

# The Mexican Film Bulletin

## Spring 2021

### So...Many...Obituaries

This is probably the most obituaries to appear a single issue of **MFB**, although the five-month gap between the previous issue and this one is largely to blame. It is important to recognise the careers of these individuals, even if space limits us to a paragraph or two for each person.

The next issue of **MFB** should be available in the fall.



### René Cardona III

René Cardona III passed away at his home in Tijuana on 16 May 2021; he was 59 years old. René Cardona Chávez was born in 1962, the son of actor and future



director René Cardona Jr. and dancer-actress Gloria Chávez. His paternal grandfather was actor-director René Cardona Sr. René III began appearing in films in the late 1960s, including *Santo contra Capulina* and *El*

*hermano Capulina*; in the 1970s he was billed as "Al Coster" in *El pequeño Robin Hood*, *Zindy el niño del pantano* (co-starring in both with his grandfather René Sr.), *Ciclón*, *Triángulo diabólico de las Bermudas*, and other pictures.

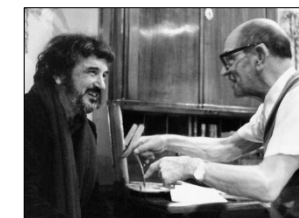
After attending film school in the USA, René III returned to Mexico and acted in some additional films, but also began working behind the camera on his father's movies. He directed his first feature film in 1988, and over the next 3 decades worked steadily as a director, mostly on *videohomes* but also some theatrical features.



### Jean-Claude Carrière

Screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière died on 8 February 2021 in Paris; he was 89

years of age. Carrière was born in France in September 1931. His first novel was published in 1957, and he then began to write and direct shorts, including *Heureux anniversaire*



(1962), for which he (and Pierre Etaix) won an Academy

Award. Carrière would be nominated for 3 screenwriting Oscars, and received an honorary Academy Award in 2015.

Carrière worked numerous times with Luis Buñuel, on the director's later (non-Mexican) films. Carrière's career was mostly spent in the French film industry, although he did co-write the Mexican-Spanish-French co-production *Antonieta* (1982).



### Abel Casillas

Actor Abel Casillas passed away on 3 January 2021; he was 68 years old and had been suffering from COVID-19. Casillas was born in Jalisco in April 1952, and began appearing in films in the 1970s. He eventually earned more than 40 feature film credits and worked on numerous *telenovelas* and television programs. Casillas was also an active member of the ANDA actors' union, serving as representative on both domestic and international films. He held leadership posts in the union as well.



### Patricio Castillo

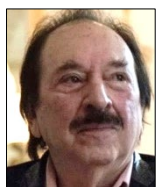
Actor Patricio Castillo passed away on 15 April 2021 in Mexico City; he was 82 years of age. Castillo was born in Chile in 1940 (some sources say 1939) and studied chemical engineering before becoming an actor. He visited Mexico in 1964 as part of a touring company and eventually became a Mexico citizen. Castillo appeared in many stage productions and *telenovelas*, as well as films like *Mecánica nacional*, *El rincón de las vírgenes*, *Actas de Marusia*, *Algunas nubes*, and *Amores perros*. His last feature film was probably the Chilean-Mexican co-production *Sanguinetti* (2020).



### Arturo Castro

Arturo Castro, a founding member of the popular Los Hermanos Castro singing group, died on 13 March 2021. Arturo Castro Muñoz was born in December 1937 in Veracruz. Arturo and his brothers Jorge and Javier first performed as "Los Panchitos" while still children, then later added their cousin Gualberto Castro and took the name "Los Hermanos Castro." The group was very

popular in the 1960s and appeared in the films *Matar es fácil*, *El zángano*, *El misterio de los hongos alucinantes*, and *Cómo pescar marido*. Los Hermanos Castros later broke up (for a time—they eventually reunited and continued performing) and Arturo had a solo career as a singer and television host. He was also a prolific composer whose works were recorded by many other artists.



### Josefina Echánove

Actress Josefina Echánove died on 29 December 2020 at the age of 93. Although born in New York in July 1928 as Josefina Rojas Hudson, Echánove grew up in Guanajuato and was originally a dancer, but began acting in films and on television in the 1970s. Her films included *Balún canán*, *Xoxontla*, *El secreto de Romelia*, and *Serpientes y escaleras*, as well as international films and co-productions like *Perdita Durango*, *Missing* and *Old Gringo*. Echánove was nominated twice for Arieles.

Josefina Echánove had 3 children: actor Alonso Echánove, singer María del Sol (Marisol de las Mercedes Echánove), and journalist Peggy Echánove. Peggy Echánove, who had a small role in *Dos crímenes* and did some television documentary work, passed away on 1 March 2021.



### Sergio Esquivel

Singer and composer Sergio Esquivel died at age 74 on 24 April 2021. Esquivel, born in



Yucatán, was a prolific composer of songs that would be recorded by José José, Lupita D'Alessio, Armando Manzanero, and others. His first big hit, "Alguien vendrá," was used in *Sueño de amor* (1971), starring José José, and his songs can

be heard in other films including *Santo en la frontera del terror*.



### José Ángel García

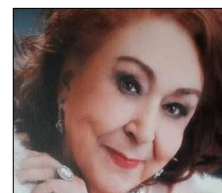
José Ángel García Huerta, a director, actor, and the father of Gael García Bernal, passed away on 22 January 2021. García was born in Michoacán in 1950 (some sources list his age at time of death as 62, which doesn't match this), and began working as an actor in the early 1980s. He appeared in films directed by Arturo Ripstein

(*La seducción*) and Felipe Cazals (*Los motivos de Luz*), before turning to directing *telenovelas* (although he continued to act as well).



### Marissa Garrido

Marissa Garrido, one of the most successful and prolific *telenovela* writers in Mexico, died on 8 January 2021 of complications from COVID-19; she was 95 years old. Marissa Garrido Arozamena born in Mexico City in May 1926; her father was a Chilean composer and her mother was an actress, one of the daughters of actor Eduardo Arozamena. Garrido began writing *radionovelas* in 1949, and switched to *telenovelas* when that format became popular in the late 1950s. She is survived by 3 children, one of whom (Mario Sauret) is a film and TV actor.



### Jaime Garza

Actor Jaime Garza passed away on 14 May 2021 of a heart attack. Jaime Francisco Garza Alardín was born in Monterrey in January 1954. He studied at UNAM and became a professional actor in 1973. Garza appeared in films, plays, *fotonovelas*, and on television,



notably in many classic *telenovelas* such as "Simplemente María" and "Rosa salvaje." His films included *Canoa*, *Naná*, *Los hermanos del viento*, and *Tiempo de lobos*.

In recent years Garza had suffered complications from diabetes, including a stroke and the amputation of one leg.



### Ricardo González "Cepellín"

Ricardo González Gutiérrez, better known as the clown "Cepillín," died on 8 March 2021; he was 75 years old. González, born in Monterrey in February 1946, studied dentistry and wore clown makeup to make his young patients less anxious. This led to public appearances



and finally a television show in Monterrey that ran from 1971 to 1977. Relocating to Mexico City, Cepellín had his own program on Televisa for 3 years, and would have other shows later; he also performed in his own circus from 1982-2006, and recorded numerous albums.

Cepellín starred in the Mexican-Spanish co-production *Milagro en el circo* (1978), and later appeared in *Las guerreras del amor* (aka *La corneta de mi general*, 1988). He was also the subject of the 1980 documentary *Mientras haya niños habrá payasos*.



### Lucía Guilmáin

Actress Lucía Guilmáin died on 15 February 2021 of complications from COVID-19. Some sources indicate she was born in January 1938 which would have made her 83 years old when she died, but her brother, actor Juan Ferrara, said she would have been 79 in August.



Lucía Gutiérrez Puerta, her real name, was the daughter of actress Ofelia Guilmáin (her sister Esther Guilmáin is also an actress) and made her professional acting debut in 1960. She made a number of appearances in small roles in 1960s, but spent much of her career on the stage and on television. Her last feature film appearance was probably *Más negro que la noche* (2014).



### Roberto Hernández Vázquez

Producer Roberto Hernández Vázquez died on 9



January 2021 of complications from COVID-19. Hernández began working as a production assistant at Televisa and in 1993 was promoted to production director of the hit “Corazón salvaje.” By the end of the decade he was an executive producer responsible for a number of successful *telenovelas*. He was also associate producer on the 2007 feature film *Mosquita muerta*.



### Libertad Leblanc

Argentine actress Libertad Leblanc died of pneumonia on 29 April 2021; she was 83 years of age. Libertad María de los Ángeles Vichich was born in February 1938 in the province of Río Negro. She married empresario Leonardo Barujel at age 17 and had one daughter, but the marriage broke up after 3 years. She made her film debut in 1960 but her first starring role was in *La flor de Irupé*

(1962). Over the next decade Leblanc appeared in numerous films produced in Argentina, Mexico, and elsewhere (often co-productions). She also did some stage and television work, retiring from the screen after *Furia en la isla* (1978), although she made an appearance in the experimental art film *Standard* (1989).



Because her films were often sexy and included nudity, a number of them were dubbed into English and released under titles such as *Love Hunger*, *Violated Love*, and *The Pink Pussy: Where Sin Lives*. Ironically, Leblanc’s nude scenes were often cut for domestic release in Mexico.



### Armando Manzanero

Singer and composer Armando Manzanero died on 28 December 2020; he had been suffering from COVID-19.



Armando Manzanero Canché was born in Mérida, Yucatán in December 1935 and began composing at an early age: he eventually wrote more than 600 songs. Dozens of Manzanero’s compositions were used in films; he was nominated for Best Music Theme or Song Arieles twice (*Juego limpio* and *Alta tensión*).

He made a handful of acting appearances, notably *Somos novios* in the 1960s and the two “Cándido Pérez” theatrical features in the early 1990s.



### Rodrigo Mejía

Actor Rodrigo Mejía, age 45, died of COVID-19 on 11 February 2021—ironically, his



father had succumbed to the same illness less than two weeks earlier. Mejía’s acting career began in 1999; although mostly a television performer, he did make appearances in films such as *El secreto oculto* and *Las Lloronas*. He is survived by his wife, TV presenter Gabriela Crassus, and two sons.





## Sara Monar



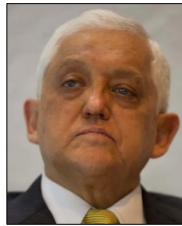
Actress Sara Monar died of complications from COVID-19 on 30 March 2021. Monar was born in Mexico City in March 1951, and began acting on television (“La rosa de Guadalupe” and “Mujer, casos de la vida real”) and in films (*Mujeres infieles*) in the late 1980s. She was active in ANDA (the national actors’ union) activities.



## Eduardo Moreno Laparade

Eduardo Moreno Laparade, the nephew of Mario Moreno “Cantinflas,” passed away at age 83 from COVID-19 on 20 February 2021, after a month in the hospital.

Moreno Laparade’s father was the manager of Cantinflas for many years, and when the famous comic actor died, Moreno Laparade formed the charitable Mario E. Moreno foundation. He also became involved in a lawsuit with the son of Cantinflas, Mario Moreno Ivanova, over the rights to 39 films: Moreno Ivanova was his father’s heir, but Moreno Laparade claimed Cantinflas had signed over the film rights a month before his death in 1993. The acrimonious case (Moreno Laparade was jailed twice due to his cousin’s accusations) dragged on for more than two decades, until Moreno Laparade was finally awarded ownership of the film rights in 2014.



## Guillermo Murray

Actor Guillermo Murray passed away on 6 May 2021 due to septic shock; he was 93 years old. Guillermo



Murray Muttis Bird Sayi was born in Argentina in June 1927. After acting professionally in his homeland for more than a decade, Murray relocated to Mexico in 1960 (he became a Mexican citizen in 1991) and worked steadily in films, television, and on the stage until the 2000s. In recent years he had reportedly been suffering from

Alzheimer’s disease.

Murray alternated *galán* roles with villainous parts, and moved into character acting seamlessly. He wrote and directed an episode of *Siempre hay una primera vez*, and late directed two features—*Una vez un hombre* and *Para usted, jefa*—co-writing the first and scripting the

second. Murray also wrote two novels and a book of short stories.

Guillermo Murray’s children Rodrigo Murray, Guillermo Murray Jr., and Gabriela Murray all became actors.



## Martha Navarro

Actress Martha Navarro passed away on 30 December 2020; she was 83 years of age. Navarro was born in Mexico City in December 1937, and originally worked as a school teacher. She became interested in acting—to the consternation of her conservative parents—and began working professionally in the late 1960s; her last film was *Princesa, una historia verdadera* (2018—this was also the final film appearance of



Evangelina Elizondo and Héctor Lechuga). Navarro was nominated for 4 Ariel Awards and won three times: *La pasión según Berenice* (Best Actress), *Rosa de dos aromas* (Best Supporting Actress), and *De noche vienes, Esmeralda* (Best Co-Starring Actress).

Navarro was married 3 times and had one son, who pre-deceased her.

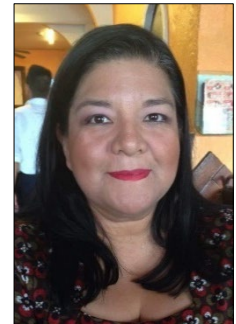


## Diana Pérez

Voice actor Diana Pérez died of a kidney infection on 27 April 2021; she was 51

years of age. Diana Andrea Pérez Revatett was born in January 1970; after receiving a degree in public relations, she participated in various acting workshops and entered the dubbing industry in 1994. One of her most famous roles was providing the voice for “Jessie” in the “Pokémon” television series, but she also did voice acting for other animated and live-action series.

[https://doblaje.fandom.com/es/wiki/Diana\\_P%C3%A9rez](https://doblaje.fandom.com/es/wiki/Diana_P%C3%A9rez)



## Toni Rodríguez

Actor Toni Rodríguez died of cancer on 22 April 2021. María Antonieta Rodríguez Zárate was born in Mexico City in December 1969. She studied acting at the Academia de Silvia Derbez, and began dubbing television



series with “Beverly Hills 90210.” While Rodríguez continued to work as a voice actor, she also appeared on-screen on TV and in films like *El conejo de la luna* and *Him: Más allá de la luz*.



### Ricardo Silva

Musician and voice actor Ricardo Silva Elizondo passed away of complications from COVID-19 on 7



February 2021; he was 67 years of age. Silva, who attended the Escuela Nacional de Música, began working in the dubbing industry in 1986. He was responsible for singing the theme songs for the Latin American versions of “Dragon Ball Z” and other series, in addition to doing voice work for animated cartoons and films.



### Antonio Valdés



Antonio Valdés “El Ratón,” the last survivor of the 9 Valdés brothers (which included Germán “Tin Tan,” Manuel “Loco,” and Ramón) died on

6 January 2021; he was 91 years old. Valdés followed his brothers into show business, and while he never achieved their level of fame, he worked steadily in films, on television, and in live venues. His film credits include some with his brother Tin Tan (*La odalisca No. 13*, *Tintanson Cruzoe*) and Manuel (*Bikinis y rock*), as well as films starring others (*Ahi madre!* with Los Polivoces, for example).



### Lupe Vázquez

Actress Lupe Vázquez, best-known for her role as the



protagonist’s receptionist Paula Cecilia in the “Cándido Pérez” television series (and 2 film versions), passed away on 21 January 2021. She was 75 years of age. Vázquez, born in September 1945, appeared in other films and TV programs as

early as the 1970s, including *Estas ruinas que ves* and “Hasta que la muerte nos separe.” She was also a writer and composer, and appeared in live venues.



### Isela Vega

Isela Vega, one of the most famous Mexican actresses of the last six decades, died on 9 March 2021; she had been suffering from cancer. Isela Vega Durazo was born in Sonora in November 1939. She started modeling and this led to work on television in the late 1950s; Vega also began a singing career around this time, and started to receive small parts in films as well. By the mid-60s she was receiving more prominent roles, and then became a leading actress.



Vega worked steadily in films and on television until 2020. During her long career she was nominated seven times for Ariel Awards, winning four: *La viuda negra* (Best Actress), and Best Supporting Actress for *La ley de Herodes*, *Fuera del cielo*, and *Las horas contigo*. Vega received the Lifetime Achievement Ariel de Oro in 2017.

Isela Vega had two children, Arturo Vázquez (son of singer-actor Alberto Vázquez), and Shaula Vega (daughter of actor Jorge Luke). She will be remembered as someone who always spoke her mind and lived her life as she wished.



## Double Vision: Remakes and the Originals

**Más negro que la noche** [Darker than the Night]

(CONACINE-STPC, 1974) *Dir-Scr*: Carlos Enrique Taboada; *Photo*: Daniel López; *Music*: Raúl Lavista; *[Prod]Coord*: Alfredo Salazar; *Film Ed*: Carlos Savage; *Art Dir*: Salvador Lozano; *Set Decor*: José González

Camarena; *Sound*: Manuel Topete; *Sound Ed*: Sigfrido García; *Union*: STPC; *Studio*: Churubusco-Azteca

**Cast**: Claudia Islas (*Ofelia Escudero*), Susana Dosamantes (*Aurora*), Lucía Méndez (*Marta*), Helena





Rojo (*Pilar*), Pedro Armendáriz Jr. (*Roberto*), Julián Pastor (*Pedro*), Alicia Palacios (*Sofía*), Tamara Garina (*Aunt Susana*), Enrique Pontón (*lawyer*), Armando Acosta (*José, library guard*)

**Notes:** Carlos Enrique Taboada is something of a cult figure in Mexican cinema, chiefly based on 3 supernatural films—*Hasta el viento tiene miedo*, *El libro de piedra*, and *Más negro que la noche*—and (ironically, to a lesser extent) one psychological thriller, 1984's *Veneno para las hadas*, which won Best Film, Best Director, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, and Best Music Score Arieles.

Although Taboada directed 18 feature films (19 if you count *Girón de niebla*, which may not have been finished and wasn't released—his screen story was re-used for *Jirón de niebla* in 2013), he was primarily a screenwriter for cinema and television. Most the films he directed were dramas rather than fantasy-oriented, and while he was certainly a competent director, Taboada did not display the same sort of flashy style as Juan López Moctezuma (*La mansion de la locura*, *Alucarda*, etc.). *Hasta el viento tiene miedo*, *El libro de piedra*, and *Más negro que la noche* are mostly brightly-lit, with saturated colours, spotless sets and costumes, and feature conventional performances. The films look quite a bit like made-for-television films being produced in the USA at this time.



However, in their defense it should be said that Taboada's fantasy films make a virtue of their conventionality, never yielding to the temptation to pull out all the stops, and when eerie events do occur, they are effective because of this restraint. *Más negro de la noche* is the best of Taboada's supernatural trio, well made and suspenseful. The deaths of Aurora and Marta are especially nicely done. Perhaps the film might have been slightly improved if some ambiguity had been retained: Aurora dies of a heart attack, a tipsy Pilar falls to her death—both could have been caused by non-supernatural causes—but

Marta is stabbed with knitting needles, clearly not an accident. The glimpses of Tía Susana's face, brief as they are and used for shock value, could have been trimmed, and the question of whether her ghost was actually causing the deaths might have been left open to argument, but the knitting needles eliminate most of the doubt (I suppose it's vaguely possible Marta might have rammed them into her chest herself to commit suicide, but that's really a stretch).

Under-employed actress Ofelia learns she's inherited a large house from her Aunt Susana. She and her three roommates—librarian Aurora, aspiring model Marta, and divorcee Pilar—move into the mansion, run by housekeeper Sofia. Susana's will asked that Ofelia care for Becker, a cat who was Susana's beloved companion for many years. Things go well for a time, although there are a few odd occurrences, such as a mysterious voice

calling for Becker in the garden, and the mysterious incident where Susana's wedding gown



vanishes from Ofelia's room and reappears in the fireplace, burned. [The audience sees Aunt Susana—represented by a hand, skirt, and cane—pet Becker and take the dress away.]

Aurora's pet canary is found dead, presumably at the paws of Becker. Becker later turns up dead in the locked basement, starved to death. His corpse reappears inside the house, and Sofia "confesses" to moving it (she's clearly lying, but why?). The cat's buried in the garden the next day. Aurora believes she's being stalked in the stacks of the library where she works, and claims she saw a shadowy figure and a cane, identical to one in a portrait of Aunt Susana (but Sofia says that cane was buried with her late employer). The next night, Aurora is stalked again, and this time she sees Susana's face...Aurora's body is discovered later, dead of a heart attack.

Pilar is reading alone one evening and hears a cat meowing. She goes into the basement (without a flashlight), wanders around endlessly, sees a shadow of a woman with a cane, and finally manages to escape. Marta, Pilar, and Sofia all think Aunt Susana has returned in supernatural form, but Ofelia does not. Sofia gives notice. Pilar attends a party with her ex-husband Roberto, who is trying for a reconciliation. He convinces the terrified Pilar to move back in with him rather than stay in the haunted house any longer. She agrees, but insists on

returning to get her things and to notify Ofelia. Bad decision! Pilar, slightly drunk, ascends the staircase but sees Aunt Susana and falls to her death over the railing.

Some time later, Sofia departs. Ofelia and Marta are alone in the house, waiting for Ofelia's fiancé Pedro to arrive. The power goes out; Ofelia checks the fuse box, but nothing is wrong. In the meantime, Marta sees Aunt Susana (well, just her hand wearing a distinctive ring) sitting in a rocking chair, but when Ofelia returns, they find only some yarn and knitting needles. Ofelia is finally convinced, and says it's unjust of her aunt's ghost to kill innocent young women, when Becker's death was an accident. Um...Marta confesses that Aurora—angered at her canary's death—attacked Becker with a fireplace tool. When Becker fought back, Pilar and Marta joined the fight and killed the cat. Marta: "Nothing can save me. I'm marked. It's all useless." She knows even leaving the house won't save her, since Aurora died at her workplace.

Pedro arrives but can't get through the locked gate. Ofelia goes to meet him, leaving Marta alone. Marta sees



Becker, then Aunt Susana, and screams... When Ofelia and Pedro come in, Marta is dead, two knitting needles stuck in her chest. As the film concludes, a

cat's meow is heard.

The differences between the 1974 and 2014 versions of *Más negro que la noche* are considerable, starting with the characters, which are much more sympathetic in the first film than they are in the remake. Aunt Susana is only seen briefly, and she does kill 3 people in revenge for her cat's death; housekeeper Sofia mentions (before any of the deaths) that if someone made a mistake, Susana would never let them forget it. The cat was her longtime friend (which is not only told to us, it's demonstrated in the brief opening scenes leading up to Susana's death), and was brutally beaten to death, so while 3 murders might seem like an overreaction to us, you can see Susana's point of view. Ofelia, Marta, Pilar, and Aurora are given a fair amount of character development (Marta least of all), and they're much nicer people than the protagonists of the 2014 film, as are 1974's Pedro and Roberto, compared to 2014's Pedro and Loco. Housekeeper Sofia seems stern at first, while her 2014 corresponding character Evangelina initially appears somewhat nicer, but Sofia turns out to be much less complicit in her late employer's vengeance than Evangelina does.

The old house where most of the action takes place is also radically different in the two versions. The 2014 film's house is incredibly forbidding in appearance, inside and out; the utilities (kitchen, bathroom, electrical system) are old and worn-out (although this doesn't stop the protagonists from hosting a party, complete with a dj and flashing lights). It's like a cartoon haunted house. In contrast, the 1974 house is old (and we never get a good look at the full exterior), but seems to be very well maintained. The interior is full of antique furniture and works of art, but is bright and clean. Even the basement doesn't seem too forbidding when the young women visit it in the daytime (and have fun trying on old clothes), although it does become scary when Pilar (rather foolishly) ventures in after dark.

Although as noted above, Taboada wasn't an especially stylish director, his work on *Más negro que la noche* is quite good. The two sequences in the library are effective, concluding with a shock cut as Ofelia turns to see the dead Aurora hanging upside-down with a look of terror on her face. Marta's death is also set up and executed nicely: Marta sees (the ghost of) Becker and backs away, coming up against the stair bannister, at which point she can retreat no further.

The camera continues to track however, revealing Aunt Susana coming down the steps directly behind Marta. Marta turns, sees her, and screams; cut to Susana pointing at Marta, then a cut to Ofelia and Pedro outside. When they come in, they find Marta's dead body on the floor.



Trivia notes: this film has bit of (unintentional?) nudity in the opening sequence, as Ofelia arrives home and finds Pilar in the shower: Helena Rojo exposes a bit too much as she leans forward (in the same sequence, Susana Dosamantes is clearly at least topless in bed, but she stays fully covered). The film as a whole features a lot of cheesecake shots, especially in the scene in which the 4 young women try on vintage clothing they find in Aunt Susana's basement.

*Más negro que la noche* is not a perfect film, but it's slick and well-made, and holds up even when seen nearly 50 years after its original release.



**Más negro que la noche** [Blacker than Night]  
(Cēleste Films--Filmadora Nacional--Neo Art--Itaca Films--L-Mento Entertainment, ©2014) *Exec Prod:* Carlos Taibo, Marcel Ferrer; *Prod:* Josémaría Torre, Leonardo Zimbrón, Marco Polo Constandse, Alex García;



*Co-Prod:* Antonia Nava; *Dir-Scr* Adapt: Henry Bedwell; *Screen Story:* Carlos Enrique Taboada; *Photo:* Marc Bellver; *Music:* Joan Valent; *Film Ed:* Marc Dominici; *Prod Des:* José Luis Aguilar; *Prod Mgr:* Fuad Abed Dalton; *Asst Dir:* Salvador Espinosa; *Sound Des:* Carlos Jiménez, Daniel

Sáiz; *Visual FX Supv:* Bernat Aragonés; *Makeup Des:* Carla Tinoco [credits list Lourdes Delgado for the same thing]; *3D (Estereoscopista):* Josep María Aragonés; *Union:* Asociación Nacional de Técnicos de Cine y del Audiovisual

**Cast:** Zuria Vega (*Greta*), Adriana Louvier (*María*), Eréndira Ibarra (*Pilar*), Ona Casamiquela (*Vicky*), Margarita Sanz (*Evangelina*), Josémaría Torre Hütt (*Pedro*), Lucía Guilmain (*Aunt Ofelia*), Hernán Mendoza (*García*), Miguel Rodarte (*Loco*), Sara Manni (*young Ofelia*), Daniel Villar (*Ofelia's fiancé*), Karla Cruz (*Rocío, maid*), Ana Macarena Escobedo (*Ana*), Miguel Ferrer (*dj at party*)

**Notes:** *Más negro que la noche* is yet another 21<sup>st</sup>-century remake of a Carlos Enrique Taboada film, following *Hasta el viento tiene miedo* and *El libro de piedra*. The 2014 *Más negro que la noche* utilises Taboada's basic premise—a young woman inherits an old house from her aunt, moves in with 3 friends, aunt's cat is killed, hauntings and deaths ensue—but changes virtually everything else, adds 3-D, and strings it out to 110 minutes (although the end credits take up nearly 10 minutes, so the running time of the two versions is nearly identical).

*Más negro que la noche* is a handsomely-produced film, with excellent production design and cinematography; IMDB estimates the cost was over 37 million pesos (nearly \$2 million USD) and it looks great. I can't judge the effectiveness of the 3-D process--there are only a few obvious gimmick shots, but the *mise-en-scene* of the old house and surrounding gardens has lots of arches, passages, doorways, and other set-ups that would have helped the illusion of depth.

Unfortunately, the film is very slow, and instead of building suspense and a feeling of dread, the result is ennui on the part of the audience. The first death (not counting the flashbacks) occurs at the 90 minute mark, followed by 3 more in the last 10 minutes (plus one mid-credits kill). [In contrast, the first death in the 1974 version occurs off-screen at about the 67-minute point, although the victim's body isn't shown until several minutes later.] None of the "kills" are particularly inventive or shocking (one occurs off-screen), and at least one of the victims is mostly blameless of anything.

Additionally, the script crams in countless details which clutter up the narrative and often lead nowhere. Becker is "more than just a cat." Aunt Ofelia is not just an old lady who died, now she's a double-murderer. Greta lived with her aunt for a time, then left for some reason. Greta had a little sister, Ana, who's now a ghost—what happened to her? The idea of Greta becoming possessed by her aunt's spirit is a twist but hardly original.

*Más negro que la noche* has a few, not very effective jump-scars, and never achieves any sort of suspense or fear. The film is replete with quick images of Aunt Ofelia's ghost, include some where she's lurking almost subliminally in the background, but the eerie effect is ruined by constantly accompanying these shots with a "whooshing" noise on the soundtrack, just so the audience knows this is SOMETHING SCARY. A spooky atmosphere is fine, but it can only do so much on its own.



When her Aunt Ofelia dies, Greta inherits the woman's mansion (and, apparently, her servant Evangelina). Greta is engaged to Pedro, the brother of her best friend Pilar. Greta, Pilar, and their other two roommates María and Vicky move into the huge old house. Aunt Ofelia stipulated in her will that her black cat "Becker" should be cared for.

[None of these characters is very well developed. Presumably in their 20s, it's unclear what any of them do for a living: Greta might be a comic book artist, and María might be a writer (i.e., we see them vaguely doing art and writing one time each), while Pilar might be bisexual (plus, she has multi-coloured hair and lots of tattoos), and Vicky is Spanish and uses drugs, supplied by her boyfriend Loco.]

Various creepy things happen. Greta has flashbacks/dreams about her (dead) little sister Ana, as



well as some other curious events, shown in fragmented form (and explained later). Pedro thinks he sees Aunt Ofelia's portrait move. María's pet ferret Isidro is killed; Becker is the prime suspect. They throw a party, complete with dj and flashing lights (although the previous day the electrical system was iffy). A depressed María tosses Becker in the swimming pool and holds him underwater with the pool cleaning net until he drowns.



Pedro says Greta is acting weird, and when he tries to forcefully make love to her, she

suddenly has super-strength and tosses him across the room. As payback, he goes outside and has sex with Vicky in a car (which Pilar sees).

More odd events, including quick glimpses of Aunt Ofelia's ghost, Ana's ghost, a dead maid's ghost. They discover a wedding gown and Evangelina tells them that Ofelia's husband cheated on her on their wedding day with a maid. Greta later "sees" (in a dream) Ofelia stabbing the maid and clubbing her husband to death. Vicky suggests calling a priest; this is done, and he'll be there the next day. "Just one [more] night," Greta says, suspicious dark circles under her eyes.

Pedro shows up and tries to explain, but Greta tells him she knows he was unfaithful. He goes outside and sits on the steps, but is chased inside by (the ghost of?) Becker. After some running around, he's pushed by Aunt Ofelia's ghost (or Greta, they appear in alternate shots) into a defective light switch (!) and is electrocuted. [Death number one at 90 minutes in.] Pilar and Greta go into



Vicky's room, and Vicky confesses that Becker was murdered. Pilar gets locked out and Greta/Aunt Ofelia forces Vicky's face

down onto two coke straws standing upright, impaling her eyes. Pilar is pushed over the upstairs railing by Aunt Ofelia but is then rescued by Greta, who speaks in Aunt Ofelia's voice. Meanwhile, (the real ghost of) Aunt Ofelia kills María (not Colonel Mustard) in the library. Pilar can't get out of the house, and she's confronted by Greta, who has a knife. Fade to black, a scream...

Greta is sitting in the mansion, waited on by the faithful Evangelina. Greta says she wants a new cat, but it has to be black. [Despite the fact that we've repeatedly seen the "ghost" of Becker wandering around—what, he's not good enough? Well, he is one of those ugly cats with flat faces, yuck. The 1974 Becker was at least a normal-looking cat.] In the yard, roses are blooming, and part of Pilar's body can be seen buried in the flower bed. [In a mid-credits sequence, Loco arrives at the mansion and is attacked and killed by Becker. It's unclear whether this is out of chronological sequence or not.]

So, apparently Greta cancelled the scheduled visit of the priest? And no one bothered to investigate what happened to María, Vicky, Pilar, and Pedro?

The performances in *Más negro que la noche* are satisfactory for the most part. Zuria Vega (the daughter of actor Gonzalo Vega) isn't especially subtle as she gradually becomes possessed by her aunt's spirit, but she's not horrible, and the other main players are adequate. Margarita Sanz is generally good in a is-she-or-isn't-she-evil part (even if she does look a little like Mrs. Doubtfire). Lucía Guilmain is seen only briefly as the elderly



Aunt Ofelia and has little "acting" to do (this was Guilmain's final feature film, although she continued to work on television until her recent death). It's interesting to note that Adriana Louvier was 34 when the film was shot, making her nearly a decade older than Vega and Ibarra, but she doesn't look it. Josémaría Torre, who plays Pedro, was 37 but doesn't look it, and Miguel Rodarte was 43 but plays a sleazy drug dealer, so the fact that he's two decades older than his on-screen love interest is consistent with this.

*Más negro que la noche* got a substantial release in the USA in 3-D but made less than a million dollars at the box-office; it did better in Mexico, earning just over \$5 million USD (but given the budget, this means it wasn't too profitable).

Trivia note: several brief clips of the original *Más negro que la noche* are shown on a television in one scene. Curiously, the 2014 version changes the name of the aunt from Susana to Ofelia (Ofelia was the name of the character called Greta in this version), while María, Pilar and Vicky replace Aurora, Marta and Pilar. Marilyn Manson's cover of "You're So Vain" is heard in the final scene.

The 2014 version of *Más negro que la noche* looks good but is not very entertaining. It tries too hard: the old

house is super haunted-looking (compared to the 1974 version, in which the house is bright, clean and filled with well-dusted antiques), “spooky” things happen every minute or so, the characters aren’t likeable, and the ending is old hat.



### El complot mongol [The Mongol Plot]

(CONACITE UNO, 1977) *Dir:* Antonio Eceiza; *Scr:* Antonio Eceiza, Tomás Pérez Turrent; *Orig Novel:* Rafael Bernal; *Photo:* Alex Phillips Jr.; *Music:* Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras; *Prod Chief:* Nicolás Reyero; *Prod Mgr:* Jesús Fragoso; *Asst Dir:* Mario Llorca; *Film Ed:* Joaquín Ceballos; *Art Dir:* José Rodríguez Granada; *Makeup:* Ana Guerrero; *Sound Ed:* José Li-Ho; *Sound:* Rodolfo Solís; *Lighting:* Mariano García; *Camera Op:* Carlos Montaña; *Re-rec:* J. González Gancy; *Union:* STPC; *Studio:* Churubusco Azteca

**Cast:** Pedro Armendáriz [Jr.] (*Filiberto García*), Ernesto Gómez Cruz (*Licenciado*), Blanca Guerra (*Martita*), Fernando Balzaretti (*Graves*), Tito Junco (*Lic. del Valle*), Claudio Obregón (*Colonel*), Noé Murayama (*Liu*), Malena Doria (*Esther Ramírez*), David Robichaux (*Spielberg*), Erika Carlson (*Anabella*), Tomás Leal (*Mauricio, hotel clerk*), Marcelo Villamil (*General Miraflores*), Elsa Ben (*Pérez's girlfriend*), Jaime Ramos (*Tommy Pérez*), Sergio Calderón (*El Sapo*), León Escobar (*Wong*), Humberto Olivares (*Luciano Manrique*), Wong's men: René Barrera, Nicolás Jasso, Manuel Anaya, Alfredo Peret Ávalos; Elizabeth San Roman (*Licenciado's girlfriend*)

**Notes:** the 1977 *El complot mongol* is quite different in style and tone from the 2018 version of Rafael Bernal's 1969 novel. The first film takes place in contemporary (1977) Mexico City, with a fair amount of location shooting (and some sets at the Estudios Churubusco Azteca); it has a relatively flat visual style, taking place mostly in shabby apartments and hotel rooms, compared

to the period setting and stylised sets and costumes of the remake.

There are several major differences in the narratives of the two films. The 1977 *Complot* is told in flashback by Filiberto to the *Licenciado* as they sit in a *cantina*, until the final sequence. However, aside from the occasional cutaways to Filiberto telling the story, the sequence of events is basically the same as in the 2018 *Complot*. The other significant difference is that Laski, the Russian agent in the 2018 version, does not appear here at all.



Graves is a CIA agent (there is an FBI agent as well, but he's killed fairly early in the picture), and it is he who is surveilling Filiberto's apartment, and who saves Filiberto's life at the end.

Some minor differences include: Filiberto is specifically not an official member of the police force in 1977; the “Hugo Stiglitz” character in 2018 is named “Tommy Pérez” in 1977; when Filiberto finds the sniper rifle in Pérez's hotel room, Pérez's girlfriend is there (1977), but the room is empty in 2018. The link between del Valle, Miraflores, and Luciano Manrique is made clearer in the 1977 film, and the *Licenciado* is not portrayed as such an extreme drunk as he is in 2018, and gets a bit of backstory. Finally, del Valle shoots General Miraflores at Filiberto's orders, and is then killed by Filiberto in the 1977 film, whereas in 2018 Filiberto shoots them both.

*El complot mongol* (1977) was directed by Antonio Eceiza (1935-2011). Eceiza (sometimes billed as Anxton Eceiza) was a Basque filmmaker who went into self-exile in the early 1970s over his political views. In Mexico, he taught at CUEC and directed *Mina: viento de libertad* (1976) and *El complot mongol* before returning to Spain and spending the rest of his career trying to promote Basque cinema. He made two additional features in Spain, *Ke arteko egunak* (aka *Días de humo*, 1989, which reunited him with Pedro Armendáriz Jr.) and *Felicidades, Tovarich* (1995).

Filiberto García is a self-described *pistolero* who works for the Mexican secret police, under orders from the Colonel. The Colonel and politician del Valle tell Filiberto they've learned of a Communist Chinese plot to assassinate the President of the USA on his visit to Mexico City a few day's hence. Because Filiberto has

connections in the Chinese community of the city, he's asked to investigate.

Filiberto is approached by shop clerk Martita Fong, who works in Liu's store. She asks for his help: while in a Chinese orphanage, one of the other children died and Martita was given her passport (the dead girl had a Mexican father and a Chinese mother), which allowed



Martita to emigrate to Mexico. Filiberto says he'll help her become "legal." Meanwhile, Martita will stay in his apartment, to avoid being sexually abused by Liu.

Filiberto is attacked

when he enters his apartment and kills his assailant, with Martita's aid; he then kills another man waiting outside and disposes of the bodies (both men are petty Mexican criminals). One of the corpses carried a large quantity of U.S. dollars; the Colonel says this cash was recently imported into Mexico via China.



Filiberto and his lawyer friend the Licenciado team up to interrogate Annabella, the *gringa* girlfriend of one of the dead men. Later, they find Annabella has been murdered, and a group of Chinese men return to search the apartment, but are captured by Filiberto, an FBI agent, and CIA agent Graves. The Chinese men are executed by another man to keep them from talking. Filiberto learns 2 other Mexicans are involved in the plot, which isn't sponsored by Communist China at all. He finds a sniper rifle in the hotel room of one of the men, Tommy Pérez. The Colonel says he'll take it from there, and suggests Filiberto take a vacation.

However, Filiberto returns to his apartment and finds Martita dead. He confronts del Valle and his partner General Miraflores: they are behind the plot, which intends to foment a coup and take over Mexico's government. Although they deny they're behind Martita's death, Filiberto compels del Valle to shoot Miraflores, then kills Miraflores himself. Pérez and

fellow conspirator El Sapo arrive and prepare to kill Filiberto, but Graves shows up and shoots the two men. Graves—because his men have been observing Filiberto's apartment—knows Liu murdered Martita. At his shop, Liu confesses to the crime, blaming Martita for his son's death (his son was one of the Chinese men killed in Annabella's apartment).



Filiberto shoots Liu, earning a reproof from Graves—“Neither one of us should kill for personal or sentimental reasons.” As the film concludes, Filiberto is alone in his apartment with Martita's body.

*El complot mongol* (1977) is a good film and actually explains the plot more coherently than the 2018 version. It's fairly straight-forward, realistic and even—compared to the flashy visuals of the second adaptation of Bernal's novel—a bit bland; 2 years later, Pedro Armendáriz Jr. and Ernesto Gómez Cruz would be reunited for two films about private detective Héctor Belacoarán Shayne (*Días de combate* and *Cosa fácil*), which this picture somewhat resembles.

Armendáriz is quite good as Filiberto, tough and assertive but displaying a tender, even gentlemanly attitude towards Martita. When he first discovers Martita's body, Filiberto picks her up and puts her on the bed, then covers her with a blanket and sits down. He pulls out a wrapped package from his pocket (he'd earlier been seen entering a jewelry store) and regards it bleakly. As Martita, Blanca Guerra is lightly made up to appear Chinese, but doesn't put on the *faux*-Asian accent that Bárbara Mori uses in the 2018 film. She's attractive and sympathetic, but doesn't have a lot of screen time. While Roberto Sosa Jr. plays the Licenciado as permanently-tipsy in the 2018 version, Ernesto Gómez Cruz has only one real “drunk” scene, and is otherwise depicted as a reasonably competent lawyer and friend of Filiberto. The rest of the cast is satisfactory. Noé Murayama as Liu is apparently the only actor with Asian heritage, although a number of the other performers playing “Chinese” roles can reasonably pass (like René Barrera and Nicolás Jasso).

The production values are fine, although current prints seem a little soft and washed-out. As noted above, there is some location work to complement the studio sets, which are adequate but hardly spectacular.







### El complot Mongol [The Mongol Plot] (Cine

Qua Non Films-IMCINE-FOPROCINE-CTT, 2018)

*Prod:* Sebastián del Amo, Carolina Amador; *Prod:* Bárbara Mori, Damián Alcázar, Sergio Ley López, María de Jesús García, Alejandro Barrón; *Assoc Prod:* Miguel Rivera, Leonardo Cordero, Marco Polo Constandse; *Dir-Scr:* Sebastián del Amo; *Orig Novel:* Rafael Bernal; *Photo:* Alejandro Cantú; *Music:* Andrés Sánchez, Dan Zlotnik, Gus Reyes; *Prod Mgr:* Germán Jiménez Velázquez; *Asst Dir:* Alfredo Sánchez Sánchez; *Film Ed:* Branko Gómez Palacio, Sebastián del Amo; *Prod Des:* Juan Carlos Castillo; *Costume Des:* Cynthia López; *Makeup Des:* Maripaz Robles; *Makeup FX:* Christian Pérez Jauregui; *Sound Des:* Mario Martínez Cobos, Miguel Hernández Montero; *Union:* Asociación Nacional de Técnicos de Cine y del Audiovisual (ANTEC)

**Cast:** Damián Alcázar (*Filiberto García*), Bárbara Mori (*Martita Fong*), Eugenio Derbez (*Sr. del Valle*), Roberto Sosa (*Licenciado*), Moisés Arizmendi (*Laski*), Ari Brickman (*Richard Gravez* [sic]), Gustavo Sánchez Parra (*Fumanchú*), Don Javier López “Chabelo” (*Colonel*), Hugo Stiglitz (*Hugo Stiglitz*), Salvador Sánchez (*Sr. Liu*), Lisa Owen (*gringa*), Rodrigo Murray (*Gen. Miraflores*), Mauricio Isaac (*hotel receptionist*), Héctor Kotsifakis (*Polanco*), Ramón Medina (*Roque Villegas*), Diana Lein (*Esther Ramírez*), Enrique Arreola (*El Sapo*), Dobrina Cristeva (*Russian spy*), Mara Escalante (*Doris*), Faisy Smith (*Gutierritos*), Osami Kawano (*Wang*), Beng Zeng Huang (*Javier Liu*)

**Notes:** Sebastián del Amo has directed 3 feature films to date—*El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol*, *Cantinflas*, and *El complot mongol*. All are period films, with especially lavish attention paid to recreating period details. *Cantinflas* and *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol*

are biographies of actual people (albeit with varying degrees of faithfulness to the historical facts), while *El complot mongol* is the second adaptation of a popular 1969 novel that has a historical setting (the early 1960s) but fictional characters. *Cantinflas* and *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol* make heavy use of flashbacks, while *El complot mongol* has a more linear narrative. *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol* features a wide variety of stylistic touches, including colour changes that match the period being depicted, optical wipes, and a “phantom” alter ego who advises Orol. *El complot mongol* eschews most of these (although the wipes are still there), but has its protagonist frequently break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience (there are also a few fantasy sequences but these are not particularly outré).

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy plans a trip to Mexico to meet President Adolfo López Mateos (this trip actually did occur, from 29 June -1 July). Rumours of a Communist Chinese plot to assassinate one or both of the presidents reach the Mexican secret police via politician del Valle, and the Colonel assigns detective Filiberto García to investigate. García uses alcoholic lawyer Licenciado as his assistant, and also cooperates with KGB agent Laski and FBI agent Gravez on the case.



The Chinese residents of the Calle de Dolores fall under suspicion, especially Sr. Liu. García befriends Chinese shopgirl Martita, who eventually moves into his apartment (where they’re spied on by the Russians from across the street). A quantity of \$50 USD bills shows up. Various miscreants (mostly Mexican, but some Chinese as well) are killed, often by García. García discovers a sniper rifle in a hotel room rented to *gringo* Hugo Stiglitz. He unravels the plot: both presidents will be assassinated, but especially López Mateos. Del Valle will become president, with the backing of General Miraflores and the



military. At del Valle’s house, García—angered by the death of Martita,

who’s been murdered in his apartment—kills both del Valle and Miraflores, making it appear they shot each other. Stiglitz and fellow plotter El Sapo arrive and prepare to kill García, but El Sapo is shot by Laski (who providentially arrives) and García knocks out Stiglitz (it’s

unclear whether Stiglitz dies or not, but García doesn't shoot him). Laski says Sr. Liu, owner of the shop where Martita worked, killed her (the Russians were surveilling García's apartment and saw it). Liu mistakenly believes Martita betrayed his son Javier, who was murdered—not by García, as Liu believes, but by other plotters—and García shoots him (to Laski's dismay, since Liu could have explained more about the plot: "avenging Señorita Fong was very unprofessional!"). As the film concludes, García sits on his bed next to Martita's body and weeps.



*El complot mongol* is both very well-produced—with excellent production design, cinematography, etc.—and very (deliberately) artificial, shot mostly on sets, utilising back-projection for some driving scenes, heavily-saturated colour photography, etc. As noted above, the protagonist frequently speaks directly to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. It's a stylish film with—ironically, given the title—relatively little "plot." The focus is more on the cast of eccentric characters and their interactions: exasperated Colonel, alcoholic Licenciado, rival Russian and U.S. agents, various inscrutable (and stereotyped) Asians, grieving (and not-so grieving) widows, and so on. The plot is confusing and is never fully explained—making the final scene between Laski and García amusing, with Laski complaining that García's execution of Liu makes it impossible to determine the full scope of the scheme.

As noted in the review of the 1977 version of *El complot mongol*, the 2018 film adds the character of



Laski—or to be more accurate, it restores Laski, who was in Bernal's original novel but removed in the first screen adaptation. In 1977's *El complot mongol*, it is CIA agent Graves who surveilles Filiberto's apartment, and who saves Filiberto's life at the conclusion,

actions assigned to Laski in 2018. This change reduces the importance of *gringo* Graves (identified as an FBI agent in the newer version) significantly. It's unknown why Eceiza dropped Laski in his script, although it may

have been just a desire to simplify the cast of characters and plot.

*El complot mongol* features a number of Asian performers, but two of the major Asian characters are cast with Mexicans (Salvador Sánchez and Gustavo Sánchez Parra), while Bárbara Mori—whose father was a Uruguayan of Japanese descent—plays the Chinese Martita (Filiberto's fantasies about Martita include her being dressed like a Japanese geisha, another commingling of Asian identities). As noted above, the "Chinese" in the film are mostly broad stereotypes, with Martita in particular speaking in stilted Spanish and most of the other Asian characters chiefly employed in casting sinister glances at García or worse. Of course, the point is that while the Chinese are involved, the *complot* is actually an internal one, with the purpose being to elevate Del Valle to the presidency and "restore" the Mexican military to prominence.

The performances are solid, if somewhat exaggerated (in keeping with the film's heightened reality/artificial tone). Both Eugenio Derbez and Javier López play their roles seriously (López, while best-known as the squeaky-voiced over-sized adolescent character "Chabelo," can and has acted straight roles before)

It's amusing to see Hugo Stiglitz—using his own name—identified as a *gringo*; the opening credits have "*Chúpate esa, Tarantino!*" after Stiglitz's name (probably a reference to *The Inglorious Basterds*, where a character is named "Hugo Stiglitz" but is played by someone else). Ari Brickman, who plays an FBI agent and alternates Spanish and English, was actually born in Chiapas and raised in Veracruz and has appeared in both Mexican and Hollywood productions.



## Naná

(Santander, 1943)

"Alberto Santander presents..." *Dir-*

*Scr:* Celestino Gorostiza; *Adapt:*

Alberto Santander, Celestino

Gorostiza; *Orig Novel:* Emile

Zola; *Photo:* Alex Phillips; *Music:*

Jorge Pérez; *Assoc Prod:* C.

Camacho Corona; *Prod Chief:* L.

Sánchez Tello; *Co-Dir:* Roberto Gavaldón; *Film Ed:*





Charles L. Kimball; *Art Dir*: Manuel Fontanals; *Camera Op*: Enrique Wallace; *Sound Op*: Consuelo Rodríguez, Fernando Barrera; *Sound Ed*: Lupita Marino; *Script Clerk*: A. Corona Blake

**Cast:** Lupe Vélez (*Naná*), Miguel Ángel Ferriz (*Count Muffat*), Chela de Castro (*Rosa Mignon*), Crox Alvarado (*Fontan*), Elena D'Orgaz (*Satin*), José Baviera (*Count Vandoeuvres*), Sergio Orta (*empresario Bordenave*), Isabelita Blanch (*Naná's aunt*), Jorge Reyes (*Fauchery's cousin*), Mimí Derba (*Madame Hugon, Bebé's mother*), Roberto Corell (*Labordette*), Virginia Zuri, Pepe del Río (*Jorge Hugon aka Bebé*), Cliff Carr (*Steiner*), Luis Alcoriza (*Fauchery*), Conchita Gentil Arcos (*Zoé, Naná's maid*), Lupe del Castillo (*old "witch"*), Hernán Vera (*prefect*), Victorio Blanco (*Marquis*), Rafael Beltrán (*Felipe Hugon, Bebé's brother*), José Elías Moreno (*man at table in café*), Alfonso Jiménez "Kilómetro," Emilia Guíú, Lilia Michel (*dancer*)

**Notes:** although born in Mexico, Lupe Vélez only made two films in her homeland, *La zandunga* and *Naná*, spending most of her career in Hollywood. Like Dolores del Río, Vélez was typecast as an "exotic foreigner" in Hollywood cinema, including a long run as the stereotyped "Mexican Spitfire." *Naná* was her last film: Vélez died in December 1944.

*Naná* is a well-produced, prestige film, directed by playwright and stage director Celestino Gorostiza (the first of only 3 features he'd direct) with assistance from Roberto Gavaldón. It takes some liberties with Zola's novel—the beginning and the end are different—but generally follows the narrative and characters.

In mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, Naná is a young unwed mother out on her own. She encounters her friend Satin, who arranges for Naná to become a servant in the "hotel"



(bordello) where Satin works. The establishment is raided, and Naná is sentenced as one of the prostitutes (Satin supports her, but the other whores insist she's one of them). This

becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Naná has to become a streetwalker to support her child (who's now living with her aunt). A chance encounter with actor Fontan results in Naná getting a job as an actress in a show produced by Bordenave. She's a success, and attracts the attention of many male admirers, including banker Steiner, young Jorge (dubbed "Bebé"), journalist

Fauchery and his cousin, and the elderly Marqués and his son-in-law Count Muffat.

[In standard melodrama style, Naná is completely untrained but performs flawlessly on stage, singing a song and doing a modified striptease. Later in the film, she sings another song, again in a professional manner. However, the film makes it clear that her beauty is what impresses (male) audiences.]

Naná is disappointed her popularity does not elevate her to the ranks of high society. She quits the theatre and accepts the gift of a house in the countryside from Steiner, but is shunned by her respectable neighbours, especially the family of her admirer Bebé. [She puts the house in her son's name, and he visits her there at one point.] After a time, Steiner admits he is broke and Naná severs their relationship.



Naná and Muffat have an affair, but she chafes because he is wary of being seen in public with her. Naná angrily tells Muffat that his wife is sleeping with Fauchery. They argue and Naná reconciles with Fontan; they move into a small apartment (her son has gone back to live with his aunt) but Fontan discards her for another woman. Naná decides to return to the stage; the leading role in Bordenave's new show has been given to Rosa, but Naná agrees to reconcile with Muffat (who has begged her to take him back) if he gets her the role. [Later, Fauchery tells Naná she has the part, but it's never revealed how she got it. In the 1979 *Naná*, there is a scene in which Muffat tells Bordenave he'll pay off Rosa's contract so Naná can take the role.]

Bebé's older brother Felipe, a military officer, is sent by their mother to convince Naná to stop seeing the young man. Naná charms Felipe and he joins her admirers. Later, Fauchery, Vandoeuvres, Bebé and Felipe visit Naná—Felipe gives her a diamond bracelet and ring, and she consents to marry him (perhaps in jest?). There is an abrupt cut to some time later: Bebé asks Naná not to marry his brother, because he loves her. Naná says she only allowed Bebé to hang around because she pitied him, and she has no intention of marrying him or Felipe. She



orders Bebé to never visit her again, and he stabs himself to death with a pair of scissors. As Naná kneels beside his body, Bebé's mother, Mme. Hugon, arrives! (What



bad timing!) She has her footmen carry Bebé away, and informs Naná that Felipe has been arrested for

embezzling money from his regiment to give to Naná. "You've done a lot of harm," Mme. Hugon says.

In another instance of extremely bad timing, Muffat arrives just in time to see this. He tells Naná it's over, this time for good. Naná protests: "You all blame the women, when it's men who are the cause for everything!" Muffat: "If a curse does anything, I curse you!"

Shunned by her former friends, Naná decides to leave Paris, but her aunt arrives and says Naná's son Luisito is gravely ill. Naná rushes to his bedside but the boy has died of smallpox.

Time passes. A group of Naná's former male friends are sitting outside a café one evening, talking about her, speculating about her current whereabouts (she's in Russia, she went crazy, an Indian rajah showered her with riches, etc.). "Poor Naná, she was never happy," Bordenave says. They decide to put aside sad memories and toast the new star of Paris, Mistinguett. [This shifts the chronology of Zola's novel, which concludes around the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, whereas Mistinguett didn't begin her career until 1885 and didn't become a star in Paris until 1895.]

An old beggar woman walks past their table and down the street, pausing briefly to gaze at the theatre where she was once famous—it is Naná, greatly aged in appearance. Some small boys harass her as she goes. [This echoes an earlier scene in which Naná witnesses an old, possibly demented woman being heckled by children.] The film concludes with a closeup of Naná, tears in her eyes.



The 1943 *Naná*, as mentioned above, begins and ends differently than the original novel. Zola's book begins with Naná's appearance on stage, and ends with her death

of smallpox, whereas Gorostiza and Alberto Santander's adaptation adds a prologue showing Naná as a decent young single mother who is unjustly accused of prostitution, and concludes with Naná still alive, although poor, homeless, and sad. [While the 1979 *Naná* is in almost every other way less faithful to the novel, it at least retains Zola's basic beginning and end.]

Lupe Vélez is given the full glamour treatment, with lots of lavish costumes and hairstyles. Perhaps surprisingly—if one is only familiar with her Hollywood career—Vélez turns in a fairly decent and at times nuanced performance. She's not entirely believable as the hard-working young mother in the early scenes, but she's not horrible. During the rest of the film, she convincingly portrays



Naná's varied moods: flirtatious, scheming, sarcastic, angry, sad, frightened. In her final

scene with Muffat, she makes a valid point: she doesn't set out to exploit men, they willingly pursue her, sometimes desert and/or betray her, and harm themselves due to their fanatic devotion to her. To be sure, she accepts (and even at times demands) material goods in exchange for her company, but she never orders them to bankrupt themselves, leave their wives, cheat, or steal for her: if they can't come up with the money, she cuts them off, and it's the mens' inability to accept this loss that causes their downfall.

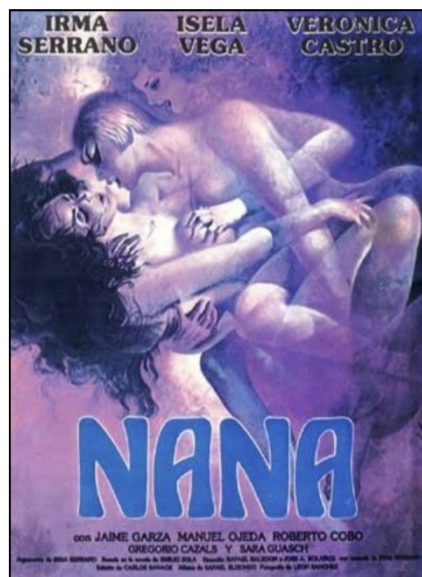
The rest of the cast is fine, with the largest parts given to Miguel Ángel Ferriz, Crox Alvarado, and Pepe del Río, while José Baviera and Jorge Reyes have little to do. The production values are fine: there isn't much in the way of "spectacle," but the theatre scene has a reasonable number of extras, and the other sets and costumes are satisfactory.

Although I had seen *Naná* on television many years ago, the film was largely unavailable in recent years. A copy—bearing the "Archivo Fílmico Agrasánchez" header, a 1996 copyright date, and apparently sourced from a film print—recently surfaced on the Internet. The quality is a bit soft but one should not complain when as recently as last year I was unable to locate it at all. This version runs about 85 minutes; García Riera gives an 87-minute running time, which suggests no major cuts.



**Naná** (Rodeo Films International, 1979, ©Prods. Platino) **original Rodeo Films opening credits:** *Dir:* José A. Bolaños; *Adapt/Story:* José Bolaños; *Based on the*

*Vodevil Teatral* by: Irma Serrano; *Orig Novel*: Emilio Zola; *Photo*: León Sánchez; *Film Ed*: Carlos Savage; *Music*: Rafael Elizondo; *Art Dir*: Javier Rodríguez; *Set*



*Décor*: José Bolaños & Carlos Cortez; *Choreog*: José Bolaños; *Prod Mgr*: Óscar López Gallardo  
©1985

**Prods. Platino version opening credits:**

*Prod*: Irma Serrano; *Dir*: Rafael Baledón, José A. Bolaños; *Co-Dir & Advisor*: Irma Serrano; *Music*: Rafael Elizondo; *Sound Ed*: José Li-Ho

**End credits on**

**both versions:** *Story/Adapt*: Irma Serrano; *Orig Novel*: Emilio Zola; *Choreog*: Ana Mérida; *Photo*: León Sánchez; *Prod Mgr*: Antonio Rubio; *Prod Chief*: Alfredo Chavira; *Sub-Dir*: Winfield Sánchez; *Décor*: Raúl Serrano; *Camera Op*: Teodoro García; *Lighting*: Gabriel Castro; *Makeup*: Elvira Oropeza; *Sound Supv*: Ramón Moreno; *Re-rec*: René Ruiz Cerón; *Dialog Rec*: Javier Mateos; *Studio*: Churubusco Azteca; *Union*: STPC  
©1980

**Cast:** Verónica Castro (*Satín*), Isela Vega (*Satín*), “La Tigresa” Irma Serrano (*Naná aka Teresa*), Gregorio Casal (*Fontaine*), Manuel Ojeda (*Count Muffat*), Roberto Cobo “Calambres” (*Francisco*), Bruno Rey (*impresario Bordenave*), Jaime Garza (*Georges Hugon aka Coquito*), Roberto Dumondt [sic], Paco Morayta (*Prince*), Sara Guasch (*Mme. Tricot*), María Martín (*Aunt*), Luz María Jérez, Cristina Molina (*actress*), Diana Arriaga, Fidel Garriga, Francisco Tames, Jorge Fegan (*Steiner*), Verónica Fernández, José Contel, Servando Manzetti, Alma Thelma, Eduardo Flores, Oliverio Ortega, Roberto Martí, Manuel González, Carlos Rios, Víctor Montoya, J. Antonio Carrasco, Jorge Osorio, Alejandro Duarte, Carlos Pouliot (*Marqués*)

**Notes:** *Naná* has an interesting and convoluted history. Emile Zola’s novel had been previously filmed a number of times, including a 1943 Mexican version starring Lupe Vélez. In the early 1970s, actress Irma Serrano produced and starred in a controversial stage version (at her own theatre, Teatro Fru Fru in Mexico City) which drew attention because of its explicit sexual themes and scenes.

This ran for several years, and in late 1979 production began on a film version.

Details of filming are unclear, but director José A. Bolaños left—apparently after clashing with Irma Serrano—and was replaced by Rafael Baledón. Bolaños retained a co-directing credit with Baledón, but lost all of his other credits (writer, décor, choreography). As I wrote in my review of *Lucky Johnny Born in America* (aka *Arde Baby arde*) in **MFB 15/01** (Jan-Feb 2009):

The directorial career of José Antonio Bolaños can best be described as “unlucky.” Not a single one of the movies he made had a simple, easy path to the screen. Born in 1935, Bolaños worked on several films in production and writing capacities in the 1950s, and was poised to direct his first feature, *La soldadera*, in 1960. Shooting was cancelled at the last minute due to government disapproval of the script, and Bolaños had to wait until 1966 to make the movie. He spent a considerable amount of time writing a screen adaptation of the novel “Johnny Got His Gun,” only to learn the movie rights were unavailable. Bolaños then made *Lucky Johnny Born in America* in 1970, but the picture’s lukewarm reception at the 1971 Venice Film Festival prompted revisions, re-shooting, and re-editing, delaying its release (in Mexico) until 1975 (I am unable to find any record of theatrical release in the USA). Bolaños directed a three-hour version of *Pedro Páramo* in 1976 (despite the fact that Juan Rulfo’s novel had been adapted to the screen only a decade before), but saw his work cut down to 90 minutes by the distributor. Finally, Bolaños collaborated with Irma Serrano on *Naná* (1979), but the star and director quarreled and—since Serrano was also the producer, it was Bolaños who left. [He died in 1994 without making another film, although he did re-edit *Pedro Páramo* aka *El hombre de la Media Luna* to its original running time.]

Isela Vega also quit the film, allegedly returning only when Serrano paid her (overdue) salary and agreed to appear in *Los amantes del señor de la noche*,



which Vega was to direct. Vega’s role is curious—she appears as one of the actresses in the film’s opening sequence, then vanishes until the 37-minute mark, in a sequence at Naná’s country house. Here, Vega appears to be playing the same role (*Satín*, Naná’s friend) as Verónica Castro! *Satín* (Vega) and *Naná* undress *Coquito* and force him to wear women’s lingerie. To confuse matters further, then *Naná* and *Coquito* go to bed, and are

spied on by Satín (Castro), who starts to join them but is called away. Satín (Castro) also appears later in this same sequence at the country house.

A short time later, Naná has been forced to work as a streetwalker by Fontaine (this is apparently a fantasy sequence)—she's pursued by the police, Fontaine refuses to hide her, and Naná takes refuge with Satín (Vega), and they have a lesbian sex scene. This is the last of Vega's scenes with the exception of a very short (about 10 seconds) closeup shot, crudely cut into the final "carnaval" sequence (it doesn't match at all).

It's unclear if Vega was brought in to replace Castro because the latter refused to do nudity (she did a brief nude scene in one early film--*El arte de engañar*—but limits herself to skimpy lingerie in *Naná*) or for that



matter appear with a nude Jaime Garza, or for other reasons. Although some sources credit Castro as "Satán" and Vega as "Satín," this is an error based on the pronunciation of the name (Sat-ANN versus Sat-TEEN,

French vs. Spanish). Watching the film, it's clear from the country house sequence that they're supposed to be the same character. Without this section, one could assume Vega and Castro were playing different roles, although it doesn't really make much sense viewed that way.

*Naná* begins in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. Naná, a former prostitute, is the hit of a musical show produced by Bordenave, to the irritation of leading actress Rosa. Naná, fellow prostitute Satín, and gay *major-domo* Francisco live together, but are all short of cash. Naná has a young child who lives with her aunt, another drain on her resources. [She was raped by her step-father and turned to prostitution to support herself and her baby.] Naná is forced to have sex with a wealthy young man procured by Mme. Tricot to buy food and pay her aunt. [This scene is intercut with Naná singing a song, then Satín and Francisco each get a song.]

Naná's stage performance results in visits by admirers including banker Steiner (who gives her jewelry and cash), young Georges, and Count Muffat. Muffat is collecting funds for charity, and Naná impulsively gives him the jewels and most of her cash. Later, a foreign prince is introduced to Naná and gives her more jewelry.

Steiner gives Naná the deed to a mansion in the country. She "retires" from the stage, but her admirers

pursue her. Georges arrives and sleeps with Naná. [Two more songs in this section.] Steiner shows up and informs Naná that the deed was never signed, and unless she has sex with him, she must vacate the premises. Impresario Bordenave stops by and urges Naná to return to his theatre and fulfill her contract. When she refuses, he says "You're nothing more than a piece of meat without a brain, to attract dogs to my bordello." Naná decides to leave the house, but Count Muffat makes an appearance: he confesses that he's madly in love with Naná and will even give up his family for her. Angered by Muffat's hypocrisy, Naná changes her mind and agrees to sleep with Steiner. She orders Francisco to invite all of her fellow actors—including Fontaine—to the house for a wild party. Both Francisco and Satín threaten to leave if Fontaine comes, characterising him as a *gigolo* who'll just exploit Naná. She disagrees: "Fontaine will give me love."



[The next sequence that follows is apparently fantasy. Naná is a lowly streetwalker who flees from the police to her lover/pimp Fontaine's house, only to discover he's in bed with 2 other women. Fontaine refuses to hide her from the police, so she visits Satín, who seduces her.]

Several confusing (in terms of chronology) scenes follow. Count Muffat asks Bordenave to re-hire Naná, offering to pay off Rosa's contract, but is refused. Muffat then (after a song-and-dance by Francisco and Satín) gives Francisco his last 500 francs for Naná. [Satín has a solo song on the stage set afterwards.]

Naná throws a wild party at her country house. Fontaine, Coquito, Steiner, Bordenave, Rosa, Muffat, and many others are there. Everyone insults everyone else. Steiner says audiences laughed at Naná's performances. Rosa asks each guest how much they paid to sleep with Naná (when she asks Satín, Satín kisses Rosa and then



tosses a glass of wine in her face). Naná says Count Muffat's wife is cuckolding him with journalist Fauchery, and the bitter and broke nobleman has to be physically

restrained from attacking Naná. Naná auctions off her aunt's virginity. Coquito's older brother, Captain Hugon,



stole money from his regiment for Naná and has been caught; he proposes to Naná but is mocked. Coquito shoots himself upon learning Naná slept with his brother. Naná envisions all of the guests as corpses, and demands they all “Kiss my feet!”

Cut to crowds of costumed people dancing, *carnavál*-style, on the stage set. [The Isela Vega version of Satín appears in one mis-matched insert shot for 5 seconds.] A group of soldiers march off to the Franco-Prussian War.



Francisco says “Naná is dead!” and various people—Steiner, Bordenave, Fontaine, etc.—shout rumours about Naná (she’s rich, etc.). The soldiers return, injured and defeated. Naná appears, dressed in black rags and with

smallpox scars on her face. Voiceover: “Naná returned to see her son who had smallpox and she was infected.”

Thanks, narrator! [It sounds like Isela Vega.] When Naná begs for water, Satín (Verónica Castro version) replies “The Venus de Fuego only drinks champagne!” The dying Naná stumbles through a void, sees Coquito, mumbles the words of her opening song, and drops dead.

*Naná* was based on Serrano’s stage “vodevil” and includes numerous musical numbers. Only one of these—the opening song in which a topless Naná emerges from a giant clamshell and sings “Venus de fuego”—is presented as an actual performance before an audience. The rest of the musical numbers fall into two categories: (a) songs sung live in “real life” as part of the plot, and (b) songs which take place on “theatrical”-style sets, cutaways representing elaborations on something a character says in “real life.” [One partial exception—Francisco’s first song takes place in an anachronistic gay bar, where he sings and dances (in drag) to the patrons, most wearing 1970s clothing. However, structurally it’s the same as the other interpolated songs.]

Because it is an adaptation of a stage performance, *Naná* has a different tone and structure than the 1943 version. The focus is on Naná, Satín, and Francisco. Satín appears only twice in the earlier film, for a minute or two each time; Francisco is not to be found at all in the ’44 *Naná* (Naná has a maid throughout, but this is a small role). Coquito and Count Muffat get a fair amount of footage. Fontaine (Fontan in 1943) is used only sporadically and is unsympathetic here, whereas in 1943 he plays a larger role and only turns bad later. Fauchery is alluded to once but does not appear in the 1979 *Naná*, whereas in the earlier version he shows up several times,

albeit only briefly. No one has a lot of character development. Naná’s life prior to her stage success is not shown, and her absent child is rarely mentioned. There is a jarring transition from the end of the house party sequence to the *carnával* finale, with nothing on screen to explain Naná’s fall from grace and disappearance, other than the obviously tacked-on voiceover about visiting her son and contracting smallpox.

Irma Serrano has had a long career as a celebrity, although her film work was not really the basis of her popularity. Originally a *ranchera* singer, Serrano appeared in more than a dozen Westerns/*rancheras* in the 1960s (as well as a handful of pictures in other genres), and was elevated to stardom in the early 1970s with *La Martina*, *El águila real* (opposite El Santo—she had in fact made her screen debut in *Santo contra los zombies*) and *La Tigresa*, but then apparently spent most of her time concentrating on her stage work. After *Naná*, she made only 3 more feature film appearances and a handful of TV guest shots. In *Naná* she seems to have toned down her stage performance style a bit, but still spends most of her time declaiming rather than really acting. By the early 1970s, Serrano was more of a “personality” than



an actress/singer, and had begun to cultivate the image seen in *Naná*—makeup and plastic surgery converting her into a semblance of a kabuki artist with a Michael

Jackson-esque nose. She made only a handful of films after *Naná*, continued live work for a time, then became involved in politics and various scandals.

The stage version of “Naná” starred Serrano, with Rosenda Monteros as “Satín,” Víctor Alcocer as “Steiner,” Sergio Kleiner as “Francisco,” and Manuel Ojeda as “Count Muffat.” Ojeda’s presence in both the stage and screen version of *Naná* suggests that he wasn’t, as one might have guessed, chosen because he’d appeared in Bolaños’ version of *Pedro Páramo*. Most of the screen cast is fine within the limitations placed on them by the script. As noted above, “Satín” and “Francisco” are practically the co-stars of the film, and Verónica Castro and Roberto Cobo are quite good. The production values are satisfactory; the production design is a mix of “realistic” and “stagey” (the latter probably reflecting the original Teatro Fru Fru sets). Rafael Elizondo’s score was nominated for an Ariel—there are no potential pop hits in the songs, but they’re at least listenable.

*Naná* was released theatrically in May 1985, rated “C” (the equivalent to “R” in the USA). It’s unclear how widely it was shown (very little in the way of publicity materials exist) or how successful it was. A VHS version was released by Video Latino but there does not seem to be a legitimate DVD available. Versions currently available on the Internet are sourced from a VHS tape (or



a bootleg DVD copy of a VHS tape), tape rolls and tracking issues included. Oddly, this “Internet version” is not the same as the Video Latino print: the Video Latino version has the

original credits, listing only José A. Bolaños as director and giving the production company as Rodeo Films Internacional rather than Producciones Platino. The credits on the Video Latino tape are full-screen title cards, while the Platino version superimposes them over freeze frames from the movie. The end credits are the same on both versions, which is why there are discrepancies between the opening credits and the end credits on the Platino version.

The Platino version runs approximately 99 minutes, while the Video Latino tape is about 96 minutes: most of this difference (more than 2 minutes) represents cuts in the Video Latino print in the Irma Serrano-Isela Vega sex scene. The Platino version is significantly better in terms of colour and brightness than the Video Latino print (which is dark and muddy brown throughout), although it’s a shame whatever tape they used for the master was so battered (the print used to create the Video Latino tape is in surprisingly good shape, aside from the poor colour and lighting); additionally, the Platino film suffers from inconsistent image quality throughout, with shots in the same sequence varying widely in brightness and contrast.

*Naná* is an interesting curiosity and it’s a shame it’s not more readily accessible today.



### Carlos González Morantes

**El otro crimen** [The Other Crime] (UNAM-DAC, 1988 [©1989]) *Prod*: Pedro Canseco; *Dir*: Carlos González Morantes; *Scr*: Rubén Torres, Tomás Pérez Turrent, Carlos González Morantes; *Story*: Carlos González Morantes; *Photo*: Jack Lach; *Music*: Rodolfo “Popo” Sánchez; *Prod Mgr*: Gilberto Morales; *Asst Dir*: Ciro Cabello; *Film Ed*: Gilberto Macedo; *Art Dir*: Patricia Rojas, Patricia García, Carlos González; *Sound*: Raúl

Sinobas [end credits: Eduardo Salazar Pérez]; *Re-rec*: René Ruiz Cerón

**Cast**: Enrique Rocha (*Omar*), Elizabeth Aguilar (*Etelvina*), María Rojo (*Ema* [teacher]; *Andrea Solís* [worker]), Claudio Obregón (*Celestino*), Jorge Russek (*don Marcos*), Javier Marc (*Alfredo*), Homero Wimmer [sic] (*Salim*), Patricia Reyes Spíndola (*Trini*), Alberto Arvizu (*René Saldivar*), Martha Aura (*Sabina*), Jorge Fegan (*union official*), Alfredo Sevilla, María Elena Ambriz, Emilio Ebergency, Miguel Alonso, Jeheyel Romo (*young Omar*), Darinka Ezeta, Patricia Eguía, Guadalupe Cazares, Nadina Iyescas, Ramiro Ramírez (*Gandad, father in restaurant*), Nelly Dorantes (*midwife*), Manuel Poncelis (*wino*), José Velazco (*portero*), Magda Vizcaino (*doña María*), Cristian Olvera (*young René*), Sabrina Livia (*Sarah*), Josefina Villalobos (*Badia*), Gloria de las Fuentes (*secretary*)



**Notes**: Carlos González Morantes graduated from the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC—now known as ENAC, the Escuela Nacional de Artes Cinematográficas) in 1973. Since that time he has worked in numerous capacities at UNAM, and on various films as director, actor, and producer. His first feature was the independent *Tómalo como quieras* (1971, not released commercially), followed by *La derrota* (1973, which starred José Alonso and Irma Lozano but wasn’t shown in cinemas until 1982), and *El otro crimen* (1988; sources indicate it premiered in 1995 and got a video release, as did *La derrota*). 20 years later, he directed *Crepúsculo rojo*—I haven’t seen this film yet, but I’ve ordered the DVD (update: see next review). Both *La derrota* and *El otro crimen* deal with exploitation of workers by capitalists; *La derrota* has a more independent “look” than *El otro crimen*, but the latter film was still shot mostly on location and is somewhat less didactic and has more character development than *La derrota*.

Omar is the son of don Marcos, a Middle Eastern immigrant to Mexico who runs a sweatshop employing women seamstresses. When his father is attacked by the enraged foreman, Omar seizes a knife and saves don Marcos by killing the man. Years later, Omar is now a

successful businessman himself—he owns various clandestine sweatshops, some run by a relative (Alfredo) and others operated by a *prestanombres* (front man)



named Salim. Alfredo and Salim are gay lovers. Private detective Celestino has somehow discovered Omar's long-ago crime, but realises he can't blackmail him over this (Omar was too young to be legally responsible): instead, he assigns his

girlfriend Etelvina to seduce Omar and get information about his crooked business deals.

Meanwhile, Trini, Sabina, and other workers are upset with the low pay and poor working conditions in Omar's mini-factories. When they protest, Omar brings in a union official to placate them, although it's clear the man is corrupt. Omar says they will soon all re-locate to a new building he's constructing. Andrea, a worker who resembles one of Omar's school teachers from his youth, is promoted to supervisor.

Omar meets former classmate René, now a politician. [This is a bit hard to swallow—it's been at least 25-30 years since they were in primary school together, and it's not like Omar looks the same!] Omar and other businessmen are courted by René's (unspecified) party, although in the past the business sector was usually associated with the "other party." René even says Omar might run for political office, although he could never—



as the son of an immigrant—become president.

Etelvina and Omar have an affair, and she breaks off relations with Celestino. However, Omar "hears" his father's voice criticising Etelvina

(who isn't of Middle Eastern heritage), and when she unwittingly offends Omar (drunkenly pretending he's a waiter and ordering "more wine!"), he takes her to his house in Cuernavaca and murders her.

Salim wants to escape Omar's control, and conspires with Alfredo to open a chain of shops that sell the garments his shops produce directly to the public. When Omar learns this, he lures Salim to his father's abandoned warehouse and kills him. Celestino uncovers proof that Omar murdered Etelvina and Salim; he promises to tell Alfredo who the killer is (for a fee), and also blackmails Omar.

Omar and Celestino's meeting is interrupted by the great Mexico City earthquake of 19 September 1985. Celestino is killed, while Omar's new factory also collapses (it's suggested that he cut corners by purchasing sub-standard construction material), trapping some of the workers. Omar sends Alfredo and some men into the ruins to recover the safe and valuable papers, but the workers are upset by his indifference to the plight of their trapped comrades. They go out on strike. [This is based on an actual occurrence during the earthquake in which the "Topeka" building collapsed, killing and trapping numerous women workers. This and the destruction of other shops became a national scandal.]

As the film concludes, Omar tells René the corrupt union has been bribed to quash the strike. René says Omar has been chosen to run for a seat in congress by the party.

*El otro crimen* is critical of unscrupulous capitalists, corrupt unions, and politics, but sympathetic to the workers (*La derrota* has some of the same sentiments, although unions are treated better). Some of the details aren't perfectly clear: why are Omar's shops clandestine (and if they are, why would he have a new building constructed to house them), why does he need front-man

Salim for some of them? Alfredo and Salim originally scheme to under-cut Omar's prices, so the introduction of Salim's retail operation comes out of left field (also, Omar accuses Salim of using his capital,



suggesting there were no safeguards in place to prevent a *prestanombres* from doing this—except the threat of being slashed to death with a straight razor, I suppose).

While Omar is the protagonist of the film and gets most the character development, some attention is paid to Alfredo, Salim, Andra, Trini, Sabina, Etelvina, and Celestino, making them more detailed as individuals. Despite the "independent" nature of *El otro crimen*, the main roles are all played by performers with some professional experience (this also goes for *La derrota*, which includes Ernesto Gómez Cruz, Manuel "Flaco" Ibáñez, Claudio Obregón, and Leonor Llausás in the cast).

Enrique Rocha's brooding appearance, voice, and demeanour resulted in his being cast in numerous villainous (or at least anti-heroic) roles (not counting *El proceso de Cristo* in which he played Jesus Christ). In *El otro crimen* his character is tormented by his status as an outsider in Mexican society (as a schoolboy he's



nicknamed “El Turco”)—these feelings are reinforced by his late father’s voice in his head: Mexico isn’t “our country.” Omar seems to truly love Etelvina (despite his father’s disapproval), but one innocent remark condemns her to death (he doesn’t say anything to her, doesn’t break up with her, he murders her because his feelings have been hurt!). Salim is killed because he betrayed Omar’s trust and stole money from him, and if the earthquake hadn’t intervened, Omar was prepared to kill Celestino as



well. Early in the film, a radio broadcast refers to a serial killer of young women, and while there’s no suggestion that Omar is this murderer, it’s certainly feasible. Late in the film, Omar asks Andrea to “work late” and then attempts to

rape her, failing only because she resists him vigorously and escapes. No other character in *El otro crimen* is given as much screen time—it’s a portrait of a flawed, insecure, conflicted, but vain and selfish man who cares little about others except as they serve his needs. We don’t get any backstories for Trini, Etelvina, Celestino, Alfredo, etc.—even though they are distinct individuals, they revolve around Omar. The story of the oppressed women workers could have been the central part of a different film (*La derrota* focuses on such a struggle between labour and management), but here it’s simply one more part of the overall story. The gay relationship between Salim and Alfredo is treated very matter-of-factly and sympathetically, with no



stereotyping or condescension.

The film doesn’t make an overt statement about issues of race/national origin—there is no suggestion that all (or only) businessmen of Middle Eastern heritage are exploiters, for instance. Omar and Salim do not look, dress, or act “foreign,” and there are only vague hints at a Middle Eastern “community” in Mexico: in one scene, Salim enters a (presumably Middle Eastern) restaurant and gallantly flirts with two teenage girls sitting with their father. They are smitten, but their father says Salim “likes men.” As noted above, it’s made clear that Omar and anyone else who isn’t ethnically “Mexican” can only rise so far in politics, so *El otro crimen* certainly takes note of

the separateness of Omar in society. Are Omar’s flaws—sexual predator, murderer, ruthless businessman—attributable to his Middle Eastern heritage, to the influence of his father, or merely the result of his own personality?

As an aside, the only other significant non-Mexican character is a stereotyped Spanish bartender. The seamstresses are not specifically identified as indigenous women; although Omar makes disparaging comments about Andrea’s rural origins and minimal formal education, he doesn’t go a step further and call her an *india*.

[The Mexican film industry had a significant Middle Eastern (primarily Lebanese) component in the Golden Age—Miguel Zacarías, Mauricio Garcés [Yazpek], Antonio Badú, to name a few—but whether this had an influence on the content of *El otro crimen* is not known.]

*El otro crimen* is technically fine, although its independent status is evident in the relative lack of production gloss in the images and sound. Cinematographer Jack Lach was an instructor at CUEC and shot mostly documentaries—aside from UNAM-affiliated films like *El otro crimen*, the only features he worked on appear to have been *Violencia a domicilio* (aka *El jardín de la paz*) and *La Rata*. His work on *El otro crimen* makes excellent use of actual locations. The opening sequence (Omar as a boy) is heavily filtered to give it a dream-like quality, while the contemporary scenes range from flat documentary-style images to some more “artistic” lighting and composition. The earthquake sequence uses impressive actuality footage of buildings collapsing and the tragic aftermath, skillfully intercut with recreated scenes (probably shot on buildings damaged in 1985 and as of 1988 still not repaired or replaced).

*El otro crimen* seems to be relatively rare—I am aware of only one release, on VHS on the MGS Video label (though I could be wrong), and there does not seem to have been any official DVD version. This is a shame, since it’s quite a good film.



**Crepúsculo rojo\*** [Red Twilight] (Promotora La Vida es Bella—FOPROCINE—IMCINE—Séptimo Arte—Estudios Churubusco-Azteca—Gecisa Internacional, ©2008) *Exec Prod*: Claudia Cosío V. Martínez; *Prod*: Óscar Blancarte; *Dir*: Carlos González Morantes; *Scr*: César Jaime Rodríguez, Carlos González Morantes; *Photo*: Jorge Suárez Coellar; *Music*: Arturo Macías, Gabriel Hernández; *Assoc Prod*: Carlos González Morantes, Jaime Arcos, José Luis García Agraz, Rogelio Villareal; *Prod Coord*: Mireya Reyes; *Prod Mgr*: Jorge Vargas; *Asst Dir*: Héctor Gómez; *Film Ed*: Jorge Vargas;



*Prod Des:*  
Mauricio  
D'Aguinaco;  
*Sound Des:*  
Miguel Ángel  
Molina; *Direct*  
*Sound:* Óscar  
Mateos; *Makeup:*  
Alejandro  
Preciado; *Union:*  
STPC

\*the poster  
and DVD case  
list a secondary  
title of *El*  
*despojo* [The  
Dispossession]  
but this doesn't

appear on the film itself

**Cast:** Alberto Estrella (*Valente Flores*), Enoc Leño (*Cmdte. Dagoberto Treviño*), María Rebeca (*Esperanza*), Ernesto Yáñez (*Padre Miguel*), Isela Vega (*Locha*), Homero Wimer (*Lic. Mariano*), Janneth Villareal (*Rosaura*), César Cubero (*Edelmiro*), Fernando Leal (*Ramón García*), Luis Marín (*town mayor*), Jesús Peréa (*Fidencio*), Martín Palomares (*Tío Lolo*), Alfredo Alvarado (*bank mgr*), Rosa María Rojas (*Rosa, bank employee*), Ramiro Garza Balboa (*notary*)

**Notes:** Carlos González Morantes directed his first feature film in 1971, followed it with his second in 1973, waited 15 years to make his third (1988), then made his fourth—*Crepusculo rojo*—20 years later, in 2008. *Crepusculo rojo* is a well-made and interesting film, but after a promising beginning (a printed prologue referring to the financial crisis of 1995, and how Mexicans were



affected by it and continue to suffer, then a scene in which a poor farmer and his wife are evicted from their land), the expected heavy dose of social commentary never arrives. The plot revolves around the foreclosure on Valente's farm, and the bankers are not portrayed positively, but this really isn't what the film is "about." Instead, the narrative deals with the myriad interpersonal relationships in a small town in Nuevo León, and how different people react to Valente's misfortune.

*Crepusculo rojo* reportedly cost about \$1 million USD (which goes further in Mexican filmmaking than it does in the USA) and looks very slick and professional (shot on digital video); the film was made on location in Nuevo León and doesn't have any substantial sets, special effects, or other expensive production frills. The acting, cinematography, etc., are all fine. The only stylistic bone I have to pick are the black-and-white flash-forwards in the first half of the picture (before Valente robs the local bank), which don't seem to serve any purpose (and in fact give away some details of the plot in advance, not that it's any major secret).

Lic. Mariano and his crew are working in the town of Iturbide, Nuevo León, foreclosing on farmers who have defaulted on their loans. Dagoberto, the local police commander, accompanies them to the farm of his friend Valente; Valente isn't home, and Dagoberto asks Mariano to wait a couple of days and everything will be resolved easily. That night, Valente visits Esperanza's bar and hits Ramón, a policeman who razzes him about losing his ranch. As Valente leaves, he meets Dagoberto and says he won't let the bank take his land.



Valente lives with his pregnant wife Rosaura, their young son, and their hired hand, Edelmiro. [Edelmiro is referred to as "mute," but seems to have a speech impediment, since he does speak but cannot be understood (except by Valente's son, who "translates" for him later in the film).] Valente and Edelmiro apparently have a plan: Edelmiro disables Dagoberto's truck, then hides a rifle in the town church. Dagoberto boards 2 horses at Valente's farm, and uses one of them to ride to town. As Dagoberto leaves, Valente asks him: "Which side are you on?" Valente tells his son that the land is theirs to work, but "all I can give you is *carácter* [a moral sense]."



Edelmiro and the boy head for town on Dagoberto's other horse to participate in the *fiesta* of San Pedro. Meanwhile, Dagoberto and Mariano arrive at the ranch. Valente says he doesn't object to paying off his loan, including interest, but the amount he's being charged has increased; Mariano says a judge approved the bill ("the rates are higher now, we have to consider the devaluation of the peso," etc.) but Valente refuses to accept this reasoning. Dagoberto asks him to be calm, and Valente



agrees to retrieve the deed from Padre Miguel, who has it for safe-keeping.

Once in town, Valente instead picks up the rifle and robs the bank, then escapes on the horse Edelmiro left for him. He's pursued by policemen Ramón and Tío Lolo, but turns the tables on them in a rural location. Ramón is forced to admit he was the one who caused Dagoberto to lose an eye in a shooting accident (never mentioned before or later), to Tío Lolo's disgust. Valente locks Ramón in the car trunk and rides off. He drops the money off with Esperanza, then heads for the hills.

Esperanza and Dagoberto had a young daughter, but Dagoberto refused to acknowledge his paternity, accusing Valente instead. Esperanza visits Rosaura and swears Dagoberto is the father; she and Rosaura reconcile. Rosaura goes into labour and is taken to Esperanza's bar/whorehouse where Locha will deliver the child. Bad cop Ramón attacks Esperanza and Locha hits him with an iron, killing him. In town, the mayor tells Mariano that "some strangers" robbed the bank.

Dagoberto catches Valente and handcuffs him;



Edelmiro appears and knocks Dagoberto out, but is mortally wounded. Valente frees himself and faces off with Dagoberto. Valente shoots into the sky and is shot to death by Dagoberto. Rosaura

has her baby. In town, Mariano is surrounded by a hostile crowd of residents.

As mentioned above, *Crepúsculo rojo* throws in a lot of sub-plots and references which appear out of nowhere. Dagoberto wears an eye-patch but the reason for his missing eye is never mentioned except for the one cryptic scene with Ramón, and it's never brought up again. Dagoberto's relationship with Esperanza is never fully explained: apparently they were lovers but Dagoberto became jealous of her friendship with Valente, and disowned his daughter. Esperanza was then compelled to become a bar owner/prostitute? Or was she one before? There are oblique references to Esperanza's daughter but she's never shown and the viewer begins to wonder if she's dead or somehow disabled; she later does appear and is a perfectly healthy little girl. And so on. None of this is bad, and it reinforces the idea that everyone in a small town has some relationship to everyone else, but it gets a bit confusing at times.

The film jumps around frantically in the second half, intercutting Valente, Dagoberto, Mariano, Rosaura, Esperanza, Edelmiro, and others—sometimes their paths cross, sometimes not. [In one amusing, under-stated scene, Dagoberto drops Rosaura off at Esperanza's bar just as Locha and some of the other prostitutes are dragging Ramón's dead body away—the women sit on the corpse (wrapped in a blanket) as Dagoberto walks by. In another ironic bit, the townspeople all conspire to blame the bank robbery on unknown strangers, presumably so Rosaura can pay off the mortgage with the stolen money Esperanza is holding for her.]

The cast of *Crepúsculo rojo* features several performers with connections to González Morantes' previous work. María Rebeca is the daughter of actors José Alonso and Irma



Lozano, who co-starred in his second film, *La derrota*, and Homer Wimer was

in *El otro crimen*. Alberto Estrella has appeared in numerous films, *videohomes* and *telenovelas* since the mid-1980s—he's often cast as a sort of everyman character, often but not always in rural settings. All of the performances are fine.

Although *Crepúsculo rojo* wasn't quite what I expected, it's generally an interesting and well-crafted film.



## Guillermo, Libertad, and Héctor

### La venus maldita [The Cursed Venus] (Prods.

Cinematográficas—

Prods. Cin. Martín,

1966)\* Prod:

Alfonso Rosas

Priego; Dir: Alfredo

B. Crevenna; Scr:

Rafael García

Travesí; Story:

Marcos Bronemberg

[based on "Thérèse

Raquin" by Émile

Zola, uncredited);

Photo: Jorge Stahl

Jr.; Music: Sergio

Guerrero; Prod Mgr:

Mario García

Camberos; Sub-Di: Félix A. Ramírez; Film Ed: Alfredo

Rosas Priego; Asst Film Ed: Ramón Aupart; Cam Asst:





León Sánchez, Abraham Mejía; *Makeup*: Noemí Wallace; *Re-rec*: Salvador Topete; *Sound Ed*: Abraham Cruz; Eastmancolor [spelled “Eatsman Color” on the credits]

\*“El cine sonoro en Perú” (Ricardo Bedoya) also credits Filmadora Peruana as a production company, but this does not appear on-screen

**Cast:** Libertad Leblanc (*Ana*), Guillermo Murray (*Rafael Carral*), Héctor Godoy (*Gustavo Fernández*), Berta Moss (*doña Beatriz*), Luis Álvarez (*Insp. Ramírez*), Edwin Mayer (*Dr. Arali*), Lucha Salazar, Lorena Duval, Luis Ángel Piñasco, Felipe Valverde, Elena Cortez, Alicia Maguina (*herself, singer*), Los Golden Boys (*band*), Freddy Roland & His Orchestra, Gustavo Larrañaga, Coco Montana, Erasmo Díaz, Q’ara Chunchu & Q’Anchi, Los Violines de Lima

**Notes:** this Mexican-Peruvian-Argentine co-production was shot entirely in Peru (Lima, Cusco, and Machu Picchu) beginning in March 1966 and spends a significant percentage of its running time showing touristy views of the country and musical performances by Peruvian artists. Not much time is left over for the very thin plot.

Gustavo is a rich “young” (30 years old) man who lives with his domineering mother, doña Beatriz (in real life Berta Moss was only 7 years older than Héctor Godoy). Gustavo’s best friend, sales agent Rafael, encourages him to have fun. While Rafael is on an extended business trip, Gustavo has an attack and is



hospitalised. Dr. Arali informs Gustavo that he’s mortally ill (we later learn he had leukemia) and needs absolute rest. Gustavo is sent home with Ana as his nurse. They fall in love and wed, over doña Beatriz’s objections (she says Ana is not in her son’s social class). Gustavo has asked Dr. Arali

to keep his diagnosis a secret from everyone, so not even Ana realises he is mortally ill.

[This would seem to be a major plot flaw. Ana is not only a nurse, but she’s assigned to Gustavo’s case, and yet she doesn’t know what he’s suffering from? Later, she complains to Dr. Arali that her husband’s medication bottles have no labels, and is told that Gustavo is “sickly and weak,” and the medicine is to “build him up.”]

Gustavo regains his strength so that he and Ana can go on a honeymoon to Machu Picchu and elsewhere. [In one scene, the “sickly” Gustavo rows a small boat for a long time as Ana sun-bathes.] Rafael returns and is surprised to learn his friend now has a wife. When Gustavo suffers a relapse, he insists Rafael escort Ana around town to keep her from being bored. Naturally, Ana and Rafael fall in love after many smoldering glances and lush, dramatic music on the soundtrack. Perhaps Rafael’s interest is also piqued by doña Beatriz’s pronouncement that Ana is “insatiable” and will be the death of Gustavo. Ana seals the deal by visiting Rafael’s room one night (he’s staying in Gustavo’s house) wearing a sheer black negligee.

However, Ana eventually feels “dirty” and decides to break off her affair with Rafael. Rafael counters with “Gustavo must die!” Ana rejects this, until Rafael says “Is it a crime to be unable to live without you?” That’s apparently all it takes to change her mind. Ana, Rafael and Gustavo set out for the family’s cabin (which requires rowing across that same stretch of open water); halfway there, Rafael tries to strangle Gustavo with fishing line, and everyone falls out of the boat. Eventually Rafael’s greater lung capacity wins out, and Gustavo drowns. A boatload of tourists rescues Rafael and Ana.

When they get back to the city, they learn Gustavo had only 2 months to live anyway. Such irony! Doña Beatriz overhears Ana reproving Rafael for killing Gustavo, but has a stroke and is left paralysed before she can inform the police; she can hear and see, but not speak or move. The police inspector in charge of the case tells doña Beatriz he suspects foul play in her son’s death. He tells Ana and Rafael they can’t leave the city until Gustavo’s body is recovered (Rafael had tied it to an underwater rock so it wouldn’t surface) and an autopsy is performed. A police diver discovers Gustavo’s body.

Rafael tells Ana she can denounce him to the police and go free, but she admits she still loves him. They



speed off in Gustavo's tiny little red car (a 1964 NSU Wankel-Spider) and commit suicide by driving off a cliff. [This is a nice bit of circularity—the film begins with Gustavo and Rafael driving through the city in this car, and when Rafael arrives at the airport in the middle of the film, Ana collects him, driving the same vehicle.]

*La venus maldita* has an odd moral message—Ana and Rafael have a **true** love (she admits she married Gustavo for money, then later came to love him, but not “passionately”) and since no one considers the possibility of divorce (I was unable to find the pertinent divorce laws for Peru in 1967, but as recently as the 2000s even uncontested divorce required the marriage to have been in force for at least two years), the only option is to murder Gustavo, right? And Gustavo's death is not even a



relatively clean, painless one, a la *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (a whack on the head)—Rafael strangles

Gustavo with fishing line (!), and they struggle for a **long** time, on the boat and underwater. Just about the only things Rafael and Ana have in their favour is that they are **really, really** in love, and that Gustavo's fortune doesn't enter into it (unlike *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Ossessione*, where the unhappy wife refuses to just run away with her lover, because that would mean losing her husband's money). Still, the conclusion of *La venus maldita* allows the murderous couple to die together, on their own terms, apparently instantly and without suffering through a trial and public shame.

It's interesting to note that the character of doña Beatriz starts off as a stereotypical domineering mother but undergoes a change as the film continues: she predicts Ana will be the death of her son (and is eventually proved correct), but after Gustavo's death she apologises to both Rafael and Ana (before she learns they murdered him). Bertha Moss does an excellent job of acting with her eyes in the last few moments of the film when her character is paralysed and unable to speak. She becomes a truly sad figure who has the full sympathy of the audience.

The Peruvian padding mentioned above occurs mostly in the first half of the film, and the second half moves along effectively. The production values are fine, with most of the picture shot on location (it's unclear if the interiors of Gustavo's house are an actual home or sets,

but I'd guess it was someone's home or possibly some sort of museum). There are only 6 significant speaking roles—Gustavo, Rafael, Ana, doña Beatriz, Dr. Arali, and the police lieutenant—and while there are sufficient extras in various scenes, it seems a little odd that Gustavo's mansion has no visible servants (I suppose this could have been deliberate, to focus the drama on the four main residents).

Alfredo B. Crevenna's direction is workmanlike and the other technical aspects are professional. However, the melodramatic coding—intense gazes and lush, romantic and/or dramatic music—is laid on with a **very** heavy hand. The performances are satisfactory (the actor playing Dr. Arali is rather obviously dubbed, but this isn't that jarring).

In sum, a routine melodrama given an extra bit of interest by the Peruvian locations.

*La venus maldita* was rated “C” (roughly equivalent to “R” in the USA), but Emilio García Riera lists the running time as 84 minutes and indicates any nudity was cut in Mexico. Existing TV prints also run just about 84 minutes and have no nude scenes—I have a Mexcinema VHS tape that claims to be the “*versión completa*” and allegedly runs 90 minutes, but it's damaged and I'm not sure it will even play.



#### 4 contra el crimen\* [Four Against Crime]

(Cinematográfica Sotomayor, 1967) *Exec Prod*: Heberto Dávila Guajardo; *Prod*: Jesús Sotomayor Martínez; *Dir*: Sergio Véjar; *Scr*: Alfredo Ruanova, Gabriel García Márquez; *Story*: Fernando Galiana; *Photo*: Rosalío Solano; *Music Dir*: Gustavo C. Carrión; *Supv*: Miguel Sotomayor Martínez; *Prod Chief*: Armando Espinosa; *Asst Dir*: Mario Cisneros; *Film Ed*: José Bustos; *Art Dir*: Salvador Lozano; *Camera Op*: Hugo Velazco; *Lighting*: Antonio Solano; *Makeup*: Concepción Zamora; *Sound Supv*: James L. Fields; *Sound Dir*: Galdino Samperio; *Dialog Rec*: Javier Mateos; *Sound Ed*: Raúl Portillo; *Spec*



*FX*: Antonio Muñoz; *Union*: STPC; *Studio*: Churubusco-Azteca

\*lobby cards for the film feature a secondary title of *Operación Muerte*, but this does not appear on the movie itself.

**Cast:** Libertad Leblance (*Nora*), Pedro Armendáriz Jr. (*Gustavo*), Guillermo Murray (*Enrique Ferrer*), Blanca Sánchez (*Elena Cervantes*), Héctor Godoy (*Pablo*), Víctor Junco (*Iván*), Fernando Luján (*Peter*), Cynthia Mandán (*Virginia Lascuráin*), Rubén Calderón (*The Chief*), Carlos Nieto (*Luigi*), Roberto Palacios (*Chang*), Carlos León (*Enrique Williams*), Jorge Rado (*Smith*), Julien de Meriche (*Cortés*), Marcelo Villamil (*Sr. Lascuráin*), Ramiro Orci (*gas station attendant*), Felipe del Castillo (*monk*), Jesús Gómez (*villain in helicopter*), Manuel Trejo Morales (*false monk*), Víctor Alcocer (*dubs voice of The Chief*), Marco Antonio Arzate (*bearded gang member*)

**Notes:** *4 contra el crimen* is remembered today, if at all, as a James Bond-inspired film, and because the screenplay was co-written by future Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez (not that there's anything in the film that would suggest this if you didn't already know).

Although the Mexican posters and lobby cards for *4 contra el crimen* blatantly appropriate the James Bond "007 pistol" logo that first appeared on the U.S. posters for *Dr. No*, merely substituting "4" for "007," and the catch-phrase on the posters reads "Agents with license to kill," *4 contra el crimen* is not actually a spy film. It appears some efforts were made to tilt it in this direction, but the basic narrative is "police versus an organisation that commits robberies." There is a bit of dialogue that vaguely explains the criminal group needs money to purchase raw materials to develop atomic weapons, but exactly what they plan to do with these weapons is unclear.

There are some futuristic gadgets that lend the picture a slight Bond-ish feel (minaturised bombs and radio transmitters, for instance), but this is quite minor and none of these are especially unrealistic. The only



bright yellow ray suddenly cause Enrique's auto to run off the road. The ray does not come from the villains' car, and in fact the source is not clearly shown and the ray

exception is totally unexplained: after Williams is shot to death, the killers speed away in their car and are pursued by the heroes, only to have a

isn't even mentioned! (One of the villains says "We're saved, chief!" but no further explanation is given.)

Oddly enough, the gadget that gets the most screen time is a conventional reel-to-reel tape recorder in their office. The agents use it to leave messages for their colleagues, but it's also put into service as a telephone answering machine: the microphone is attached to a standard black telephone and the recorder is turned on; when a call comes in, a gadget lifts the phone's receiver (thus "answering it") and the incoming call is taped.

The official role of the protagonists is curious. They work for The Chief, just the four of them, apparently. However, they're part of the police force (not secret agents), and they can call on uniformed officers and other police facilities at any time. But the Four (as I'll call them) don't really function as police detectives. They're assigned to investigate Iván and his criminal organisation, but during the film they also handle (a) a kidnapping, (b) security for a Tibetan temple's conference, and (c) a "maniac" who murdered a woman and is now shooting at police from his hotel room. So definitely not any "secret agent" work, yet not really conventional police work, either.

Criminal leaders Smith and Cortés are killed by a bomb in their toothpaste tube and camera, respectively. Williams, the third surviving gangster boss, survives a bombing attempt implemented by Luigi, and agrees to cooperate with the police. The Chief assigns his best agents to the case: Gustavo, Enrique, Elena, and Pablo

(from now on, The Four). The 3 gangsters worked for a large criminal organisation run by the mysterious Iván; the



organisation is attempting to develop nuclear weapons, and their members are committing crimes to accumulate money to finance this goal. Iván chastises Luigi for failing to murder Williams, but gives him another chance.

Meanwhile, Virginia, the daughter of wealthy Sr. Lascuráin, has been kidnapped. Lascuráin and Virginia's fiancé Peter don't want the police to intervene, but the Four follow them to the ransom drop-off point (some sort of enclosed sports arena, apparently). Peter was behind the scheme: he told Virginia he needed money to cover a shortage of funds at the bank where he works, but he actually just wanted the cash for himself. Virginia breaks



off their engagement; she quickly becomes romantically involved with Gustavo.

Pablo is engaged to his colleague Elena, but has recently become extremely nervous and fearful at work. Since he hates violence and is always afraid, Elena agrees they can both quit the police force when they wed, even though she loves what she does.

Williams arranges to meet Iván at a drive-in restaurant so the Four can capture the organisation leader. Iván drives up and a sniper in his auto kills Williams. The Four pursue in 2 cars, but Enrique's vehicle is struck by a mysterious ray and goes off the highway, allowing Iván to escape. The Four find his abandoned car in a warehouse:



the sniper is there and is arrested. [In a very odd twist, Iván was wearing a life-like mask while he was driving the car; when he stopped, he put the mask on his unconscious henchman so the

Four would—briefly—think they'd caught Iván.]

Enrique is attracted to Nora, who owns a restaurant-nightclub and was acquainted with the late Williams. However, he doesn't know she's in Iván's employ; Nora visits a Tibetan temple in the city to make plans for a future robbery of the temple's treasure. The Four know Iván is planning a new crime, but they don't know what it is. Elena's contact Chang agrees to obtain this information for a price. Elena follows him to the basement of an antique shop where there is a clandestine bar for criminals; she's caught but the rest of the Four arrive and defeat everyone in a wild brawl. However, Chang is murdered before he can pass on his information.



Enrique is assigned to provide security at the Tibetan temple; Nora tries to seduce him into missing his shift, but he leaves. At the temple, a helicopter full of fake Tibetan monks lands and Enrique radios for backup. The fake monks rob the treasure room and flee to the copter, although Enrique shoots one and captures another. The copter takes off but is pursued and shot down by Gustavo and Pedro in another aircraft. Back at headquarters, Gustavo is (roughly) interrogating his prisoner when the head monk comes in and says this guy is a real monk and

is innocent. However, the arrested monk is so humiliated at being accused of a crime that he leaps out a window to his death. Enrique quits the police force in shame.

Nora says she can help Enrique start a business and before you can say "what kind of business," he's running a chain of pet shops (which, we later learn, are a front for drug dealing). He and Nora are scheduled to leave for a European vacation soon. The head Tibetan monk collaborates with a police artist to produce a sketch of the woman who toured the temple a few days before the robbery, and Pablo recognises it as Nora. Before he can do anything about it, he's called to a hotel where a maniac has cut a woman's throat, and is now sniping at police through his room's window. Pablo charges the building and is mortally wounded (the sniper is shot by Gustavo). As he dies, Pablo says "You see—I conquered my fear."

Iván, as is his habit, contacts his henchmen via radio and instructs them to carry out their last big robbery: a Swiss Bank armoured truck. However, the gangsters can't see that

Iván's voice is a recorded, and their leader has been stabbed to death. The robbery is successful (in a neat touch, the criminals ram



their van into the back of the bank truck and flip a switch, causing an electrical current to run through the vehicle and kill the guards) but when the loot arrives at a secure location, the gangster delivering it is killed by a poisoned dart shot by a mysterious figure.

Gangster Luigi and Nora accuse each other of murdering Iván. Luigi is subsequently murdered by Enrique, who is in league with Nora to abscond with the loot. Elena is taken hostage by the two criminals and locked in the trunk of their car with the money; she triggers a small radio device that alerts the police to her presence. Gustavo pursues them, for some reason

accompanied by his new girlfriend

Virginia (who isn't a police officer at all). When Enrique's car starts leaking oil, he pulls into a gas station and tries to carjack another vehicle.

Gustavo arrives and

Enrique uses Elena as a human shield, but the gas station attendant sprays Enrique with gasoline. Enrique flees--a



bullet ignites the fuel and he burns to death as Nora, under arrest, watches in horror.

Although the plot of *4 contra el crimen* is rather slipshod and illogical, there are a number of interesting aspects to the film. Although I'd seen the film many years ago, I didn't remember that Enrique turned bad and Pedro was killed, so these were both surprising plot twists (I half-expected Enrique to be working undercover but no, he really did become a drug-peddling murderer).

In addition to the nudity (see below), there are a few minor bits of "gore" (not that they would qualify as such in today's cinema): the corpses of both Smith and Cortés are shown after they're killed by bombs, and their faces are made up to appear horribly burned; the dead bodies of Iván and the woman slain by the



hotel "maniac" are also shown and are more realistic in appearance than one might expect; one criminal is shot and falls out of a helicopter to his death (as Gustavo and Pedro grin with delight), the suicide of the monk ends with a shot of his gory body, and the hotel maniac also plummets several stories to the pavement below;



finally, the fiery death of Enrique is accomplished by a stuntman doing an actual fire "gag," which is rather rare for Mexican cinema of this era.

The film tries too hard in its two attempts to hide the identity of characters. Víctor Junco as Iván is shot entirely from behind in his first scene (very awkwardly), "wears" a false-face mask in the drive-in sequence (it's obviously another actor with Junco's voice dubbed in), and then only his eyes are shown in the next scene. Although the script makes a point about Iván not being known even to his henchmen (except Nora and Luigi), keeping his face off screen serves no purpose unless he were to be revealed as a character the audience already knows. There's no "surprise" when we finally see it's Víctor Junco, so all of the subterfuge in the first part of the movie is pointless. Similarly, the "mysterious" person who kills the gangster driver and Luigi is obviously Enrique, and keeping him in shadows in these two scenes is just an affectation: who else would it be? Also, you can

hear Guillermo Murray's voice and even in silhouette he's recognisable.

The production values are not elaborate, but nothing looks horrible or cheap—a lot of the picture was shot on location, including the car chases, which is interesting—and the stock footage is kept to a minimum. The pacing is actually fairly good, with quite a few action sequences and no time-wasting musical numbers. Some of the performances are rote, but Héctor Godoy and Guillermo Murray invest some effort in their non-standard characters, while Víctor Junco is fine as the gang leader. Libertad Leblanc, saddled with an enormous beehive wig in several scenes, does a decent job as the evil Nora, who falls in love with Enrique and has second thoughts about her liaison with Iván (she doesn't become good, she just changes her allegiance to Enrique).

Apparently *4 contra el crimen* is fairly difficult to see today. It is used to play on television, and I have a VideoVisa VHS (which to my surprise appears to be uncut, discussed below), but there doesn't seem to be a legit DVD release and I haven't found a full copy uploaded to the Internet (there is a clip on YouTube from a "De Película" airing, but not the entire film, and this version is apparently cut).

Although *4 contra el crimen* was rated "A" (suitable for all audiences) in Mexico (according to García Riera), the VideoVisa VHS contains three nude scenes: (1) a brief topless shot of Libertad Leblanc with Guillermo Murray; (2) Libertad Leblanc nude in bed with Víctor Junco, which could pass for a "show-



nothing" nude scene, but then she gets out of bed and walks across the room to put on a robe, and is shown fully nude from the rear; (3) a partially topless corpse of a woman in a hotel room. Presumably these shots were not present in the Mexican version. The aforementioned YouTube clip is part of scene (1), and the shot of Leblanc's bare breast is replaced by an irrelevant cutaway to a different scene!

Trivia notes: This film reunited top-billed Libertad Leblanc, Guillermo Murray, and Héctor Godoy from *La venus maldita* (1966). Murray and Leblanc had also co-starred in *Una mujer sin precio* (1966), joined by Víctor Junco, who'd later be in *4 contra el crimen*.

There is one piece of stock footage from *Teatro del crimen* (1956) of police cars leaving the Teatro El Roble; this shot (which only lasts a few seconds) is intended to



show police cars responding to the murder of Williams and the subsequent car chase, but it isn't really needed and was probably more trouble to insert than it was worth.

Rubén Calderón, who plays the boss of the crime-fighting organisation, is rather obviously post-dubbed by Víctor Alcocer, which raises the question as to why Alcocer didn't play the role himself. Perhaps Alcocer wasn't available for actual filming, or charged more to act than he did to dub, or maybe most of the film was post-dubbed (for everyone) and Calderón wasn't available to record his tracks (the other main performers seem to have done their own dialogue).

Not a classic and somewhat misleadingly advertised, *4 contra el crimen* is adequate entertainment with a few out of the ordinary aspects.



## Isela Vega



**El sabor de la venganza\*\*** [The Taste of Vengeance] (Cinematográfica Marte, 1969) Prod: J. Fernando Pérez Gavilán, Mauricio Walerstein; Dir: Alberto Mariscal; Scr: Tony [sic] Sbert, Alberto Mariscal, Joe Morhaim [sic]\*; Story: Ricardo Garibay; Photo: Javier Cruz; Music: Rubén Fuentes; Co-Prod: Wally Brody; Asst Dir: Fernando Durán; Film Ed: José J. Munguía; Art Dir: José Luis Garduño; Sound: Heinrich Henkel; Union: STIC; Studio: América; Eastmancolor and Panavisión

\*\* [also released as *Marca de violencia*; English-language version released by World Wide Films as *The Taste of the Savage*, with a self-applied "X" rating; some sources cite *An Eye for an Eye* as an alternate title, but I've not seen any proof of this—the Italian title was, translated, "Eye for an Eye, Tooth for a Tooth, You're Screwed, Cobra!" Some sources cite *Branded X* as an alternate title, but this seems to be only the advertising catch-phrase for *The Taste of the Savage*, not an actual alternate title.]

\* [Emilio García Riera credits Mariscal and Morhaim, the print I have seen lists only Sbert and Garibay]

**Cast:** Isela Vega (*Sarah Carson*\*\*\*), Helena Rojo (*Rina Pittman*), Jorge Luke (*Judd Carson*), Cameron

Mitchell (*Huck*), Rogelio Guerra (*Joe Carson*), Mario Almada (*Al Gibson*), Enrique Lucero (*Lobo*), Carlos East (*Collins*), Nick Georgiade (*Neil Robertson*), Arthur Hansel (*Sam Pittman*), Roger Cudney (*lustful ranch hand*), John Kelly (*rude man at dance*), Ignacio Magalloni (*Sam's henchman who is stabbed*), José Chávez Trowe (*second bartender*), Antonio Raxel (*Hank, sheriff*), Raymundo Capetillo (*man at rodeo*), Hernando Name (*David?*), Jorge Patiño (*onlooker at rodeo*), Marco Antonio Noriega, Roberto Meyer, Rubén Márquez (*man at dance*), Angel di Stefani (*bearded gunfighter with Robertson*), José Luis Carol (*Peters, rancher*), Maria Cecilia Leger (*woman onlooker at gunfight*)

\*\*\*I don't think she is ever referred to by her first name in the film, but I could be wrong.

**Notes:** this is one of Alberto Mariscal's best-known Westerns, although it did not receive the critical accolades that *Todo por nada* (1968) got (*Todo por nada* was also a bigger commercial success, playing 7 weeks in its opening engagement in Mexico City). To illustrate the reasonably wide distribution this film got, a pre-recorded video I saw is from a Canadian print (as *Vengeance pour un Colt*, with the credits in French but with Spanish dialogue), and I have seen posters or video boxes for Italian, Greek and Swedish releases.

A Mexican-U.S. co-production, the film was shot mostly in English: the Spanish-language version was (if you watch the characters' lips) post-dubbed into Spanish, but Jorge Luke, Isela Vega, Mario Almada, and most of the Mexican performers seem to have re-recorded their own Spanish dialogue.

Cameron Mitchell is obviously dubbed in the Spanish version, as he was in his previous Mexican picture, *Autopsia de un fantasma*, but he does his own dialogue in the English version. Oddly, while

the producers obviously made an effort to cast Mexican film performers who also spoke English, neither Isela Vega nor Jorge Luke (both bilingual) do their own dialogue in the English-language version.

*El sabor de la venganza* was a remake of *Los hermanos del Hierro* (The Del Hierro Brothers, 1961), directed by Ismael Rodríguez. In the original version there are two sons of the vengeful widow (played by Columba Domínguez), Antonio Aguilar and Julio Alemán. Alemán had the role roughly equivalent to Jorge





Luke's in the remake, Patricia Conde was his love interest (a role taken by Helena Rojo in Mariscal's version), and Cameron Mitchell's gunfighter was interpreted by Ignacio López Tarso.

Various versions of *El sabor de la venganza* have been released on video over the years: most of the VHS copies were 4:3 pan-and-scan of the original Panavision 2.21:1 aspect ratio, which was certainly not optimal. [An online discussion board indicates a French VHS release apparently contained something close to the Panavision image.] A newer "De Película" broadcast copy is fake



"widescreen" in 16:9--it has black bars with the DP logo on the right and left to make it 16:9, but the actual image is still 4:3. Another "De Película" copy I have is not fake-letter-boxed and is also 4:3. The rape scene in the "De Película" print has been edited to remove virtually all of the (brief) nudity.

Laguna Films released *El sabor de la venganza* on DVD a number of years ago, but since copies are being sold at outrageously high prices, I can't report on what this version looks like. Existing copies (such as the one currently on YouTube) of *The Taste of the Savage* (sometimes listed as *Eye for an Eye*) are 4:3 as far as I know, although compared to the "De Película" print, the image has been zoomed in (however, the English version occasionally provides more visual information than the "De Película" copy). It also seems *The Taste of the Savage* and *El sabor de la venganza* were cut slightly differently (this is only noticeable if you run both versions side-by-side, because the narrative content of the relevant scenes is unchanged). *El sabor de la venganza* concludes with a shot of Jorge Luke bending over Isela Vega's dead body (although it looks like she's still breathing to me),



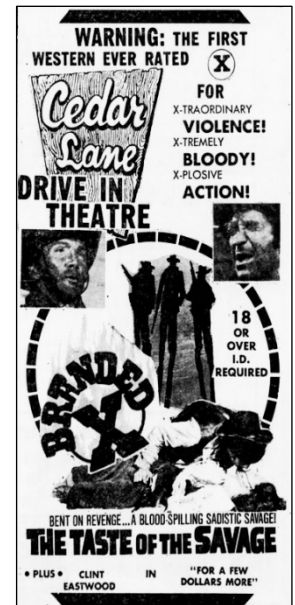
but freeze-frames before he kisses her; *The Taste of the Savage* has him giving her a full-mouth kiss, at which time the image freezes and is tinted red. [note: García Riera says Judd is then shot to death by off-screen gunmen, but this doesn't appear in either version I saw.]

Although the panned-and-scanned (or just using the central 4:3 portion of the original image) image affects

one's visual evaluation of the picture, *El sabor de la venganza* features very fluid camera work and lots of giant closeups of people's faces (and other body parts), but relatively few of the zooms for which García Riera criticizes *Todo por nada* (the earlier film was photographed by Rosalío Solano, while *Venganza* was shot by Javier Cruz). There are slow-motion death scenes, an amount of blood, and some nudity (oddly enough, not Isela Vega, but rather Helena Rojo in the rape scene). Rubén Fuentes' understated score starts off as if it is going to be imitation Ennio Morricone, but never really develops this vein. The production values are fine, good use is made of the Durango locations and the studio work--including the Estudios América "Western town" set--is satisfactory.

The acting varies. Isela Vega is adequate but never quite works up a full head of steam: although she allegedly forces her son to become the instrument of her vengeance, this isn't clearly demonstrated on the screen, and she doesn't seem like a bitter, obsessed, domineering woman. Jorge Luke, in one of his earliest roles (he'd previously been a singer with "Los Rippers"), is also satisfactory, although again he underplays when a bit more would have been in order. [Luke and Isela Vega began a romantic relationship while making this film, which lasted a number of years and produced a daughter, Shaula Vega.] Cameron Mitchell, on the other hand, is very good, at least as best as one can judge in a dubbed performance. Everyone else is OK: Rogelio Guerra is only on-screen for a few seconds, Carlos East a bit longer, and Mario Almada a bit longer than that. This was the first Mexican film for both Arthur Hansel and Roger Cudney, two future "professional *gringos*" in Mexican cinema; they're joined on-screen by John Kelly, who'd held that role in Mexico since the 1950s. Also of minor interest is the presence of Hollywood actor Nick Georgiade, who'd previously appeared in 1963's *La edad de la violencia* with two of his co-stars from television's "The Untouchables," Paul Picerni and Abel Fernández.

As his young son Judd looks on, rancher Joe Carson is shot to death by three men. When Joe's wife arrives, she finds her son sobbing over his father's body. Years pass. Mrs. Carson [García



Riera lists her name as "Sarah," but I didn't hear anyone call her this in the film itself] raises Judd to hate the men who killed his father; she hires gunfighter Huck to teach Judd how to shoot. Judd loves Rina Pittman, sister of wealthy Sam Pittman, but Sam is opposed to their relationship. An old family retainer, Lobo, arrives on the ranch. One of the killers, Neil Robertson, has been located.

Judd goes to a saloon and confronts Robertson. He kills two of the man's friends in a gunfight, then sits down and shoots Robertson point-blank in the face (huge closeup of a bloody face, eye-socket, etc. ). Although Judd is disturbed by the killings, his mother reassures him. Huck, however, leaves, not liking what Judd has become. Later, Judd tracks down Collins, the second killer: with a rifle, he methodically shoots the man many times, inflicting as much punishment as he can and leaving him to die.

Judd is arrested by Hank, the local sheriff, for the Robertson killings. However, Sam Pittman says Judd will go free if he goes to work for him. Judd agrees, and



becomes a hired killer, driving off ranchers whose land Sam covets. But when he sees Rina kiss David, a young man who is courting her with Sam's permission, Judd loses his temper.

Stabbing one of Sam's men to death, Judd breaks into Rina's bedroom and rapes her. He then goes on the run. Huck pays Mrs. Carson a visit: he has been hired by the authorities to track down her son. She offers to pay him to help Judd escape instead, even offering her body as a reward, but he refuses.

Lobo rejoins Judd. After an argument at a rodeo in which Judd kills a black cowboy, the two men travel to a town where Al Gibson, the last killer, is known to be. While waiting for Gibson to show up, Judd meets Huck. He can't believe his former mentor is there to capture or kill him. Gibson appears; Judd kills two of the man's friends, then disarms and pistol-whips the killer and finally shoots him point-blank. Before he dies, Gibson says Sam Pittman hired them to kill Joe Carson.

Huck confronts Judd, who insists that he must finish the job by killing Sam. They face off to fight, and Huck is shot to death. However, Lobo appears and says he killed Huck (from ambush) to save Judd; Judd becomes enraged and shoots Lobo! He goes to Sam Pittman's office with a shotgun, accusing the man of ordering his father's death. When Rina bursts in, Judd instinctively whirls and shoots her, then kills Sam. [Oddly, the scenes cuts just after Judd shoots Rina; only in the final montage—which recaps all of Judd's killings as he's shooting his mother--do we see Judd whirl and kill Sam after shooting Rina.]

When his mother runs to greet him, Judd deliberately shoots her! (many times!) As the film ends, Judd says "Mamá," and bends over to kiss his mother's corpse.

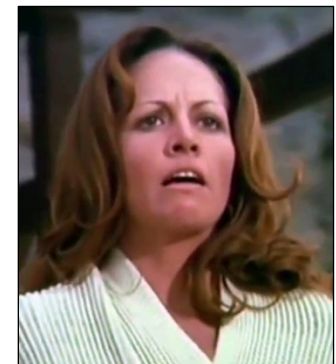
*El sabor de la venganza* doesn't have as much psychological content as one might expect. The only scene in which Judd exhibits much in way of remorse or torment occurs after his first killing (Robertson). Judd shoots two of Robertson's



henchmen, demonstrating his quick-draw prowess, then turns down Robertson's pleas for mercy and shoots him in the face at close-range. He wanders off into the night, stunned, then returns home, telling his mother in a wondering tone, "It was easier than I thought." However, he very quickly becomes inured to violence, nearly murdering a man at a dance, cruelly shooting Collins, executing a man on Sam's orders, stabbing one of Sam's ranch hands, killing a cowboy at a rodeo who has beaten him in a bet, then shooting Gibson and two comrades. He expresses no remorse after any of these events, and then kills his longtime friend Lobo who has just saved him from dying at the hands of Huck, his mentor. After accidentally shooting Rina (and deliberately killing her brother), Judd apparently goes insane and kills his own mother for having turned him into her instrument of vengeance. However, this isn't verbalised.

[Judd's propensity for violence is shown even before he kills Robertson. When one of his mother's ranch hands sexually harasses her, Judd beats the man severely and Huck has to restraint him from killing the offender.]

Similarly, Mrs. Carson never shows any guilt for her actions. She's unfailing in her defense of Judd (refusing to believe he raped Rina), and asks Huck to save him. When Judd comes home at the end of the film, Mrs. Carson is overjoyed (until her son riddles her with bullets). The character with the most development is Huck, who has several extended scenes in which he talks about his feelings, his past, his hope that he, Mrs. Carson, and Judd could "form a family," and his guilt about turning Judd into an efficient killing machine.



*El sabor de la venganza* is a good, imitation-spaghetti Western that goes to pieces in the last ten minutes (after a



leisurely build-up punctuated by a few action scenes). It isn't a masterpiece and has almost no Mexican flavor, but it is a respectable and professionally-made production.

Trivia note: a 1964 Italian-Spanish Western also goes by the title *El sabor de la venganza*, and is also known as *I tre spietati* (The 3 Ruthless Ones), and *Gunfight at High Noon*, among other titles. Coincidentally, the plot of this film deals with a woman who raises her 3 sons to avenge their father's death at the hands of 3 outlaws. There's also a 1966 Hollywood Western titled *An Eye for an Eye* which is about an older man and a younger one who team up to track down the murderer of the first man's wife and son.

Originally reviewed in **MFB** 5/3 (November 1998) but extensively revised and expanded here.



### Las reglas del juego [The Rules of the Game]

(Filman Internacional, 1970) *Prod*: Juan Filcher; *Dir*: Mauricio Walerstein; *Adapt*: Toni Sbert; *Story*: Juan Filcher; *Photo*: Fernando Colín; *Music*: Rubén Fuentes; *Prod Mgr*: Jesús Frago M.; *Asst Dir*: Fernando Durán; *Film Ed*: J. José Munguía; *Artistic Co-ord*: Julián Pastor; *Art Dir*: José Méndez; *Choreog*: Colombia Moyá; *Camera Op*: Agustín Lara; *Makeup*: Graciela Muñoz; *Dialog Rec*: Consuelo J. vda. de Rendón; *Re-rec*: Heinrich Henkel; *Union*: STIC

**Cast**: Isela Vega (*Verónica*), José Alonso (*Gabriel*), Pili (*Silvia*), Héctor Suárez (*Chino*), Enrique Rambal (*Gabriel's father*), Sergio Kleiner (*El Güero*), Fernando Balzaretti (*Pepe*), Juan Peláez (*Raúl*), Jack Misrahi (*Pedro*), Cristina Rubiales (*Olga*), Kiki Herrera Calles (*"Coronela"*), Silvia Mariscal (*Paula\**), Juan Balzaretti (*Miguel*), Anel, Malú Galán (*Katy*), Selene Aguilar (*mother*), Julián Pastor, Toni Sbert, Emilio García Riera (*film lecturer*), Mario Oropeza (*Jorge*), Rodrigo Puebla & Antonio Zubiaga (*gangsters*), Carlos Jordán (*rich man*), Jorge Fegan (*club mgr*), Gabriela Araujo (*Elisa\**), ?Carlos Hennings (*man at drunken party*), Mirón Levine (*man at drunken party*), José Luis Avendaño (*concierge at Verónica's apartment*)

\*end credits list Mariscal as Elisa and Araujo as Paula, but I am 99% sure this is reversed.

**Notes**: Mauricio Walerstein was the son of producer Gregorio Walerstein, and had directed one part of the multi-story film *Siempre hay una primera vez* in 1969, when he was only 24 years old. A year later, Walerstein made *Las reglas del juego*, following this with *Fin de fiesta* in 1971, then departed for Venezuela where he spent most of his career (he returned to Mexico in the mid-2000s and made a handful of movies before his death in 2016).

*Las reglas del juego* has many things to recommend it, but there are also some confusing and less than effective aspects. Note: this is an extremely difficult film to find;

the copy I have is a (sadly damaged) 1980s VHS tape from Million Dollar Video Corporation which runs 91 minutes, four minutes less than the running time cited in García Riera's *Historia documental del cine mexicano*. This version is definitely cut—there is no nudity present (except “show-nothing” nudity), and I have seen at least one still of Isela

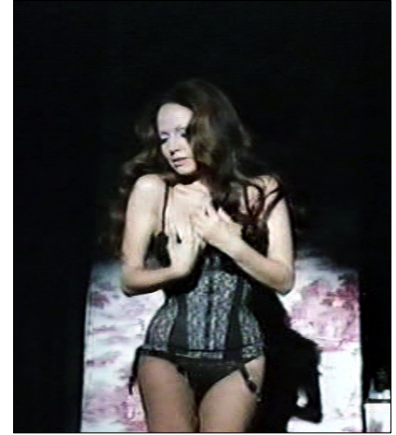
Vega topless, so this has been edited out (I don't think four minutes of nudity could have been cut, but I might be wrong). I have never seen another copy, nor a DVD (which is not to say there haven't been other releases, but I've never come across one). Even more curious, there is virtually no “paper” (posters, stills, lobby cards) for *Las reglas del juego* visible on the Internet, going back at least 10 and probably more like 20 years! This is rather surprising, since the film was apparently quite successful upon its theatrical release (running 9 weeks in its opening engagement in Mexico City), but perhaps its “D” rating (adults-only) limited its exposure.

The “D” rating was not often given to Mexican films in this era (*Los meses y los días* and *Satánico pandemonium* also got one), and nudity alone would not necessarily earn this grade—films with significant nude scenes were assigned a “C,” for example. *Las reglas del juego* features nudity (in its uncut version), a clear reference to oral sex, references to drug use and drug dealing, and homosexuality (both male and female), but doesn't contain any criticism of the government, social issues, or Church, so the “D” is a bit puzzling.

Gabriel is a student of economics at the Universidad de las Américas; he has a steady girlfriend, Silvia, who is also studying economics. Gabriel suggests he and his



“Antigone.” Gabriel's friends Pepe and Raúl are cultivating the acquaintance of two exotic dancers, and



friends Pepe, Raúl and Pedro—along with Silvia and some other students—put on a performance of the classical play



they bring Gabriel and Pedro to the club where the young women work. Gabriel sees Verónica's act (shown in its entirety in the opening sequence, but only the end of it is seen this time) and is impressed. He tries to get an introduction via the two dancers, but they say Verónica only dates rich men and Gabriel's wasting his time.

Verónica lives in a luxurious apartment with her gay assistant Chino. She's deeply in debt to gangster El



Güero (it's never openly stated, but presumably this is for drugs she purchased from him) and he wants his money. He gives her a few more days to pay. Verónica is visited by "La Coronela," who offers to help her if she needs it.

Later, El Güero confronts Verónica at the club; he slaps her, and his men beat Chino when he tries to protect her. The gangster offers Verónica a way out—she can sell



drugs for him—but she refuses. He gives her until Saturday to pay her debt. At this, Verónica visits La Coronela at her place of business (a boxing gym) and asks for assistance; La Coronela promises to

solve the problem, then kisses Verónica. [La Coronela has a number of lesbian "attributes" and in this scene her sexual orientation is confirmed.]

Gabriel keeps trying to make Verónica's acquaintance. His friends and his younger brother Miguel are puzzled, since Gabriel already has an attractive girlfriend, Silvia, a member of his own social class (and with whom he is sleeping). Verónica is "different than the rest," Gabriel says, and insists "Silvia is another thing entirely." Gabriel finally

meets Verónica and they go for a coffee; he flatters her performance, etc., and she seems pleased.

Silvia and Gabriel's friends notice that he's been distracted; he quits his post as director of



"Antigone" when the cast rebels at his criticism and at his insistence that one actress remove her tunic for a nude scene. Silvia breaks up with him. [This is odd, because up to this point Gabriel has only met Verónica once, and got no firm commitment to meet again, so what he's been doing all this time to alarm his friends is puzzling.]

Gabriel finally visits Verónica at her apartment and they sleep together. She invites him to spend the weekend with her at a luxury resort hotel. [We see Gabriel pawning various objects to obtain money, but after the weekend tryst, it's made clear Verónica paid for it.] The weekend is idyllic, as Gabriel and Verónica make love, go swimming and horseback riding, and so on. [It seems they smoke dope in one scene as well.]

La Coronela tells Verónica her troubles are over. Verónica does her act to an empty club except for the manager, La Coronela, and a wealthy man and his two bodyguards. Gabriel is turned away at the door, then follows Verónica to the rich man's mansion, where he's punched by the bodyguards. Inside, Verónica's new boyfriend has summoned El Güero, who apologises for his actions. Verónica savagely beats the drug dealer with a riding crop, then goes to bed with her middle-aged lover. [We later see her quit her job at the nightclub; she's replaced by Raúl's blonde dancer girlfriend.]

In a confusing scene, Gabriel shows up...somewhere. It must be Verónica's apartment, but it doesn't look like it. Is it Chino's apartment? How does Gabriel know where Chino lives, and why would he think Verónica would be there? Chino is having a big gay party, and all of his gay friends gaze longingly at Gabriel until he leaves. Gabriel later appears at Verónica's apartment, forces his way in, and confronts Verónica. She rejects him: "I played fair. I didn't promise anything. You sought me out. It's over." He hands her some cash and says, "You're a damned whore [*piruja*]—take this and we'll go to bed." Verónica: "I accept it for all the times we did it and you didn't pay me. And you still owe me money." Gabriel departs. As the film concludes, Verónica is doing a new strip-tease number in slow-motion, and the image freezes...

As noted above, *Las reglas del juego* has its flaws and good points. The basic premise is predictable, dating back to *The Blue Angel* (and probably before), although the conclusion here is at least open-ended: there is no "tragedy" when their relationship ends, Gabriel and Verónica both simply go on with their lives. Walerstein seems to like philosophical discussions worked into every-day conversations, making some of the characters appear slightly pretentious, and there are the aforementioned inconsistencies in plot, setting, time-line, etc. In its favour, the film (hopefully deliberately) pokes fun at the university students, who discuss the world, life,

and so on, with the utmost seriousness, but alternate these “profound” pronouncements with talk of the eternal hunt for a sexual and/or romantic partner. Gabriel’s teen-age brother is practically a walking stereotype of a wannabe, “hip” young person. A fair amount of the film was shot on location (a list of actual places is thanked at the end); the walls of the apartment set shared by Raúl and Pepe (I think) and Gabriel’s bedroom set (which he shares with his brother) are covered with typical late 60s-early 70s posters (political, movie stars, musicians), which might be slightly overdone but are still evocative.

Gabriel is the film’s protagonist but isn’t exactly an admirable character. Early in the film, he says when he and Silvia graduate with degrees in economics, he’ll go to work in the financial world while she’ll be “home washing diapers.” Silvia: “Then why am I studying?” Gabriel: “To be a cultured woman.” He develops a crush on Verónica and it’s unclear if he’s



sincere in his comments about her “art,” or if he’s just stringing her along in hopes of a sexual encounter, and still intends to eventually marry Silvia. Later, his infatuation with Verónica causes him to lose perspective and fantasize that somehow they’ll be together forever.

For her part, Verónica is a troubled character and not really a gold-digger. The film obliquely suggests she has a drug addiction—in one scene, she staggers away from a “party” in her apartment (young women from the nightclub and older men, drinking and pawing each other), goes into the bathroom, and returns, smiling and alert, leading her partner into the bedroom. Clearly something happened in the bathroom to change her; if this wasn’t enough of a hint, the fact that she owes a huge amount of money to a drug dealer seals the deal. Verónica is flattered by Gabriel’s attention and realises he doesn’t have a lot of money, but it’s unclear if she ever develops sincere romantic feelings for him, even during their weekend getaway. In the end, she has sold herself to a wealthy man to get out of El Güero’s clutches, and rejects Gabriel—this is either the standard “I don’t love you, get out” lie to end the relationship and spare his feelings, or she’s really fed up with his clingy nature. It’s very ambiguous.

Isla Vega was nominated for a Best Actress Ariel for this film, but lost to Rita Macedo (for *Tú, yo, nosotros*). She appears in the opening sequence (her strip-tease act), and is then off-screen until the 25-minute mark (where

she’s seen only briefly). She doesn’t have any real dialogue until 30 minutes of the film have elapsed. This reinforces the ensemble nature of *Las reglas del juego*—a significant amount of time is spent on Gabriel and his friends and family, and even after Verónica has been introduced as a character, there are numerous cutaways to the other characters (mostly in relation to Gabriel). The performances are generally good, although some of the dialogue doesn’t ring entirely true.

It’s interesting to see Pili (Pilar Bayona) in one of her early solo roles (the first was *El club de los suicidas*, 1968) after her sister Mili got married and retired from acting. She’s fine as the girlfriend Gabriel dumps.

Another bit of trivia is the presence of future film director Julián Pastor, writer Toni Sbert (who’d make his directorial debut later in the year with *Sin salida*), and film critic/historian Emilio García Riera



in cameo roles. García Riera mocked his own performance in his entry on the film in his *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, and in fact his scene—the very end of a slide show about Federico Fellini—is fairly extraneous, serving only to reunite Silvia and Gabriel one last time (she apparently attended the lecture with someone else, and they bump into each other as they leave). Probably Walerstein included the actual lecture as a nod to García Riera (and an homage to Fellini), and it’s not that intrusive, for what’s basically an in-joke. *Las reglas del juego* features two Balzarotti brothers (Fernando and Juan), but this was trumped by *El principio*, with Fernando, Juan and Jorge Balzarotti in the cast.

As mentioned above, *Las reglas del juego* was shot largely on location, with some interiors done at the América studios. The production values are fine.



Walerstein’s direction is moderately stylish, with some particularly effective shots—Verónica kneeling by Chino, both of them crying, after El Güero and his men have roughed up Chino, for example. The idyllic weekend of Verónica and Gabriel at the resort hotel is shot in a stereotypical “romantic” style, with lingering shots of them in a pool, riding horses, and

so on. This is almost certainly Walerstein spoofing romance-movie conventions, since the rest of film looks entirely different.

The opening sequence is a clever example of movie misdirection. We see a sad widow (Verónica) dressed in black enter her bedroom and gaze longingly at a photo of a man (her late husband?). Eventually, she starts to undress, down to a black lace bustier and stockings, and we get a reverse shot: this has all been taking place on a stage, and Verónica is a stripper.

Walerstein and scripter Sbert alternate some subtle touches with occasional blatant aspects, but in general this is an interesting, well-made film.

Trivia note: in one scene, Gabriel walks by a newsstand and spots issues of “Cinelandia” and “Estrellas de Cinelandia,” both featuring Verónica on the cover. These are actual magazines which (especially the latter) featured pin-up style photos of actresses and *vedettes* (along with cartoons and jokes). Whether “Verónica” would have qualified for the cover of these publications is doubtful, but it’s still amusing to see them.



### La buscona [The Whore] (Gómez Muriel-



Ruanova\*, 1969)

Prod: [Emilio]

Gómez Muriel &

[Alfredo]

Ruanova; Dir:

Emilio Gómez

Muriel; Scr:

Alfredo

Ruanova; Photo:

Humberto

Peruzzi; Theme

Song: Leonardo Shultz; Sung By: Daniel Riobobos; Prod Dir: Luis Óscar Giudici; Asst Dir: Julio C. Vázquez; Film Ed: Gerardo Rinaldi; Camera Op: Enrique Filippelli; Sound Chief: José Feijoo; Re-rec: Mario Fezia; Makeup: Ernesto D'Agostino

\*no production company or distributor name appears on the film or on Mexican publicity materials; some sources cite this as a Mexican-Uruguayan co-production, while others list it as a Mexican-Argentine co-production

**Cast:** Enrique Lizalde (*Julio Márquez*), Isela Vega (*Ana*), Jorge Salcedo (*Enrique Márquez*), Luis Alarcón (*Ramiro*), Susana Giménez (*Marta*), Pochi Grey (*prostitute*), Alicia Baires, Gloria Geddes

**Notes:** filmed in Montevideo, Uruguay, *La buscona* looks a bit different than shot-in-Mexico productions of this era, but (unlike, for example, *La venus maldita*), no particular effort is made to showcase Uruguay's tourist attractions (although there are some nice beaches on view). Aside from director Gómez Muriel, writer

Ruanova (who was born in Argentina but had been working in Mexico since the late 1950s), Enrique Lizalde and Isela Vega, the only other Mexican film representative was actor Luis Alarcón (I'm not sure he was Mexican but his acting career seems to have been based there)—the rest of the cast and the crew were all from the Argentine film industry. [Oddly enough, Alarcón is the only cast member whose dialogue was obviously post-dubbed.]

*La buscona* was rated “C” when released in Mexico, and (based on stills) contained nude scenes of Isela Vega and Pochi Grey (at least), but these do not exist in most current prints of the film. Curiously, García Riera cites an 85-minute running time (as does IMDB), but a version I have is just over 87 minutes (and is still cut).

Composer Julio is obsessed with Ana, a young woman who regularly visits his neighbour to have sex. When his neighbour dies, Ana introduces herself to Julio, and they eventually have an affair. Julio is repressed; his widowed, wealthy father Enrique has an endless string of



one-night stands, rejecting the idea of romantic love, but tries to set Julio up with his secretary Marta. Julio is confused by Ana's attitude: she has no “ambition” in life. However, he soon discovers she has changed her mind and is now having sex with men in exchange for what they can give her, including dresses and a luxury apartment. Ana also sleeps with Ramiro, at first lying when caught by Julio and then insisting “I follow my own rules, and if I make a mistake, I'm the only one who suffers the consequences.” Julio proposes marriage, and she says “I'm not one of those women who wants a husband, children, a home.” Julio: “Don't talk like that—those are the only reasons to live.” Ana: “I want to live my own life, not be a part of yours.” Julio: “You'd have everything you'd desire.” Ana: “Except my freedom.”

[At one point, Ramiro describes Julio as his “rival,” and Ana corrects him, saying this implies she's a possession, and that she belongs to no one.]

Enrique disapproves of his son's obsession with Ana, but gives him a pair of airline tickets and money to take her on a world tour, suggesting it might make her give up her other lovers. However, Enrique then visits Ana and offers her money to turn down the trip, and she agrees. Julio arrives and Ana suddenly decides she loves him and accepts the trip, only to have Enrique emerge from another room and imply that Ana has slept with him. Julio breaks off relations with both Enrique and Ana.



Later, as Enrique departs for the airport, he bumps into Ana but refuses to speak to her and drives off. Ana enters a nightclub and spots Ramiro; as they dance, her stunned expression turns to joy.

*La buscona* is a very interesting drama and psychological study of Julio, Ana, and Enrique. The



“twist” at the end—Ana accepts money to dump Julio, then changes her mind—is not very convincing. Literally 30 seconds before Julio arrives, she agrees to the

deal, but immediately changes her mind for no discernable reason: she already knows what Julio is going to propose, and he hardly has time to make any argument to persuade her, but she suddenly says, “I really do love you and I’ll go with you.” This compels Enrique to think fast and come up with the story that he’s just had sex with Ana. A parent offering “go away” money to an “unsuitable” mate for their child is a hoary melodrama trope, and usually the intended recipient of the money indignantly turns it down (although sometimes agreeing to break off the relationship for other reasons): in *La buscona* it’s in character for Ana to take the money and fulfill her part of the bargain, but then she breaks the deal.

This is not to suggest that Ana is depicted as wholly mercenary; in fact, she tells Julio that it was his comment about her lack of ambition that made her decide to have sex with men in exchange for money or other valuable items (which may or may not be true). Ana does appear to have feelings for Julio, but stubbornly continues to see



Ramiro and other men, frequently lying (in a sort of innocent, childish way) to Julio about her actions but then admitting it when caught.

The script

attempts to portray her as a free spirit without malice, and compares her (favourably) to Enrique, who pays to sleep with women and callously treats it as a business proposition. Not even Julio is completely blameless: although obsessed with Ana, he picks up a prostitute and has sex with her, only to learn his father was one of the

woman’s previous clients! (What are the odds? Perhaps there aren’t very many prostitutes in Montevideo?) On the rebound from Ana, Julio dates Marta and sleeps with her, but can’t bring himself to renounce Ana (at the end of the film, Marta offers to go to Europe with Julio but he turns her down).

Isela Vega is quite good as Ana, and Enrique Lizalde also does a fine job as the obsessed Julio. After they’ve met, he stalks her, demands that she account for her activities away from him, and is jealous of the time she spends with other men; his work suffers. Julio tries to have a conventional relationship with Ana, but every time he draws a line in the sand about her behaviour, she walks across it and he backs down. In one scene he confronts her about her lies and even hits her, but a short time later



they’re back together and he’s even less in control than before. Only when he erroneously “learns” Ana’s slept with his father does Julio finally make a

clean break—and manages to sustain this when he sees her later—but what lasting effect this will have on him is unclear.

Julio’s relationship with his father is also crucial to the film. Despite insisting on his independence and deploring his father’s string of sexual liaisons, Julio visits Enrique constantly and relates all of his problems to him. Enrique is manipulative rather than domineering, and he seems to have Julio’s best interests at heart (at least, as far as he understands them).

While Ruanova’s script has some nuances, Gómez Muriel’s direction is flat, zero-degree style with high-key lighting and no particular efforts to enhance the drama via editing or camera angles. The most “kinetic” sequences are the go-go dances in the “Caldera” nightclub (a fairly small space that looks like someone’s apartment), focusing on the wild gyrations of the “young people.”

*La buscona* is interesting and generally entertaining, with a (very mild) bonus of some views of Montevideo and its environs.

One trivia note: the women in this film (Vega, Giménez, and Grey) all have enormous manes of hair, which is certainly an improvement over mid-60s beehive hairstyles.



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