*: Jorge Benavides; *Studio*: Churubusco

*[U.S. release as *The Phantom in the Red House* (Young America Prods.); *Prod*: K. Gordon Murray; *Dir*: Manuel San Fernando [most first names of cast/crew are Anglicised on U.S. print, e.g. "Michael M. Delgado"; cast names in dubbed version are listed in brackets below]

Cast: Alma Rosa Aguirre (*Mercedes "Meche" Benz de Carrera* [Mercedes "Merche" Benz Rattington]), Raúl Martínez (*Raúl Velasco* [Rory Baxter]), Antonio Espino "Clavillazo" (*Diógenes Holmes* [Diógenes Hammis]), Che Reyes (*Modesto Silvestre* [Matthew Silvertone]), Guillermina Téllez Girón (*Evangelina Buenrostro* [Angela Archer]), Víctor Alcocer (*lawyer*), Enriqueta Reza (*Diana Alegre* [Diana O'Leary]), Armando Arriola

(*Dr. Hipócrates Piedra* [Hippocrates Piney]), Conchita Gentil Arcos (*Rómula Feucha* [Amelia Fuschia]), Manuel Dondé (*Pedro Satán* [Peter Selvin]), Armando Espinosa "Periquín" (*Sgt. León Manso* [Lester Pester]), José Chávez Trowe (*Victor, chauffeur*), Guillermo Hernández "Lobo Negro" (*thug*), Trío Calaveras, Trío Los Panchos

Notes: K. Gordon Murray imported nearly 3 dozen Mexican films for theatrical and television release in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of these were fantasy films, either "adult" horror movies or fairy tale pictures aimed at children. His catalog was largely (22 titles by my count) composed of ABSA (Abel Salazar's company), Cinematográfica Calderón, and Roberto Rodríguez productions, which makes the selection of *El fantasma de la casa roja* doubly curious: it's a horror **comedy**, and was produced by Filmadora Chapultepec (*Bring Me the Vampire* was another dubious KGM choice in this genre, produced by Estudios América;



Bloody Sea was a non-horror drama, made by the Cooperativa de Trabajadores Cinematográficos).

Comedy is difficult to translate, and one can only imagine the

reaction of U.S. audiences to *The Phantom in the Red House* and *Bring Me the Vampire*: the slapstick might be universal, but the "jokes" lose a lot of punch when translated to English (although the dialogue in most of the Murray versions was actually translated reasonably accurately) and delivered by the voice actors at "Soundlab" in Coral Gables, Florida. For purposes of this review, I relied chiefly on *El fantasma de la casa roja*, only dipping into *The Phantom in the Red House* on occasion.

Meche and Raúl work in "El Infierno," a Hell-themed nightclub managed by Modesto but owned by Meche's late godfather, don Tiburcio. Meche, Raúl, Modesto, and Modesto's girlfriend Evangelina (the club's cigarette girl), are summoned to don Tiburcio's mansion. Also present are servants Pedro and



Diana, Dr. Hipócrates, and don Tiburcio's long-time girlfriend Rómula, as well as a lawyer. The lawyer tells them that Meche inherits the nightclub and the house, but 5 million pesos in cash is up for grabs. All of the heirs must spend 3 nights in the mansion, and on the third night they can search for the hidden money. [Raúl, Meche, Modesto and Evangelina return to the nightclub

each evening, departing in time to make it to the house by the midnight deadline.]

On the first night, Meche is nearly murdered in her bed by a masked intruder. The next day, Raúl hires private detective Diógenes and his assistant Sgt. Manso to protect Meche. The second night in the mansion involves a lot of running around. On the third night, Raúl, Meche and Diógenes are waylaid at the club by gangsters hired by Modesto, but Sgt. Manso's unexpected arrival foils this plan. Despite a flat tire, the quartet arrives at the mansion as the clock strikes midnight.

The heirs split up to search for the money. Dr. Hipócrates and Rómula are both stabbed to death. Meche is chased around the house by the masked killer, but he's knocked out by Diógenes. Pedro and Diana are in on the plot to eliminate all of the other heirs (the masked killer was the chauffeur Víctor)--the lawyer says don Tiburcio was aware of the servants' greed and asked him to keep an eye on Meche. As the film concludes, Meche falls through a trap door, down a chute into the basement, where she discovers her godfather's stash of cash. [This idea was repeated in another Mexican film,



the title of which I can't currently recall.]

One odd aspect of *La fantasma de la casa roja* is the fact that two characters are murdered (not on-screen, but their

dead bodies are shown) in this comedy: neither character is especially villainous or unpleasant (they're comically greedy, that's all). This does raise the stakes for the other characters to show it's "serious" business, but is unnecessary: Dr. Piedra and Rómula could have just been abducted, which would have removed them from competition for the money.

The script also gets needlessly complicated at the very end and to some extent becomes illogical. The lawyer says he played the masked killer at times to protect Meche, and that he was the one spying from behind a portrait on the wall--except we see real eyes peering



through the portrait in an early scene when the lawyer is speaking to the heirs, so it couldn't have been him then. The main masked killer is Víctor, who only had a couple of brief scenes earlier, so it's not a great surprise; similarly, Pedro and Diana are both overtly shown

plotting to murder Meche well before the climax, rendering their reveal as villains an anti-climax.

There are a couple of actually amusing and even somewhat surreal moments. As Meche and killer run around a large table, she picks up a hatchet (that Modesto had put down earlier) and threatens the killer, at which time he reaches underneath his cloak and pulls out a full-size axe! Later in this sequence, there is an old cartoon-gag: Meche tells the killer "One moment!"--they both stop running, she takes a drink of water, then the chase resumes.

The dubbed version is reasonably faithful to the original, but there are some changes. For example, in the original dialogue there are numerous references to popular songs--in one scene, a character says "*la vida no vale nada*" but someone replies "That's only in Guanajuato" (referring to the song "*Camino de Guanajuato*")--and these are not relevant to English-speakers. In another scene, Diógenes calls the grim-looking Diana "La Llorona," but in the dubbed version this becomes "a voodoo doll!"

[Trivia note: the Beverly Wilshire DVD box reads "The Phantom of the Red House" but the film print is



still labeled "The Phantom in the Red House." This is the AIP Television print. However, at least one other print of Murray's dubbed version is

circulating that has the leader from the original film (and not the AIP logo).]

The performances in *El fantasma de la casa roja* are satisfactory, although Alma Rosa Aguirre is annoying as the hyper-active and hyper-fearful Mercedes. Clavillazo does his usual *shtick*, gesturing flamboyantly and using his catch-phrases ("*En qué país vivimos?*" "*Movida chueca*", etc.), but doesn't have to be the whole show and is used effectively. Raúl Martínez--who from some angles looks remarkably like E. Schillinsky--is a decent straight man, although his two songs (and two others by trios) are essentially padding and can be skipped. Che Reyes is under-used, and does a "heel turn" midway through the film; Armando Arriola is pretty good (and, surprisingly, his dubbed performance is also satisfactory). The production values are adequate, limited to the old house and nightclub sets, and one brief location sequence (which seems to have a bloop: only Raúl, Diógenes, and Meche are seen when their car has a flat tire, but Sgt. Manso is with them when they arrive at the house).

Moderately entertaining in the original version, but certainly not what K. Gordon Murray's audiences would have expected (or, probably, enjoyed).





Hasta que la muerte nos separe* [Till Death Do Us Part] (Prods. Cometa, 1987) *Exec Prod:* Luis Quintanilla R.; *Prod:* Orlando R. Mendoza, Carlos E. Díaz; *Dir/Scr:* Ramón Obón [Jr.]; *Photo:* Fernando Alvarez Colín; *Music:* Tino Geiser; *Asst Dir:* José Amezcuita; *Script [Continuity]:* Lourdes Álvarez; *Film Ed:* Ángel Camacho; *Artistic Coord:* Rubén Piña; *Art Dir:* Gerardo Hernández; *Camera Op:* Febronio Tepozte; *Costume Des:* Carlos Brown; *Makeup:* Guillermina Oropeza; *Sound Engin:* Abel Flores; *Re-rec:* Ricardo Saldívar; *Sound Ed:* Jaime Reyna; *Union:* STIC

*aka *La mansión del terror* (prints and posters exist with this title as a “snipe,” but *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* appears to be the original)

Cast: Hugo Stiglitz [sic] (*Orlando*), Rosita Quintana (*Eloísa*), Dacia González (*Tenchá*), Luz María Jérez (*Griselda*), Carlos Ratzinger (*"Oteló" actor*), Diana Ferreti (*Alicia*, *Orlando's mother*), Pepe Romy (*actor*), Lizeta Roma, Gabriela del Valle, Alicia Camps, Regino Herrera (*don Pancho*), Ana Luisa Padilla, Sabine, Amado Zumaya?

Notes: This is a film which I had very good memories of, having seen it nearly 10 years ago (*note:* as of the original review in 1998). Upon reexamination, it does not hold up quite so well, but it is still somewhat above average and worth watching. Unusual for its era and budget, *Hasta que la muerte nos separe* is a period film (set in the 1930s): while the setting has nothing to do with the plot, it's nice to see the filmmakers making the effort. Luz María Jérez, who often (*note:* again, written in 1998) plays scheming, unsympathetic characters, makes an attractive heroine, and Rosita Quintana--off-screen for about a decade prior to this picture--is also good, along with Dacia González. Hugo Stiglitz is saddled with a very



bad wig (funny, I didn't notice it the first time I saw the picture) and a red herring role.

[*Note:* in the first version of this review, I confused Ramón Obón Jr. with his father, Ramón Obón Sr. This was Obón Jr.'s first directorial effort--he has since directed a handful of other features, including 2012's *Morgana*--but is primarily a writer.]

Griselda is an actress appearing in a stage production of "Othello." A mysterious man has been attending all of the performances and sending her flowers. Griselda finally meets him: his name is Orlando, and he is (apparently) independently wealthy and a classical pianist. They fall in love and get married. Before leaving for Paris, where Orlando plans to study music, they decide to pay a visit to his Aunt Eloísa. She is his only relative, and lives in an old house in the countryside.

They arrive at the house and are greeted by Tencha, the housekeeper. Unknown to Orlando, the letter he wrote to his aunt about his marriage has been stolen (by Tencha); Griselda hears Eloísa berating Orlando. However, the next day, Eloísa is gracious and hospitable to Griselda. She says she hopes Orlando's new marriage works out better than his first one! This news comes as a surprise to Griselda, who argues with Orlando.

Eventually, Griselda learns Orlando's mother went insane and was kept locked up in a padded room (wearing her wedding gown). However, a terrible fire destroyed that part of the house, and the mother's body was never recovered. Someone, wearing a wedding gown and veil and with horribly scarred hands, attacks Griselda while she's washing her hair, trying to strangle her with a piano-wire garrote. Griselda escapes.

Later, Orlando confronts the spectre and is knocked unconscious. The killer--revealed to be insane Aunt Eloísa--thinks Griselda is her sister Alicia (Orlando's mother), who stole her lover (Orlando's father). She is knocked out when the cover on the grand piano falls on her head (!), but recovers and attacks Griselda once more. However, Eloísa trips and falls through the window, crashing into the greenhouse below.

Hasta la muerte nos separe contains the usual Gothic-mystery and "old dark house" conventions: strange noises and voices in the old house, a servant who acts hostile, family secrets which emerge bit by bit, brief shots of the lurking killer, the new husband who suddenly has a personality change, etc. Griselda (not to make fun of anyone's name, but when was the last time you saw a film whose protagonists were named



"Griselda" and "Orlando"? leaves her former life behind to embark on her marriage to a virtual stranger, and on top of this is plunged into mortal danger! Next time, insist on a long engagement!

The film was shot mostly on the *Hacienda San Gaspar* near Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos. This property is currently available as a site for weddings and other events, and apparently has an adjacent golf course.

On the whole, a carefully-crafted film and satisfactory entertainment.

Originally reviewed in MFB 5/5, revised, corrected and updated here.



Federico Curiel's Rural-Fantasy Comic book adaptations

El caballo del Diablo [The Devil's Horse]
(Cima Films, 1974) *Assoc Prod:* Jorge Rivero, Jorge Camargo; *Dir/Scr:* Federico Curiel; *Photo:* Javier Cruz; *Music:* Sergio Guerrero; *Prod Chief:* Antonio H. Rodríguez; *Sub-Dir:* Javier Duran; *Film Ed:* Max Sanchez; *Camera Op:* Alberto Arellanes; *Makeup:* Graciela Muñoz; *Union:* STIC; *Studio:* América

Cast: Jorge Rivero (*Luciano*), Narciso Busquets (*don Fernando*), Juan Miranda (*Esteban*), Yolanda Ochoa (*Luisa*), Martiza Olivarez [sic] (*Lupita*), Linda Porto (*Gabriela*), Gloria Mestre (*Renata*), Víctor Alcocer (*Padre Marcos*), Enriqueta Carrasco (*party guest*), Josefina Echánove (*party guest*), Gabriela Moreno (*?Natalia, Rufino's wife*), Alfredo Gutiérrez (*cantinero*), Carlos León (*Filegonio*), Alejandra Ramirez (*Lupita's friend*), Roberto Spriu (*don Lupe, doctor*), Liza Willert (*gossip at party*), Marco E. Contreras, Rubén Alejandro



Reyes, [Carlos Bravo y Fernández] Carlillos (*Rufino, druggist*), Rogelio Brambila (*don Lorenzo*), José L. Murillo (*ranchhand*), Lilia Lupercio, Jesus Gómez (*Apolinar*), Juan Angel Martínez (*campesino who finds body*), Agustin Fernández (*man in cantina*), Elsa Benn, Vicente Lara (*villager*). Miron Levine (*party guest*)

Notes: Routine fantasy film, based on a comic book series that began in September 1969. *El caballo del Diablo* doesn't look cheap, with a fair number of extras showing up for "big" scenes like a party, a funeral, and two decent saloon brawls, but the sound and photography are sub-par, and there are no special effects or special makeup, aside from a few camera tricks and simple opticals.

Although *El caballo del Diablo* was rated "C" (similar to an "R" in the USA), García Riera refers to "*desnudos femeninos*," and at least 1 lobby card shows nudity, most extant versions appear to have been cut: the original running time of 88 minutes is now just under 86 minutes in available copies (some are even slightly shorter).



Don Fernando and his sons Luciano and Esteban are more like 3 friends than father and sons. They work together raising horses, live together (Esteban is married, to the long-suffering

Luisa), and carouse together. One night, Luciano's disfigured body is discovered by the side of the road, chopped up with machetes by some unnamed enemies. He can only be identified by the bracelet he wore.

Fernando is distraught, cursing God and demanding that his son be returned to him. After the funeral, Fernando remains behind in the graveyard and says he'd sell his soul to the Devil if Luciano came back. A black horse appears from nowhere, then disappears just as mysteriously.

That night, Luciano comes home. He tells Fernando that he was visiting some friends out of town; the body that was found on the road was someone else, also named Luciano, who had an identical bracelet and was wearing identical clothes--"an odd coincidence." He is riding the black horse, which he claims to have purchased out of town. His demeanor and even his voice are different.



Luciano begins to exhibit strange behavior. He savagely beats up a ranchhand who jokes with him, shoots a horse that throws him, and rapes and murders the sluttish wife of the local druggist. Luciano also makes a pass at Luisa, his brother's wife, but she eludes him. He later rapes Lupita, the young daughter of one of

the ranch workers. Her father confronts Luciano in the *cantina* and shoots him, but the bullets have no effect. Roaring like a lion, Luciano destroys the *cantina*, easily beating the men who attack him.

Fernando realizes that his son is changed: "Are you a man or a devil?" Luciano replies: "You know that better than anyone. Why did you take me from my grave?" After Luciano rapes Luisa, Esteban and Luciano fight. Their battle carries them to the local church, where Padre Marcos uses a crucifix to subdue the demonic Luciano. As Fernando, Marcos, and Esteban surround Luciano with crucifixes, the priest reads the act of exorcism. Luciano collapses and dies, his soul at rest. The black horse runs away.

El caballo del Diablo begins in a light tone, with the drunken Fernando and his sons in the local cantina (Juan Miranda gets to sing a long *ranchera* song); when Fernando is accused of swindling someone who bought some horses, a brawl breaks out. This is staged and shot quite nicely, with some good stunt work. When the 3 men get home, there is more comic byplay as they try to fool Esteban's wife into believing that don Fernando is ill, not drunk.

Presumably, the black horse is the Devil's emissary, and there are several fisheye closeups of the horse's eyes as he stares at Fernando, but there isn't any clear explication (for viewers not familiar with the comic book--see sidebar) until the final scene, when the possessed Luciano (apparently in the Devil's voice) says to Fernando: "This body belongs to me and your soul as well." Of course, the Devil could be possessing both the black horse and Fernando, but more likely the horse is just Satan's hench-horse.

There are a number of fisheye shots of Jorge Rivera's face, and the screen is occasionally tinted red while he is possessed. The only other particular "special effect" is the glowing crucifix that the priest wields at the climax: it looks like it has neon light bulbs stuck on it, but this was apparently a post-production optical effect.

Federico Curiel was a veteran of numerous fantasy films, and a more or less competent director overall, and *El caballo del Diablo* doesn't have any especially awkward or clumsy scenes. Curiel is a little zoom-happy, and he inserts at least one 360-degree pan just because he could, but he knows how to put together a film. The sequence where Luciano returns from the dead is adequately staged, although his lame excuse for his absence is rather too easily swallowed by everyone. There are a few nice touches: for example, after Luciano has beaten up Lupita's father and everyone else in the cantina, he turns to leave. But as he goes, he delivers one last vicious kick to a guy lying unconscious on the floor!

The cast is satisfactory: Narciso Busquets is good, but the dye job on his hair seems to be more bluish-purple than gray, although this might be Eastmancolor's fault. Rivero, Miranda, and the rest of the cast are adequate.

Reprinted with some changes from MFB 4/4.



El Jinete de la muerte (The Rider of Death)

(Películas Latinoamericanas---Novelty Internacional Films, 1980) *Prod*: Roberto Rodríguez; *Dir/ Scr*: Federico Curiel; *Based on a character created by*: René Eclair; *Photo*: Alfredo Uribe; *Music*: Rafael Carrión; *Prod Mgr*: Roberto Lozoya; *Asst Dir*: José Luis Urquieta; *Film Ed*: Ignacio Chiu; *Camera Op*: Guillermo Bravo; *Dialog Rec*: Francisco Strempler; *Re-rec*: Salvador Topete; *Union*: STIC

Cast: Andrés García (*Martín Lucero*), Rosa Gloria Chagoyán (*Dolores Montero*), Patricia Rivera (*Enedina*), Linda Porto (*Linda*), Fernando Casanova (*Fernín*), Rodrigo Puebla (*Pantoja*), Fernando Pinkus, Baltasar Ramos (*Benito*), Federico González (*Lucas, cantinero*), Carmelina Encinas and Gina Batista (*Linda's friends*), Marcelo Villamil (*don Gonzalo*), Marcko D'Carlo (*comisario*), José Luis Fernández (*henchman*), Jorge Reynoso (*henchman*), Carlos León (*rival cockfighter*)

Notes: This is a mildly interesting fantasy film that is unfortunately harmed by a disappointingly inconclusive ending.

Former actor Federico Curiel was one of the most prolific fantasy directors in Mexico between 1959 (when he helmed the "Nostradamus" series) and 1980, although he made quite a few non-fantasy films as well. *El jinete de la muerte* is competently made for the most part, professionally acted and photographed. The location shooting in an actual Mexican town adds considerably to the film's ambiance--there are plenty of extras in the crowd scenes (it was apparently filmed during an actual *feria*) and there is an authentic feel to the picture. *El jinete de la muerte* was based on a Mexican comic book (as was *El caballo del Diablo*, one of Curiel's earlier pictures). The "El Payo" series, based on yet another comic book, also includes fantasy elements in a rural setting.



Wandering cockfighter Martín is surprised to find the streets of the town he visits deserted. A friendly bartender warns him to seek shelter, because it is the "night of San Silvestre," when the dead walk. Martín sees a skeleton *charro* riding a white horse and carrying a scythe. He is struck down by a mysterious force; his spirit climbs up on the horse next to the skull-faced rider, while his body remains on the street. Martín is taken to a cavern filled with candles. The voice of "El Supremo" informs him that he has been chosen to be the new messenger of death. To allegedly explain his choice, there is a flashback to the death of Martín's father at the



hands of Pantoja, when Martín was a boy (why this is supposed to explain anything isn't clear--and for the rest of the film the audience is

waiting for Pantoja to show up again, but he doesn't). Martín is then transported back to the town, where his spirit re-occupies his body. Martín is wearing the black *charro* garb and riding the white horse. The former messenger (with a skull face but now wearing a white shroud since Martín got his clothes) says Martín will appear to be a normal human except when his services are needed to take the souls of dead people to the cavern of the lights.

Martín meets Dolores, a young woman who has recently returned to Mexico from studying in the United States. She takes him to her father's house, where a party to celebrate New Year's Eve is going on. The handsome Martín is the object of interest for many of the women guests, especially Linda and her two friends. Fermín, Dolores' cousin, is cool to Martín. Suddenly, Martín sees the skull-faced messenger. In the street outside, Dolores' father don Gonzalo is shot to death when he tries to intervene in a quarrel. Martín, unseen by the others (and his face now converted to a skull), rides off with don Gonzalo's soul.

The next day, Martín (normal again) is riding through the countryside when he sees a young woman, frightened by a snake, fall out of a tree. Benito, a young boy, asks Martín if the girl (his sister Enedina) is going to die. Martín looks around carefully to see if his skull-faced companion has appeared: "No, not this time," he replies. Enedina revives. She and her brother are poverty-stricken, living in a humble hut with little to eat. Martín promises to send them some provisions from town; he is going there to attend don Gonzalo's funeral. After the funeral, Martín visits Dolores at her house. Over Fermín's objections, Martín promises to take Dolores for

a horseback ride. However, Skull-face appears again and says "Go to the hut on the hill."

Riding to Enedina's hut, Martín fears it is Enedina whose soul he has come to collect: "I swear it will break my heart to take you." However, when Enedina and her brother appear alive, he is relieved. A short time later, it is Benito who is killed, falling from Martín's horse. Martín takes the boy's soul away.

Later, Dolores disappears, and Fermín accuses Martín of kidnapping her. Enedina helps Martín escape from jail. He confronts Fermín and his cronies in the cantina. Skull-face appears. During the ensuing fight, three of the villains are killed, but Fermín escapes. Martín (who tells the corpses, "I'll be back for you later") pursues on horseback, but Fermín runs his car off a cliff when he sees Skull-face in his rearview mirror. He is killed.

Dolores is being held prisoner in a shabby house. Her two captors get in a fight and the shack catches fire. Martín rushes in to save her, but is apparently too late (there is a shot of him riding away on his horse, presumably with her soul, although this is unclear).

Martín returns to the cavern of the lights (this scene is spoiled by re-use of footage from the first scene in the cavern, before Martín becomes the messenger: he is dressed in regular clothes and Skullface is still wearing the black *charro* suit). "El Supremo" says that everyone's soul must pass through the cavern sooner or later, so that Martín should enjoy life while he can. The film ends as Martín visits Enedina's hut: they embrace and go inside.

Andrés García is good as the Rider, although he doesn't have to strain too much; a young Patricia Rivera, while

attractive, is saddled with annoying mannerisms and a fakey "Indian" accent (her dialogue might even be dubbed—Jorge



Reynoso's voice seems to have been). The rest of the cast is generally satisfactory.

However, the final impression of *El jinete de la muerte* is not favorable, since there are too many loose ends left dangling. Martín is told he has to serve as the messenger until he pays his "debt." What debt? Although the flashback of his father's death is presented as the "reason" why Martín was chosen, nothing is explained at all! Even the death of Dolores is left unverified (there are no clear shots of her body). It is easier to forgive some loose ends or incongruities at the beginning of a film, but when there are problems in the last five minutes, the viewer may go away disappointed.

[Reprinted with minor changes from MFB vol. 2 #5]



The Comics Behind the films

Ediciones Latinoamericanas began publishing "El Caballo del Diablo" in September 1969, and at least 629 issues were published over the next 10 years. These were drawn comics; at some point at least one and possibly two different *fotonovela* versions were also published (I have seen 2 issues with different logos, suggesting different publishers, #10 and #46, the latter an Ediciones Latinoamericanas product). Reprints were also published in South America.

The basic premise of the comic (from <http://www.pepines.unam.mx/serie/694> [my translation]):

"The Devil's Horse is an indomitable black stallion--emissary of the Devil--that roams the Mexican countryside with its message of "death and evil." In



reality it cruelly punishes all types of sinners and evil-doers. The story takes place in a Mexican countryside tinted with modernity, where there are tractors and automobiles, the women wear brief miniskirts and their appearance is completely urban, seeming to have recently left a beauty parlor, when they're not being shown semi-nude under any

pretext, such as bathing in rivers. Nonetheless, this modernised countryside is still a territory of superstition and legends of terror, crime, violence, ambition, and "base passion." The stories are always introduced by the Devil himself, who appears in the first panel serving as narrator. When the horse shows up in the villages where the stories occur, the characters know very well that something terrible



will happen. The evil-doers always meet a terrible death that the artwork delights in showing; one of the recurring themes is sex. This is a comic that is graphically

provocative, with moralising text and stories." "El Jinete de la muerte"--from the same publisher, Ediciones Latinoamericanas--began weekly publication



in the 1970s, later converting to a biweekly schedule. In later years, the page count went from 32 pages to 64 pages, reprinting two of the earlier stories. A *fotonovela* version was also published. In 2000, a new version entitled "El retorno de El Jinete de la muerte" began.

Like "El caballo del Diablo," this is basically a rural anthology series, although the titular Jinete is somewhat more involved in the plots than the Devil's horse.



I Smell a Rata

Una rata en la oscuridad* [A Rat in the Darkness] (Productora Mazateca, 1978) Prod: Gustavo

Bravo Ahuja; Assoc Prod: Fernando Clavel; Dir-Scr: Alfredo Salazar; Photo: Miguel Garzón; Music: Alfredo Díaz Ordaz; Asst Dir: José Amezcuita; Film Ed: Francisco Chiu; Makeup: Guille Oropeza; Re-rec: Ricardo Saldivar; Sound Ed: Ignacio Chiu; Union: STIC

*although many sources cite the title as *Una rata en la oscuridad*, the main title screen and the publicity spell it *oscuridad*--either spelling is acceptable in Mexico

Cast: Ana Luisa Peluffo (*Josefina*), Anaís De Melo (*Sonia*), Ricardo Cortés ("woman" of the portrait), José A. Marros (*Dr. Salas*), Aurora Castellón (*mother*), Claudia Fernández (*daughter*), Blanca Estela Roth (*hospital receptionist*), Betty Clavel (*nurse*)

Notes: Alfredo Salazar, the younger brother of producer-actor-director Abel Salazar, made his directorial debut (after years of scripting) with the ultra-cheap *El charro de las calaveras* (The Charro of the Skulls, 1965), a spliced-together horror-Western in which the hero's costume changes halfway through the film without explanation (the actual explanation: the film consisted of episodes of an unsold TV series shot at different time). His later efforts are a strange mix of the innocuous (*Bikinis y rock*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*) and the exploitative (*Juventud desnuda*, *Peor que los buitres*, a biker film with *Billy Jack* touches). After *Una rata en la oscuridad*, he directed only 3 more films, two *rancheras* and the wacky killer



clown-doll *videohome* *Herencia diabólica*, before his death in 2006.

Josefina and her younger sister Sonia purchase a huge, old house. It comes complete with furniture and a large portrait of a dark-haired woman in a frilly nightgown. There's also a rat (just one?) who prowls around constantly. Sonia is visited at night by the woman from the portrait, who makes love to her. Sonia turns surly, withdrawn, and uncommunicative towards Josefina, and spends a lot of her time staring at the portrait. Josefina tries to snap Sonia out of her fixation, and is attacked by the younger woman; she manages to clout Sonia with a metal tray, knocking her out. She



begs a passerby to call an ambulance (the house has no electricity or telephone yet), then collapses herself. When she awakes, a doctor says Sonia was taken to the hospital, but will recover. That

night, the phantom woman seduces Josefina.

At the hospital the next day, Josefina learns Sonia has been discharged. Returning to the house, she finds Sonia's corpse. While trying to burn the portrait, Josefina is battered and then stabbed to death by a flying fireplace poker. Some time later, a middle-aged widow and her grown daughter agree to buy the mansion. When they depart, the real estate agent is revealed to be a man in drag: laughing in a sinister manner, he puts on the lingerie of the "woman of the portrait" to await the return of his new victims.

Una rata en la oscuridad is an interesting film and fairly well-made. It's become something of a cult film in the years since its release, due to the outré nature of its conclusion (and the copious nudity). The *denouement* is perhaps not a complete surprise--when the phantom is having sex with Josefina, Josefina reacts to "something" and calls the ghost a *farsante* (phony, or impostor), but the full-frontal male nudity of actor Ricardo Cortés (who'd appeared previously in Salazar's *Bikinis y rock*) in the final scene is still shocking (especially since this is almost never seen in mainstream cinema, Mexican or otherwise). [Both Anaís de Melo and Ana Luisa Peluffo are seen completely nude as well, but that's not unusual.]

However, the film's final twist is not exactly logical. Much of what goes on in the old house is clearly supernatural, and the film does not attempt to suggest that it is not. But the elaborate female impersonation by the "ghost" makes sense only if he is a living person (for instance, someone who hides in the house and preys on the tenants). One would not think that a ghost would need a wig, eyeliner, false breasts, lingerie, and so on.

Alfredo Salazar probably didn't worry too much about this inconsistency, or perhaps he really intended the explanation to be: the rat is the supernatural creature who

controls everything, and the murderous cross-dresser is merely the rat's minion. This would explain why the rat is always lurking around, and why the "woman" caresses the rat in the final scene. Or not. The script doesn't provide any back-story for the house or the portrait: in one scene the rat knocks a book off a shelf and Sonia picks it up, but the audience's expectation that this book contains some explanation or information about the house and its phantom inhabitant is sadly unfulfilled.

Salazar's direction is solid, albeit not especially stylish. He does insert one odd sequence in which Josefina dances around a room filled with waving curtains as the ghost-woman watches--this is the only "arty" portion of the film. Otherwise, Salazar works up a fair amount of suspense and doesn't tip his hand too

soon. The house itself is huge but doesn't appear very comfortable or clean (despite a montage sequence of Josefina and

Sonia madly dusting) and the sisters' inability to afford electricity (they spent their savings on the down payment of the house, apparently) doesn't speak well for their financial acumen. Perhaps you'd have been better off buying a smaller house? One without a murderous cross-dressing phantom and an ubiquitous rat?



La rata maldita* [The Damned Rat] (Prods. Torrente, ©1991) *Producer:* Raúl Galindo; *Director:* Rubén Galindo Jr.; *Adaptation:* Raúl Galindo Jr., José Mobellán; *Story:* Rubén Galindo Jr.; *Photography:* Javier Cruz Jr.; *Music:* Federico Chávez; *Associate Producer:* Rogelio Ramos; *Production Manager:* Víctor V. Alamillo; *Assistant Director:* Guillermo Romero; *Film Editor:* Marcos González R.; *Special Makeup:* Arturo Galicia; *Sound Engineer:* Ángel Sánchez
*aka *Mutantes del año 2000*

Cast: Miguel Ángel Rodríguez (*Axel*), Gerardo Albarrán (*Roberto Cervantes*), Rossana San Juan (*Irina*),

José Manuel Fernández (*Andrés*), Teresa [Tessy] Escobar (*Marta, secretary*), Óscar Vallejo (*Óscar, student*), Enrike Palma (*henchman*), Víctor V. Alamillo (*mutant*)

Notes: Rubén Galindo Jr.'s last theatrical motion picture was *Ladrones de tumbas* (1989). Shortly thereafter, the Mexican film industry went into one of its periodic slumps, and movie production dropped drastically. However, many filmmakers turned to direct-to-video pictures, known in Mexico as *videohomes*, to keep busy.

Direct-to-video productions in Mexico date from the mid-1980s, but probably didn't out-number theatrical films until the early '90s. Mostly shot on 16mm (a few videotaped examples exist), Mexican *videohomes*, particularly in their first decade or so of existence, were frequently made by film industry veterans (unlike many



U.S. dtv films, which are often made by independent filmmakers or first-timers) and feature "name" performers.

La rata

maldita displays the standard attributes of the low-budget *videohome*--location shooting (no sets), 2 or 3 "name" performers only, minimal special effects (other than makeup, i.e., no explosions, car crashes, etc.). However, it is rather unusual in its choice of the science-fiction genre (most direct-to-video movies are comedies or action pictures), and its relatively ambitious attempt to depict a heavily-polluted Mexico of the near future (as of the time the film was made).

In the polluted Mexico City of 2000, schoolteacher Irina is involved in a nasty divorce action against her husband Roberto, who refuses to relinquish his control of her late father's chemical factory. Irina's colleague, science teacher Axel, discovers Roberto has been illegally dumping toxic waste. The result is the creation of mutant insects and animals. One of these creatures, a man-sized mutant rat, invades Irina's home, killing her dog and an exterminator hired to eradicate the pest. A tense, four-way showdown between Roberto, Axel, Irina, and the man-rat concludes with only two survivors. Can you guess which two?

Despite its low budget, a certain amount of care was put into *La rata maldita*'s depiction of future-Mexico's environment. Exterior scenes are shot through a hazy filter (or an optical effect was added in post-production) to represent air pollution, and characters wear respirators (the one worn by Miguel Ángel Rodríguez is missing the caps, so that cotton stuffing sticks out) when they're outside (even children at school), although this has the

effect of making everyone sound like Bain in *The Dark Knight Rises* (the sound quality when they're not wearing masks isn't so great, either).

Once inside the school building, Irina turns on a fan or ventilator or sanitiser or something that clears the room, at which point a sensor indicates it's safe to remove one's mask; her home also has such a device. Late in the the film, Irina and Axel run outside her house to escape the mutant rat, but it's raining, so they go back inside--this refers back to an earlier, seemingly irrelevant scene in which

Axel tells his students that "acid rain" is harmful to living beings. None of this is amazing, but it is "world-building" and demonstrates

some commitment to the premise. [A wall calendar in the background of one shot has been altered with Sharpie to read "2000," a nice touch.]

The performances are fine, with only 3 main roles (Irina, Axel, Roberto), 3 minor roles (Roberto's secretary, Axel's student, and exterminator Andrés) and a couple of bit parts. Miguel Ángel Rodríguez had been a major action star of the 1980s cinema, and he moved smoothly into *videohome* stardom. Rodríguez played a werewolf in *Colmillos--el hombre lobo* (Fangs--the Wolf Man, 1990), written by Rubén Galindo Jr.. [This picture had been originally announced in 1988 as a film Galindo would direct, but when filming started in late 1990 Galindo's former college classmate René Cardona III was at the helm.] Rodríguez plays a school science teacher in *La rata maldita* and in one sequence he teaches his class wearing a noteworthy, not-school-appropriate outfit (and this is what he wears for the rest of the movie): a blue mesh t-shirt and black leather pants with black suspenders. Stylish!

The villain in *La rata maldita* is played by Gerardo Albarrán. Albarrán, a stunt man who began appearing in films in the mid-1980s developed into a popular leading man in direct-to-video projects of the 1990s and beyond. As "Gerardo Moreno," he became a stunt coordinator. [Albarrán and Rodríguez were reunited with their *Pleito de colosos* (1989) co-star Rossana San Juan in *La rata maldita*.] The two actors have an extremely long fight at the end of *La rata maldita*--coincidentally, Rodríguez and Albarrán have another long battle in *Asesino del teatro*, also reviewed in this issue.

The mutant rat in *La rata maldita* was designed by Arturo Galicia, who had previously worked on *Ladrones de tumbas*, *Colmillos--el hombre lobo*, and an earlier *videohome* directed Rubén Galindo Jr., *Resucitaré para matarlos* [I Will Come Back to Life to Kill Them]. Galicia's company AnimaFX has also done special



effects work for numerous movies, TV shows, and commercials over the years. The rat (well, two rats are separately shown, but it's obviously the same suit/actor) is never seen clearly, but it's a shaggy, full-body suit with a vaguely rat-like face and a long tail.

La rata maldita is a decent little film, with good direction by Rubén Galindo Jr. One would have liked to see more of the mutant rat--and isn't it a coincidence that it was created by Roberto's lab (as a drawing Axel finds proves) and just happens to tunnel into Irina's house? [Perhaps it was put there deliberately--although Roberto wants Irina to sign over the factory to him, he isn't trying



to murder her--but since the dialogue in the film is so hard to hear that even if this was openly stated I wouldn't have picked up on it.] The last third of the film goes on forever,

with the aforementioned extended fight between Axel and Roberto and then--after Roberto has been killed by the rat--a long final battle between Roberto, Irina and the rat (with an intermission so Axel and Irina can have sex while the rat is right outside the bedroom door!). Also, Irina's house has at least 3 levels, and the spatial relationships become extremely confused, with constant running up and down, hiding in various rooms, going outside and coming back in, and so forth.

Still, for what it is, *La rata maldita* is satisfactory entertainment.

[Final note: although this film deals with pollution and not a pandemic, it's interesting to see the depiction of society's adaptation to the problem, with universal "mask" (respirator)-wearing (including school children), and ubiquitous devices that test indoor air-quality (and improve it?). Substitute "airborne virus" for "deadly air pollution" and *La rata maldita* would have easily qualified for the "Pandemic Películas" category.]



21st Century Terror

24 Cuadros de terror [24 Frames of Terror]
(Frontera Prods., 2008) *Exec Prod*: Ignacio García; *Prod*: Patricia Rojas, Miguel Kahan; *Dir-Scr*: Christian González; *Asst Dir*: Iván Cuevas; *Photo*: Rafa Sánchez; *Music*: Nahum Velázquez; *Prod Mgr*: Araceli R. Arózqueta; *Film Ed*: Carlos Espinosa; *Art Dir*: Johem; *Makeup*: Luz María Larraguivel; *Sound*: Abel Flores; *Sound Des*: Carlos Aguilar, Carlos Cano "Kanito"

Cast: Rafael Amaya (*Lady Killer*), Anna Ciochetti (*ghost twins*), Pamela Trueba (*Gilda*), Gerardo Murguía

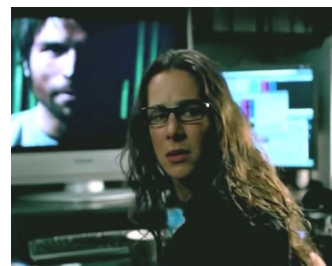
(*Lady Killer II*), Raquel Bustos (*Sofía*), Faisy (*Aldo*), Cony Madera (*Roberta*), Alberto Licea (*Ruy*), Mariana Urrutia (*Sonia, victim*), Luz Treviño (*Lucía, victim*), Jesús Arriaga (*El Loco*), Gabriela Melgoza (*photographer*)

Notes: Christian González is something of a cult director in Mexico. Since *Thanatos* (1985)--a film I've never been able to see--González has directed numerous theatrical films and *videohomes* (IMDB lists 90 directorial credits for him through 2017, which may be an undercount). His films generally fall into crime, fantasy, and "erotic thriller" genres (sometimes combining several or all).

There is some indication that *24 Cuadros de terror* was released theatrically, but in any case it did receive fairly wide distribution in other media and streaming. Unfortunately, it's not a particularly entertaining or interesting film.

Video editor Gilda breaks up with her boyfriend, a director. She suddenly gets a job offer to edit a feature film, but when she arrives at the address she's been given, her employer isn't home. Instead, he gives her directions over the phone to get into the suite where she can edit; food and drink are also available. Gilda discovers the footage she is expected to fashion into a film depicts a man murdering numerous women. She passes out from drugged wine.

When Gilda wakes up, she meets her employer, who is apparently not the same man in the snuff films. [He's credited as Lady Killer, so that's what we'll call him--he has no character name in the movie. The murderer in the original footage is credited as Lady Killer II.] However, Gilda is kept a prisoner until she edits the footage into the "greatest horror movie ever made." Lady Killer II later shows her film of him murdering her ex-boyfriend and the actors in his project. As time goes by, Gilda



commits to editing the project, making suggestions to improve its impact; she and Lady Killer II even have sex, but she is still a prisoner. Gilda has dreams in which she meets the ghost of one

of Lady Killer II's victims.

Gilda finally completes the film, and Lady Killer says they'll celebrate with champagne--she smashes the bottle into his head, unlocks the restraints on her ankles, and



tries to flee the building, but meets Lady Killer II at the door (which is odd, considering Lady Killer II was seen decapitating himself in video footage). Lady Killer II gives her an ice pick and Gilda stabs Lady Killer to death.

Gilda's friend Sofia arrives at the building. Gilda is nowhere to be seen, but she gives Sofia instructions to get into the editing suite and watch the completed film (we see nearly 4 minutes of death scenes at this point, as the filmmaker attempts to get to the 90-minute runtime mark, but fails). Sofia is shocked; she passes out (more drugged wine). When she awakes, she sees Gilda on the screen, and is then (presumably) murdered by Gilda, who is the new Lady Killer.

24 cuadros de terror has a number of confusing aspects. Some of these, upon further reflection, can be rationalised: the two different Lady Killers (actually there are 3, and I have a hard time determining which is which) and the ghost, for instance. However, there are a number of inexplicable other aspects. (1) Gilda goes to work at her new job, and calls her friend Sofia (also a film editor) when the situation seems mysterious. Sofia agrees to come see her (we see Sofia in her car, at night).



And yet, when Sofia arrives at the end of the movie, it's daytime (not to mention this would suggest the events of the film all took place in one day, which is

unbelievable). (2) Gilda rushes for her job interview, packing her laptop and external hard drive (presumably containing her show reel or something). Then she's imprisoned by Lady Killer for at least a few days (and probably longer), wearing a wide variety of outfits that she got from...? (Did Lady Killer have a wardrobe ready for her?) (3) Lady Killer II is shown filming his murders with a small video camera, but there are shots which are not consistent with a first-person camera. (4) Several times, Lady Killer panics and appears to fear someone, but this is never explained. (5) As the film opens, Gilda is looking at footage provided by her boyfriend, who proposes editing it into a documentary or something--this footage is of (the future) Lady Killer talking to the camera, although he has a different hairstyle than he does later in the film. Is this supposed to be the same person? Or is it...significant? (6) Gilda interacts with a blonde ghost of a victim, who claims to be a "twin" (and the credits confirm this), but I don't think her twin (who has dark hair) is seen as a ghost, only as a victim (I could be wrong).

The conclusion of the film makes sense to a certain extent, but is illogical in other ways. Gilda becomes the new Lady Killer, having found her "true self," but this is

never explained properly--while she seems to become inured to the violence she's seeing in the videos (although when Lady Killer forces her to record one of his murders (of a friend of hers) in person--taping the video camera to her hand--she passes out), it's suggested she is suppressing her true feelings so she can complete her work and then escape (or, improbably, be freed by Lady Killer). She attacks Lady Killer so she can escape, and only kills him after being given an ice pick by (the ghost of?) Lady Killer II--so in the space of a minute or so (between hitting Lady Killer with the champagne bottle and running into Lady Killer II at the door) she suddenly decides to become a serial killer? [Also, as noted above, the scenes with Sofia throw the whole timeline off.]

24 Cuadros de terror is not as sleazy as one might expect: there is no nudity (only a split-second of Gilda topless), and the murders are grim and unpleasant but there are no extreme gore effects. Technically it's not bad--although

obviously low-budget, the photography is good, mixing the low-tech videos of Lady Killer II's murders,

"medium"-tech footage of Lady Killer's killings, and the slick "real" scenes of Gilda and Lady Killer in his lair. The music score is deliberately abrasive and noisy. Pamela Trueba (who slightly resembles Sandra Bullock) and Rafael Amaya (who looks a bit like John Travolta from certain angles) are fine; most of the rest of the cast is adequate in their brief screen time.

Not horrible, but vague, "arty," and narratively illogical. I don't require that everything in a film is explained clearly, but *24 Cuadros de terror* spends far too much time getting to its predictable "twist" ending.



Belzebuth (Pastorela Películas-FIDECINE-IMCINE, ©2018)* *Exec Prod*: Ana Hernández, Georgina Terán; *Prod*: Rodrigo Herranz Fanjul, Emilio Portés; *Line Prod*: Ana Hernández; *Dir*: Emilio Portés; *Scr*: Luis Carlos Fuentes Ávila, Emilio Portés; *Photo*: Ramón Orozco Stoltenberg; *Music*: Aldo Max Rodríguez; *Film Ed*: Rodrigo Rios Legaspi, Emilio Portés; *Prod Des*: Carlos Lagunas; *Makeup Des*: Roberto Ortiz; *SpecFX*: Arvizu FX; *Stunt Coord*: Balo Bucio; *Sound Des*: Christian Giraud, Alejandro de Icaza; *Visual FX Prod*: Cyntia Navarro; *Visual FX*: Othon Reynoso, Polar Studio, Melocotón Studio, Frame FX; *Union*: STIC, STPC Técnico y Manuales, ANDA

*shot in 2015, released in Mexico in 2019

Cast: Joaquín Cosío (*Emmanuel Ritter*), Tobin Bell (*Vasilio Canetti*), Tate Ellington (*Ivan Franco*), José



Sefami (*Demetrio Vega*), Yunuen Pardo (*Beatriz*), Liam Villa (*Isa*), Carlos Conde Fabregat (*Belzebuth*), Giovanna Zacarías (*Leonor, la bruja*), Aurora Gil (*Marina Ritter*), Aida López (*Elena*), Norma Angélica (*doña Eulalia*), Enoc Leño (*Nájera*), Alondra Benítez (*kindergarten teacher*), Boris Schoemann (*bishop*), Felipe Tututi (*Enzo*), Damaris Rubio (*reporter*), Diana

Solano (*possessed nurse*), Carlos Manzano (*cousin Jonathan*), Carlos A. Gómez Marroquín & Fernando Rojasbarr (*Vasilio's bodyguards*)

Notes: *Belzebuth* is a well-made horror film which is slightly related to Emilio Portés' *Pastorela* (2011)--made with a number of the same cast & crew members--which won Best Picture (and 6 other awards) in the 2012 Arieles (reviewed in *MFB* 18/3, July-Aug 2012). *Belzebuth* was nominated for 6 Arieles in 2020, winning two: Best Visual FX and Best Special FX. *Pastorela* is a strange but entertaining fantasy-comedy while *Belzebuth* is a more conventional and "internationalised" horror film (and did receive widespread distribution outside of Mexico, whereas *Pastorela* may have been too "Mexican" and unconventional in form and content to appeal to foreign audiences).

[This is not to say *Belzebuth* has no Mexican flavour, but it's pretty "accessible" to international viewers. One reference which foreign viewers may miss is the presence of La Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde images in the underground "chapel" in the tunnel.]

A series of massacres of children occurs in northern



Mexico over a period of time: a teenager shoots up a kindergarten, a nurse slays the

babies in a neo-natal unit of a hospital, a housekeeper electrocutes children swimming in an indoor pool, a man blows up a cinema. All of the murderers also commit suicide. The newborn son of policeman Emmanuel Ritter is one of the hospital victims, and his wife later commits suicide in grief.

Franco and a specialised forensics team arrive at the kindergarten site. Franco shows a skeptical Ritter what they've found: evidence that the souls of the children (or

at least remnants of their consciousness) still exist in the locations where they died. There are occult signs on the walls. Franco says defrocked priest Vasilio Canetti was seen in close proximity to several of the massacres. Ritter and Franco visit a church in a deserted town where they are confronted by the demon Belzebuth, inhabiting a (pretty impressive) large figure of Christ. Ritter sees his dead wife and child and attacks Franco, but Vasilio appears and knocks the policeman out with a Taser.

Vasilio and a group of heavily armed men live in a airplane "graveyard." They are guarding Beatriz and her young son Isa: Vasilio tells Ritter and Franco that Isa is the new Messiah. The Devil's minions are trying to kill him, hence the massacres of children. Isa and his mother need to cross the border to the USA so they can reach a secret, protected monastery where the child will be safe.

Ritter, Franco, Vasilio, Beatriz, Isa, and several of Vasilio's men enter a tunnel that runs under the border. However, partway through their journey, Ritter is possessed by the demon, kills Vasilio's men, and threatens Isa's life. Vasilio cuts Isa's hand and uses the boy's blood to exorcise Ritter; the former priest trades his own soul for the power to imprison Belzebuth in a huge boulder for eternity, then dies. Ritter, Franco, Beatriz, and Isa escape, then blow up the tunnel to trap Belzebuth forever.



Franco, actually a priest, reports to the Vatican. Isa is safe, under the guardianship of Ritter (who can never again be possessed by evil), until such time as the boy can take his place as the Messiah.

Belzebuth's plot has a number of twists and surprises--for example, Vasilio is initially portrayed as a suspect, then becomes heroic, seems to have turned evil, and finally saves the day and sacrifices himself--but the basic plot is not particularly unique. Ritter is nominally the protagonist but for a large chunk of the last hour he's a dangerous villain, killing his best friend on the police force and a number of others. Prior to this he's shown to be conflicted and still grieving about the death of his wife and son, and while this seems to contribute in some way to Belzebuth's ability to possess Ritter's body, it's not the only factor (and it's unclear exactly when Ritter is possessed: was it in the church, but then the demon went dormant until the tunnel, or was he...re-possessed?). There are some other ambiguous points, including the timeline. Franco's role is also confusing: at first he seems to be a member of a law enforcement agency, and has numerous assistants, but these people disappear and are never heard of again, leaving Franco on his own, and

then the conclusion indicates he's been a Vatican secret agent the whole time?

These are minor issues. Overall, *Belzebuth* is extremely entertaining and exciting, morphing from a supernatural mystery into a full-blown, mega-*Exorcist* horror film that keeps getting louder and more intense for what seems like an hour, before coming to a happy ending (unless you're *Belzebuth*). The performances are good: Cosío, Bell (from the *Saw* series) Ellington (who's been around for more than a decade in films and on television, but I can't say I'd ever heard of him before) and José Sefami stand out, but no one else has much to do (Yunuen Pardo and Liam Villa are on-screen quite a bit, but Pardo mostly screams and looks scared, while Villa is fine but he's a little kid, after all).

Well-produced, directed, written and acted.



Ready, Willing and Abel Salazar

El caso de la mujer asesinadita [The Case of the Murdered Woman] (Filmex, 1954) *Prod:* Abel Salazar; *Dir-Adapt:* Tito Davison; *Orig. Play:* Miguel Mihura & Álvaro de la Iglesia; *Photo:* Agustín Martínez Solares; *Music:* Antonio Díaz Conde; *Prod Chief:* Luis G. Rubín; *Asst Dir:* Manuel Muñoz; *Film Ed:* Gloria Schoemann; *Art Dir:* Jorge Fernández; *Lighting:* Juan



Durán;
Camera Op:
José A.
Carrasco;
Makeup:
Carmen
Palomino;
Cost:
Armando
Valdés Peza;
Music/Re-rec:
Enrique
Rodríguez;
Dialog Rec:
Rodolfo
Solís; *Studio:*
San Ángel
Inn

Cast:

Jorge Mistral (Francisco "Frank" Payeiro), Gloria Marín (Mercedes), Abel Salazar (Lorenzo), Martha Roth (Raquel González), Prudencia Grifell (Sra. Llopis), Amparo Arozamena (Teresa), Carlota Solares (Rosaura), Jesús Valero (Sr. Arturo Llopis Jr.), Armando Arroela [sic] (Renato), Victorio Blanco (chimney sweep), men in meeting: Daniel Arroyo, Carlos Robles Gil, Ignacio Peón; Tito Davison (?Mr. Davison)

Notes: I started watching this film in the fall of 2018, intending to review it for that year's *MFB* Halloween issue, only to discover that the copy I had recorded from cable television (several years earlier) was incomplete,

due to a cable failure. However, I subsequently obtained a complete copy, and that's what I'm reviewing now.

El caso de la mujer asesinadita was based on a 1946 Spanish play, and had been filmed in Argentina in 1949 as *El extraño caso de la mujer asesinadita*. The first version is available on YouTube (a very poor copy), and while I haven't watched it in its entirety, the conclusion is a bit more literal than the Mexican film: amid clouds, Mercedes (Argentine actress María Duval, not to be confused with the later Mexican actress with the same name) and Frank (George Rigaud) literally walk away on a winding path



to Heaven. In the 1954 film, Frank and Mercedes are seen in closeup, in separate ovals, superimposed against the backdrop of a night sky.

Having not seen or read the play, I can't say what changes were made in *El caso de la mujer asesinadita* from stage to screen, but two sequences stand out as strong suspects. In one sequence, Frank and Mercedes tour an art gallery, discuss the paintings, and reinforce their relationship. Shortly afterwards, they sit on a couch in her living room and share a "psychic" experience. The first scene adds only a little to the characterisations and required a new set, so this seems unlikely to have been in the play (at least in the same form), and the second scene uses some optical effects (the screen is briefly split horizontally, with Frank and Mercedes seated in the bottom half, and their mental images at the top--she's dressed like Marie Antoinette and he's in his American Indian costume) which again would probably not have been done in a stage version. There is also a very brief scene of the servants using a Ouija board which is rather pointless.

As the film opens, Mercedes is engrossed in a Western novel by Karl May titled "El terror de las praderas" (Terror of the Plains). She takes a sleeping pill from a host of bottles in a cabinet (one of them is marked "Poison," a Chekhov's Pill Bottle, so to speak), drops it in a glass of milk, and settles down on her sofa to read, but swiftly falls asleep. Her servants--maid Teresa, cook Rosaura, gardener Renato--come in, smoke her cigarettes, and chat. After a time, Mercedes wakes and goes upstairs to bed (her husband Lorenzo is attending a banquet and won't be home until later). [In a subtle hint that things aren't as they may seem, Teresa brings a bird cage downstairs and covers it with a cloth--but there's a kitten inside!]

The door to the house opens and Lorenzo and Raquel enter; it's raining outside, and they caught a ride with someone on his horse (!)--Frank enters, dressed as an

American Indian warrior (the same costume as the Native American on the cover of "El terror de las praderas"). Frank says "How!" a lot and speaks awkward Spanish. His favourite phrase is "One is an Indian. And we the Indians only think about the vast plains, the sombre valleys, and the pale faces who pursue us and humiliate us." Lorenzo and Raquel explain that they're married and this is their house. Lorenzo was



married before, telling Frank "Divorce is forbidden here. I killed her." Raquel--his former secretary with whom he was having an affair--adds "I helped a lot!" Mercedes comes downstairs and confronts the intruders, who insist the house is theirs. In a clever sequence, Lorenzo, Raquel and Mercedes alternate giving detailed descriptions of the house to "prove" their point. However, when the servants are summoned, all side with Mercedes. Lorenzo, Raquel and Frank depart, and Mercedes sits on the sofa and dozes off, only to awake a short time later and realise it was all a dream (the cage now holds a canary instead of a cat). Lorenzo comes home later and says he's hired a private typist to help him prepare a report, and the details about her (an orphan, 5 brothers and sisters, one of whom has whooping cough) match Mercedes' dream, which upsets her.

[One curious thing about this dream, in retrospect, is that Mercedes doesn't recognise Lorenzo as her husband, nor does she seem to later recognise Raquel when the secretary appears in real-life. However, she does recognise Frank when he shows up (even though he was dressed as a Native American in her dream and is wearing a business suit in real-life).]

The next day, Raquel does appear--wearing an extremely tight sweater and skirt--to type Lorenzo's "expert report." Mercedes tries to prevent them from being alone in his home office, but fails. However, she's soon distracted by the arrival of Frank, a business associate of Lorenzo from the USA. Mercedes and Frank are strangely attracted to each other, and discover that they each had a dream on the night of September 24th in which the other person appeared. They touch finger-tips, and suddenly an elderly couple enter the house. Sr. and Sra. Llopis say they heard the house was for rent because the owner's wife was murdered! They claim they've been searching for a home since their house burned to the ground, 5 years earlier. Mercedes

convinces them that the house isn't for rent, and they depart. However, this all apparently happened in a split-second, because when Frank and Mercedes separate their fingers, everything is back to normal. Mercedes call the telephone number the Llopis had given her, and learns the couple died in a fire, 5 years before.

Time passes and Mercedes and Frank realise they have a psychic bond, and the dream was one manifestation of this. Frank says in his dream, he died in an automobile accident at the exact moment Mercedes passed away from poisoning. Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Raquel develop an attraction; after Lorenzo's report is done, Raquel departs but Lorenzo later hires her to work at his company. On Christmas Eve, Mercedes and Lorenzo have planned a party, but the weather is so bad that Frank is the only guest; Mercedes then invites Raquel as well. In the kitchen, Lorenzo declares his love to Raquel: he says he'll divorce Mercedes, but Raquel indicates divorce is forbidden, and she'd never marry a divorced man anyway. Lorenzo vows he'd even commit a crime to be free of Mercedes so he can wed Raquel.

Frank--who is leaving for the USA the next day--and Raquel depart (since it's raining, he says he'll drop her off at her house). Mercedes tells Lorenzo she has a headache, and asks him to bring her a glass of milk and one of her headache tablets from the cabinet: she warns him to be careful of the label, so he doesn't "accidentally" pick the bottle of poison (apparently it's heart medicine which can be fatal if over-dosed). Mercedes drinks the milk and closes her eyes...Meanwhile, Frank (having dropped Raquel off) is driving through a heavy rainstorm, and crashes head-on into a truck.

Frank and Mercedes are reunited in the after-life, and will be together for eternity.

The conclusion of *El caso de la mujer asesinadita* is romantic and melodramatic, but it's also ambiguous.



Mercedes essentially commits suicide by giving Lorenzo the means and opportunity to poison her (although it was his decision in

the end), whereas Frank dies accidentally. Both of these deaths were foretold by the original dream, but it's still mildly odd that Mercedes and Frank don't both die by accident, or both basically commit suicide.

The film is quite amusing at times, then veers into romance, and also contains a significant amount of supernatural and/or philosophical material. The idea that

Frank and Mercedes are soul-mates is not unusual, except that their entire "relationship" occurs in a 3-month period (24 September-24 December). There's no suggestion that the marriage between Lorenzo and Mercedes is dysfunctional, although very little of their life is shown before Raquel and Frank arrive (although why she didn't go with Lorenzo to the banquet on 24 September isn't explained). As the film begins, Mercedes is depicted as distracted, dreamy, perhaps neurotic or hypochondriac, but not necessarily unhappy. *El caso de la mujer asesinadita* thus suggests that Fate might someday throw two strangers together, causing them to fall in love (and not just love, but super-love), and yet won't allow them to be happy in life (only in the after-life), which is not exactly a happy premise.

El caso de la mujer asesinadita is a trifle long (about 102 minutes, versus 78 minutes for the Argentine version, at least in existing prints). As noted above, there are several scenes which feel "interpolated," but are not necessarily padding, and in general the pacing is fine. Including the opening credits, the first "act" (the events of 24 September) runs about 33 minutes, the second--which includes the "extra" scenes--is 44 minutes long, and the final act (Christmas Eve) lasts about 25 minutes.

Tito Davison's direction is assured without being especially stylish. There are some nicely-framed shots, but no notable directorial flourishes. The cinematography and art direction are quite good. The performances are also top-notch: Gloria Marín gets the most attention, but Mistral, Salazar, and Roth are very satisfactory as well, and the supporting players are seasoned veterans and make the most of their limited screen time.

Trivia note: in the scene in which Frank delivers Lorenzo's report to a board of directors, Frank calls one of the men "Mr. Davison." It's unclear if this is actually director Davison (who was an actor before he began directing) in a cameo role, or just an in-joke.

El caso de la mujer asesinadita is quite well-made and entertaining, a good example of the high-gloss Mexican cinema of the 1945-55 period.



El hombre y el monstruo [The Man and the Monster] (Cinematográfica ABSA, 1958) *Prod:* Abel Salazar; *Dir:* Rafael Baledón; *Adapt:* Alfredo Salazar; *Story:* Raúl Zenteno; *Photo:* Raúl Martínez Solares; *Music:* Gustavo César Carrión; *Pianist:* María Teresa Rodríguez; *Prod Mgr:* Alfredo Salazar; *Prod Chief:* Paul Castelain; *Asst Dir:* Felipe Palomino; *Film Ed:* Carlos Savage; *Art Dir:* Javier Torres Torija; *Camera Op:* Cirilo Rodríguez; *Lighting:* Carlos Nájera; *Makeup:* Armando Mayer [sic]; *Sound Supv:* James L. Fields; *Dialog Rec:* Manuel Topete; *Music/Re-rec:* Galdino Samperio "Crucy"; *Sound Ed:* Reynaldo P. Portillo; *SpFX:* Juan Muñoz Ravelo; *Studio:* Churubusco-Azteca; *Union:* STPC

English-language version: *The Man and the Monster*: *Prod:* K. Gordon Murray; *Dir:* Paul Nagle

Cast: Enrique Rambal (*Samuel Magno*), Abel Salazar (*Ricardo Souto*), Martha Roth (*Laura*; *Alejandra Meyer*), Ofelia Guilmáin (*doña Cornelia*), Ana Laura Baledón (*little girl*), José Chávez [Trowe] (*police inspector*), Mari Carmen Vela (*blonde victim*), Carlos Suárez (*Cosme*), Armando Gutiérrez (*hotel mgr*), Jesús Gómez (*Ramón, policeman*), María Cecelia Leger (*woman in conservatory*), Carlos Henning (*man in audience*), Armando Acosta (*man on stage at climax*)

Notes: *El hombre y el monstruo* is a fine entry in the ABSA series of horror movies, a Faust/werewolf

movie directed with style by Rafael Baledón. There are some plot holes and production gaffes, but some care was obviously exercised in making the picture, and the plot is different enough to be interesting.

The main reason *El hombre y el monstruo* does not achieve classic film status is the ludicrous monster makeup. For whatever reason, the monster is given a outsized nose, giant eyebrows, and prominent teeth, a result more laughable than horrific. [The design looks like a cross between the Fredric March Mr. Hyde in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and the Wolfman.] Like *Ladrón de cadáveres*, the progressive makeup goes a step too far--the iconic still of the monster from *Ladrón de cadáveres* is actually not the final version, which looks too much like an ape, and the creature in *El hombre y el monstruo* is far too exaggerated to be effective. Even a slightly smaller nose would have greatly improved the final product. In later years, effective werewolf-type creatures did appear in pictures like *Santo y Blue Demon* vs. *Drácula y el Hombre Lobo* and even *Capulina contra los monstruos*, but *El hombre y el monstruo* is irreparably harmed by the design (not necessarily the execution) of the titular monster.

This is a shame, because the rest of the film is quite good in almost all ways: direction, photography, acting. The script has a few issues. At times it seems Monster-Samuel is actually a separate person, since he refers to Samuel as if he's talking about someone else, and Samuel doesn't remember what he does when he's a monster. This would seem to negate the whole purpose of Samuel



selling his soul to become the world's greatest pianist (since it's not really him who is playing). But this isn't even consistent throughout the film--in the flash-back to Samuel's first transformation, he calls doña Cornelia "mother" and is surprised that he now has a monstrous face.

Also, Monster-Samuel's murder of the woman in the pre-credits sequence and the little girl late in the film is largely unmotivated--as if he's just a vicious a werewolf, which is not actually the case (when he's a monster he's rational, if horrible-looking). His other murders (and attempted murders) have a "logical" reason (= people



who threaten him in one way or another, although I guess one could argue that the stranded motorist

and the little girl could have identified him). A more subtle premise would have been for Samuel to become the world's greatest pianist but not only turn monstrously ugly when he plays, meaning he can never play in public (unless he wore a mask, which seems feasible), but also that he has to kill one person before each concert. This would set up a moral dilemma for Samuel, his "monstruous ambition" (as his mother aptly describes it) vs. the lives of others, and provide a motivation for his murders, which is lacking in the film as it stands.

Finally, the *denouement* of the film, in which Samuel turns into the monster as Laura plays the devil's music, contradicts the rest of the movie to that point, which shows Samuel transforming as he plays (and not just his "signature" theme--he's playing Tchaikovsky when he kills the little girl).

It is almost certainly not Enrique Rambal in most if not all of the monster scenes. Certainly it's not Rambal in the hotel sequence where the monster lifts a man over his head and body-slams him (the monster also body-slams Abel Salazar's double in the final scene). The monster's dialogue is post-dubbed (the goofy teeth probably prevented the actor from speaking in any case) so the likelihood is that a double donned the makeup most of the time (aside from the time-lapse montages of Rambal transforming).

Concert promoter Ricardo happens upon a wrecked car in a rural area of Mexico. He finds the injured driver and goes to a nearby house to ask for assistance, but is turned away. The woman dies. The local police are satisfied she died as a result of the crash, despite being found outside the vehicle. Ricardo books a hotel room in

the nearby town: he is looking for reclusive pianist Samuel Magno. As it develops, Samuel lives in the old house Ricardo had visited earlier. When he returns there, Ricardo learns Samuel no longer plays the piano, but has a brilliant young protégé, Laura. However, Samuel's mother, the austere doña Cornelia, orders Ricardo to leave.

Ricardo sneaks into the house at night and finds the mummified body of a woman, clutching a strange piece of sheet music. He takes the music and departs. When the robbery is discovered, Samuel's mother compels him to play the piano, at which time he transforms into a hairy beast. In flashback, the story unfolds: Samuel was jealous of Alejandra, a fine pianist and vowed to sell his soul to become the greatest pianist in the world. After murdering Alejandra in her dressing room with a pair of scissors, Samuel takes her body to his remote house and plays a piece of music she had with her: as he plays, he becomes a monster and realises this is his curse: he's the greatest pianist in the world, but transforms whenever he plays the piano.

The bestial Samuel visits Ricardo's hotel room, killing a man (who had switched rooms with Ricardo), and battling Ricardo before fleeing with the music. Returning to his house, Samuel nearly murders Laura--perceiving her as a threat to his ranking as the world's greatest pianist--but is dissuaded by his mother. The trio departs for the city, where Laura is to make her concert debut soon. Ricardo convinces the police to search Samuel's house, but the inhabitants--and Alejandra's corpse--are gone.

At the concert venue, Samuel--for some reason--thinks the curse will be ended when Laura performs. He starts to burn the music (Alejandra has also been reduced to ashes, which he carries around in a small wooden box) but is distracted by some (bad)



piano playing. A young girl is butchering Tchaikovsky in a practice room; Samuel unwisely decides to give her a few pointers, turns into the monster, and kills her (off-screen). Ricardo arrives and pockets the remnants of the sheet music; he later asks Laura to play it during her concert, when Samuel will be conducting the orchestra. She does--Samuel transforms and attacks her right on stage! Ricardo intervenes but is losing when a policeman shoots Samuel to death. Samuel reverts to his normal appearance.

As noted above, *El hombre y el monstruo* is effectively directed by Rafael Baledón, who makes the

most of a small budget. Set-ups and camera angles are well chosen, and the editing is effective. For instance, during the orchestral portion of the final concert, Baledón wasn't satisfied to shoot the concert hall with a single master shot, he intercuts three different angles of the audience and stage with close-ups of Enrique Rambal conducting the orchestra. The murder of Alejandra begins with a shot of the pianist looking in a mirror, with



Samuel shown in the reflection; he steps into the shot with her, then there's a cut to a hand mirror on her dressing table, upon

which rests a pair of scissors. Alejandra and Samuel's faces are reflected in this mirror, upside-down, as Samuel grasps the scissors and prepares to cut her throat (we don't see the actual murder, but her slashed throat is visible in subsequent shots of her body). It's obvious Baledón cared about making films, even low-budget ones, and while his personal style isn't as obvious (or outré) as that of, for instance, Chano Urueta, Baledón's films are almost without exception superior in terms of direction.

Trivia notes: while Martha Roth remains admirably still in most of her scenes as the dead Alejandra (complete with nicely understated makeup), in her final appearance she clearly blinks just as Enrique Rambal opens the door to her room. She's facing away from the camera so we only get a profile image of her, but she definitely blinks.

Roth and Abel Salazar had previously appeared together in *Se le pasó la mano*, *Quiéreme porque me muero* and *El caso de la mujer asesinada*; these three films were all comedies.

Ana Laura Baledón, the girl murdered by Samuel for playing the piano badly, was the daughter of director Baledón and his actress-wife Lilia Michel (the couple had 5 children, including Rafael Baledón Jr., who became an actor and director himself). Ana Laura Baledón does not appear to have continued her acting career after this appearance.

In sum: good film, bad monster.



La cabeza viviente [The Living Head]

(Cinematográfica ABSA, 1961) *Prod*: Abel Salazar; *Dir*: Chano Urueta; *Scr*: Federico Curiel, A[dolfo] López Portillo; *Photo*: José Ortiz Ramos; *Music*: Gustavo César Carrión; *Prod Mgr*: Luis García de León; *Prod Chief*: Luis G. Rubín; *Asst Dir*: Mario Cisneros; *Film Ed*: Alfredo Rosas Priego; *Art Dir*: Roberto Silva; *Camera*

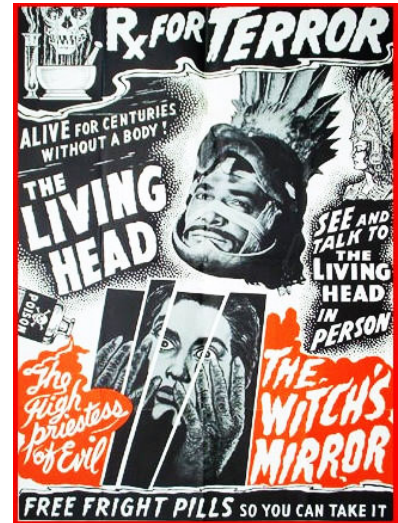
Op: José León Sánchez; *Lighting*: Luis Medina; *SpFX*: Juan Muñoz Ravelo; *Makeup*: María del Castillo; *Asst Ed*: Ramón Aupart; *Sound Supv*: James L. Fields; *Dialog Rec*: J. González Gancy; *Re-rec*: Galdino Samperio; *Sound Ed*: Abraham Cruz; *Studio*: Churubusco-Azteca; *Union*: STPC

English-language version: *The Living Head*
Prod: K. Gordon Murray; *Dir*: Manuel San Fernando

Cast: Ana Luisa Peluffo

(*Marta*; *Xochiquetzal*), Mauricio Garcés (*Roberto*; *Acatl*), Abel Salazar (*Insp. Toledo*), Germán Robles (*Prof. Muller*), Guillermo Cramer (*Xiu*), Antonio Raxel (*Urquizo*), Eric del Castillo (*detective*), Salvador Lozano (*Rivas*), Alvaro Matute (*medical examiner*)

Notes: one of the lesser ABSA horror movies, *La cabeza viviente* runs less than 80 minutes, has a small cast and limited sets/locations (90% of the film takes place in one house), and doesn't really deliver much of the promised "killer mummy" action (and although everyone refers to Xiu as a "mummy," he looks exactly like he did when he was alive). The basic premise is similar to the Calderón "Aztec Mummy" films, combined with *Muñecos infernales* (group of people marked for death for offending religious sensibilities of others), not to mention all of the Universal "Mummy" films that had come before.



The film begins with a sequence set in "1525"-- much of the spectacle here is footage lifted from earlier films-- as Aztec priest Xiu sacrifices a man (holding his heart aloft) who allowed warrior Acatl to be killed. Xiu and the reluctant Xochiquetzal are entombed with the

mummified head of Acatl. Scientists Muller, Urquizo, and Rivas enter Acatl's tomb in "1963." [this is odd: the on-screen dates jump from "1525" to "1661", "1761", etc. but when they hit the 20th century, it's suddenly "1963"--although *La cabeza viviente* was shot in March 1961, it wasn't released until early 1963. Perhaps the final date was changed once the release was finalised? The font for "1963" is different than all of the other superimposed years in this montage.] Xochiquetzal's body crumbles into dust before their eyes (oddly enough, Muller doesn't notice that she looks exactly like his daughter Marta), but they see the preserved (albeit cobwebby) body of Xiu, and Acatl's head (which opens its eyes when their back is turned).

[A model of Acatl's head used in some shots, and Mauricio Garcés is seen in others. The model doesn't really look like Garcés, especially the nose.]



Muller takes Acatl and Xiu back to his house. Muller's assistant Roberto thinks Xiu has moved from his (upright) coffin, but Muller scoffs until the body of Rivas is discovered, his heart sliced out (and left in front of Acatl's head), and Xiu's obsidian dagger is dripping blood!

Muller's daughter Marta (the spitting image of Xochiquetzal) feels weird, both before and after she finds the murder victim. She's wearing the golf-ball sized "ring of death"--which has a large, blinking light in it--formerly the property of Xochiquetzal. When Muller and the others found the ring in the pile of dust that was formerly the Aztec princess, they all remarked about how horrible it looked and how "no one would wear that," to which Muller said "I know someone who would." And that "someone" was presumably Marta, although we never saw him give it to her.

[Urquizo fears Rivas is the victim of the Aztec curse they read about while in the tomb. Muller tells him "today there are rockets...but no ghosts or devils or vampires." An in-joke reference to *El vampiro*?]

The second to die is Urquizo. Although Marta was not involved in the murder of Rivas (she was at her piano lesson), Xiu compels a hypnotised Marta (still in her nightgown) to carry the head of Acatl (on a tray) to Urquizo's house. How the undead Aztec warrior and

Marta get to Urquizo's house (which is clearly indicated to be some distance from Muller's home) is unclear. Did they take a cab? Walk? Urquizo, by the way, has a framed photograph of himself, Rivas, and Muller in the Aztec tomb on his desk--who took this photo? They were alone in the tomb (it was a low-budget archeological expedition). No matter, Xiu and Marta confront Urquizo, who--after shooting at Xiu, to no effect--has his heart removed (off-screen). Marta wakes up in her bed, screaming. She tosses the ring out the window (way to treat a priceless archeological artifact and gift from your father!). Roberto drives up and parks--in front of a back-projected image of a forest, which contradicts the earlier sequence in which Muller's house has a terrace overlooking a large city--spots the ring, and pockets it.

Muller gets a call about Urquizo's murder, and Marta says she dreamed about it--and also dreamed about Rivas, but didn't tell anyone. Roberto finds Urquizo's heart in front of Acatl's head, blood on Xiu's dagger, and bullet-holes in Xiu's stomach. [Blood is still dripping from the heart and the dagger, although it's been quite some time since the murder; also, Xiu's wounds apparently bled also, even though he's been dead for more than 400 years.] Roberto is convinced, but when Muller returns (with two police bodyguards), the scientist still refuses to believe in the curse.

Even though Marta discarded the ring, Xiu is still able to control her; he tries to get her to stab Muller, but one of the detectives intervenes and is killed. [Mere seconds later, Roberto and the other detective enter Muller's room and...it's empty! Is this house full of secret passages or what?] Taken to another room, Muller awakes and convinces his daughter to spare his life. Xiu starts to commit the murder himself (after all, he killed Rivas and Urquizo), but Acatl--finally!--talks (like Xiu, he speaks modern Spanish) and stops him. Roberto, like a dunce, puts on the Ring of Death (sometimes it's called the Eye of Death, or perhaps it's the Eye of Death on the Ring of Death) and is ordered to kill Marta. However, Acatl--finally!--recognises that Roberto is his double and Marta is the reincarnation of Xochiquetzal, and calls it all off. Inspector Toledo arrives, shoots Xiu and the Ring of Death; Acatl

and Xiu crumble into dust.

Muller: "No one has the right to disturb the peace of the dead." So I guess he'll have to find another career.

La cabeza viviente doesn't contain much of the Chano Urueta style, unlike films such as *El espejo de la bruja* and *El barón del terror*, which are far superior (not to



mention ABSA productions like *El vampiro* and *El hombre y el monstruo*, made by other directors--to be fair, probably on larger budgets). It's shot mostly in a flat, non-atmospheric style, on anodyne sets. [There are a few examples of Urueta's penchant for obvious back-projection rather than any sort of location shooting.] The plot is thin and re-hashes previous mummy pictures, but in a drab and uninteresting manner. Even a few stabs at horror (get it? Because Xiu stabs people?) such as the graphic bleeding hearts don't provide much excitement. The numerous illogical aspects and outright gaffes are somehow more annoying here than in, for example, *El barón del terror*, because that film was so outrageously entertaining.

One of the irritating aspects of *La cabeza viviente* is the characterisation of Xiu, played by veteran screen villain Guillermo Cramer (who, to be fair, does a good job of remaining motionless in numerous scenes). As noted above, he's called a "mummy" but isn't visibly mummified at all--he's therefore not a "monster," just a murderer, who uses a knife. Sometimes Xiu walks stiffly, but in other scenes he moves normally and in fact very rapidly. He simply isn't scary, and Acatl's head doesn't do enough to qualify as frightening, either.

La cabeza viviente is fairly well-known thanks to the K. Gordon Murray dubbed version that played theatrically and on television as *The Living Head*, but it's certainly no classic.



2020 ARIEL AWARDS



The 2020 Ariel Awards ceremony was held on 27 September 2020. Although based in the studios of TV channel 22 in Mexico City, the event was largely a virtual one. The night's big winner was *Ya no estoy aquí*--13 nominations, 10 awards--while *Esto no es Berlin* and *Polvo* (with 12 and 11 nominations each) were shut out. Lifetime Achievement Arieles de Oro went to

actress María Rojo and composer Lucía Álvarez.

(winners underlined)

Best Film

Asfixia
Cómprame un revólver
Esto no es Berlin
Polvo
Ya no estoy aquí

Best Director

Kenya Márquez *Asfixia*
Julio Hernández Córdón *Cómprame un revólver*
Hari Sama *Esto no es Berlin*

José María Yazpik *Polvo*
Fernando Frías de la Parra *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Actor

Benny Emmanuel *Chicuarotes*
Xabiani Ponce de León *Esto no es Berlin*
Armando Hernández *La paloma y el lobo*
Luis Alberti *Mano de obra*
José María Yazpik *Polvo*

Best Actress

Verónica Langer *Clases de historia*
Flor Eduarda Gurrola *Luciérnagas*
Mariana Treviño *Polvo*
Cassandra Ciangherotti *Solteras*
Giovanna Zacarías *Sonora*

Best Supporting Actor

Raúl Briones *Asfixia*
Sostenes Rojas *Cómprame un revólver*
Daniel Giménez Cacho *Chicuarotes*
Adrian Vazquez *Polvo*
Juan Manuel Bernal *Sonora*

Best Supporting Actress

Mónica del Carmen *Asfixia*
Dolores Heredia *Chicuarotes*
Bárbara Mori *El complot mongol*
Ximena Romo *Esto no es Berlin*
Dolores Heredia *Sonora*

Best Upcoming Actor or Actress

Azul Magaña Muñiz *Asfixia*
Johana Fragozo Blendl *Asfixia*
Eduardo Banda *Huachicolero*
Juan Daniel García *Ya no estoy aquí*
Coral Puente *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Original Screenplay

Julio Hernández Córdón *Cómprame un revólver*
Rodrigo Ordoñez, Max Zunino, Hari Sama *Esto no es Berlin*
David Zonana *Mano de obra*
Alejandro Ricaño, José María Yazpik *Polvo*
Fernando Frías de la Parra *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Adapted Screenplay

Sandra Becerril *Desde tu infierno*
Sebastián del Amo *El complot mongol*
John Sayles, Guillermo Munro Palacio *Sonora*

Best Editing

Lenz Claure *Cómprame un revólver*
Rodrigo Ríos Legaspi, Ximena Cuevas, Hari Sama *Esto no es Berlin*
Miguel Schverdfinger *Polvo*
Valentina Leduc, Jorge García *Sonora*
Yibrán Asuad, Fernando Frías de la Parra *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Cinematography

Alfredo Altamirano *Esto no es Berlin*
Diego Tenorio *La paloma y el lobo*
Tonatiuh Martínez *Polvo*
Serguei Saldívar Tanaka *Sonora*
Damián García *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Score

Yolihuani Curiel, Sofia Orozco, Fernando Arias *Asfixia*
Aldo Max Rodriguez *Belzebuth*
Alberto Torres *Cómprame un revólver*
Galo Durán *Sanctorum*
Jacobo Lieberman *Sonora* (tie)

Best Sound

Isabel Muñoz Cota, Christian Giraud, Alejandro de Icaza, Jaime Baksht, Michelle Couttolenc *Belzebuth*
Javier Umpierrez, Damián del Río *Esto no es Berlin*
Alejandro Ramírez, Enrique Greiner, Miguel Ángel Molina, Raymundo Ballesteros, David Muñoz *La paloma y el lobo*
Raúl Locatelli, Pablo Lach *Sonora*
Javier Umpierrez, Yuri Laguna, Olaitan Agueh, Michelle Couttolenc, Jaime Baksht *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Art Direction

Carlos Lagunas *Belzebuth*
Ivonne Fuentes *Cómprame un revólver*
Diana Quiroz *Esto no es Berlin*
Bárbara Enríquez, Carmen Guerrero *Polvo*
Taísa Malouf Rodrigues, Gino Fortebuono *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Costume Design

Cynthia López *El complot mongol*
Gabriela Fernández *Esto no es Berlin*
Adela Cortázar *Polvo*
Gabriela Fernández *Sonora*
Magdalena de la Riva, Gabriela Fernández *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Make-Up

Roberto Ortiz *Belzebuth*
Adam Zoller *Cómprame un revólver*
Maripaz Robles, Cristián Pérez Jauregui *El complot mongol*
Karina Rodríguez *Esto no es Berlin*
María Elena López, Itzel Peña García *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Visual Effects

Othón Reynoso, Thomas Boda, Jonatan Guzmán, Ricardo Robles, Paula Siqueira, Juan Lazzarini, Amilcar Herrera, Cris Cruz, Eddie Mendoza, Cyntia Navarro *Belzebuth*

Alejandro Iturmendi *Esto no es Berlin*
Javier Velázquez *Huachicolero*
Alejandro Miranda, Fantasm *Sanctorum*
Sasha Korellis, Catherine Tate *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best Special Effects

Ricardo Arvizu *Belzebuth*
Ricardo Arvizu *Feral*
José Manuel Martínez *Huachicolero*
Alejandro Vázquez *Sonora*
José Martínez *Ya no estoy aquí*

Best First Work

Edgar Nito *Huachicolero*
Carlos Lenin *La paloma y el lobo*

David Zonana *Mano de obra*

Axel Muñoz *Noches de Julio*

José María Yazpik *Polvo*

Best Latin-American Film

Brazil *A vida invisível de Eurídice Gusmão* Karim Aïnouz

Spain *Dolor y gloria* Pedro Almodóvar

Argentina *La odisea de los giles* Sebastián Borensztein

Colombia *Monos* Alejandro Landes

Peru *Retablo* Alvaro Delgado Aparicio

Best Animated Film

Día de muertos Carlos Gutiérrez Medrano

Olimpia José Manuel Cravioto

Best Feature Documentary

El guardián de la memoria Marcela Arteaga

Midnight Family Luke Lorentzen

Oblatos. El vuelo que surcó la noche Acelo Ruiz Villanueva

Una corriente salvaje Nuria Ibañez

Vaquero del mediodía Diego Enrique Osorno

Best Short Animated Film

Adelina Ana Portilla

Dalia sigue aquí Nuria Menchaca

Eclosión Rita Basulto

Hant Quij Cōipaxi Hac (The Creation of the World) Antonio Coello

Le tigre sans rayure Raúl Alejandro Morales

Best Short Fiction Film

5:03 Abril Schmucler

Encuentro Ivan Löwenberg

La bruja del fósforo paseante Sofía Carrillo

Las desaparecidas Astrid Dominguez

Una canción para María Omar Deneb Juárez

Best Short Documentary

Un abrazo de tres minutos Everardo González

Abrir la tierra Alejandro Zuno

El valiente ve la muerte solo una vez Diego Enrique Osorno

La Bruja de Texcoco Cecilia Villaverde, Alejandro Paredes

Lorena, la de pies ligeros Juan Carlos Rulfo

Arieles de Oro

María Rojo, actress

Lucía Álvarez, composer



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