

# The Mexican Film Bulletin

## Volume 18, Number 3

### July-August 2012

#### 2012 Ariel Awards



The 2012 Ariel Awards ceremony took place on 2 June 2012 at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. The two most-honoured films were *Pastorela* (7 Arieles, including Best

Film) and *Días de gracia* (8 Arieles, including Best First Work for director Everardo Gout).

The Lifetime Achievement Arieles de Oro were given to Alfredo Joskowicz—director, former head of IMCINE and the Churubusco studios, film teacher—and sound engineer René Ruiz Cerón. The late Pedro Armendáriz Jr. was also the subject of a tribute during the evening's festivities.

Carlos Carrera, president of the Academia Mexicana de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas, asked that Mexico's next president (whoever it shall be after the upcoming elections) help protect the Mexican film industry. He cited a breakdown of the "gentleman's agreement" that



guaranteed a week's release for Mexican films, with the possibility of a second week in cinemas if the box-office supported it. Instead, the majority of films from the *cine nacional* (which make up about 10% of the movies shown in Mexico each year) are pulled after a single week.

The 54<sup>th</sup> edition of the Ariel Awards was the subject of some controversy, with complaints that the budget for the ceremony was insufficient and neither of the major television networks was willing to broadcast the event (or would only do so if they could keep the commercial revenue and didn't have to pay any fees to the Academia).



#### 2012 Ariel Awards (Winners Underlined)

##### Best Film

*Días de gracia*  
*Miss Bala*  
*Pastorela*

##### Best Direction

Everardo Gout (*Días de gracia*)  
Gerardo Naranjo (*Miss Bala*)  
Emilio Portes (*Pastorela*)

##### Best Actress

Magda Vizcaino (*Martha*)  
Teresita Sánchez (*Verano de Goliat*)  
Irán Castillo (*Victorio*)

##### Best Actor

Tenoch Huerta (*Días de gracia*)  
Noé Hernández (*Miss Bala*)  
Joaquín Cosío (*Pastorela*)

##### Best Co-Starring Actress

Norma Angélica (*Acorazado*)  
Eileen Yáñez (*Días de gracia*)  
Nailea Norvind (*La otra familia*)

##### Best Co-Starring Actor

Krystyan Ferrer (*Días de gracia*)  
Mario Zaragoza (*Días de gracia*)  
Carlos Cobos (*Pastorela*)  
Roberto Sosa (*Victorio*)

##### Best Original Screenplay

Álvaro Curiel (*Acorazado*)  
Jorge A. Estrada, Alfredo Castañeda (*La revolución de Juan Escopeta*)  
Emilio Portes (*Pastorela*)

##### Best Photography

Sebastián Hiriart (*A tiro de piedra*)  
Luis David Sansans (*Días de gracia*)  
Damián García (*Pastorela*)

##### Best Editing

Hervé Schneid, José Salcedo, Everardo Gout (*Días de gracia*)  
Juan Manuel Figueroa (*El cielo abierto*)  
Rodrigo Ríos, Emilio Portes (*Pastorela*)

##### Best Original Music

Atticuss Ross, Shigeru Umebayashi, Nick Cave, Warren Ellis (*Días de gracia*)  
Michael Nyman, Gerard Pastor (*La maleta mexicana*)  
Aldo Max Rodríguez (*Pastorela*)

## Best Sound

Vicent Arnardi, Julién Pérez, Enrique Greiner,  
Frédéric Le Louet, Fernando Cámara (*Días de gracia*)  
Mario Martínez, Miguel Hernández, Isabel  
Muñoz (*Pastorela*)  
Lena Esquenazi, Diego Gat, Pablo Tamez (*Te extraño*)

## Best Art Direction

Bernardo Trujillo (*Días de gracia*)  
Emilio Basaldúa (*El mural*)  
Alejandro García (*Pastorela*)

## Best Costumes

Graciela Galán (*El mural*)  
Gabriela Fernández (*Pastorela*)  
Mónica Neumaier (*Te extraño*)

## Best Makeup

Felipe Salazar, Roberto Ortiz (*Días de gracia*)  
Beatuska Stanislaw (*El mural*)  
Roberto Ortiz (*Pastorela*)

## Best Special Effects

Ricardo Arvizu (*Días de gracia*)  
Daniel Cordero "Chovy" (*Pastorela*)  
Alex Vázquez (*Salvando al soldado Pérez*)

## Best Visual Effects

Buf Comagnie, Film Factory (*Días de gracia*)  
Gretel Studio (*Pastorela*)  
Raúl Prado, Edgar Mejía, José Carlos García de  
Letona (*Salvando al soldado Pérez*)

## Best First Work

*A tiro de piedra* (Sebastián Hiriart)  
*Días de gracia* (Everardo Gout)  
*El lugar más pequeño* (Tatiana Huezo)

## Best Documentary Feature

*El cielo abierto* (Everardo González)  
*El lugar más pequeño* (Tatiana Huezo)  
*Morir de pie* (Jacarando Correa)  
*Presunto culpable* (Roberto Hernández, Geoffrey  
Smith)  
*Príncipe Azteca* (A. Fernández)

## Best Fictional Short

*El pescador* (Samantha Pineda)  
*Juan y la borrega* (J. Xavier Velasco)  
*Mari Pepa* (Samuel Isamu Kishi Leopo)

## Best Documentary Short

*Extraño rumor de la tierra cuando se abre un  
surco* (Juan Manuel Sepúlveda)  
*Y retiemble en sus centros la tierra* (Patricia  
Martínez)  
*Yuban* (Ya'asib Vázquez Colmenares)

## Best Animated Short

*Mutatio* (León Fernández)  
*Prita noire* (Sofía Carrillo)

## Best Iberoamerican Film

*La hora cero* (Diego Velasco—Venezuela)  
*Pa negre* (Agustí Villaronga—Spain)  
*Violeta se fue a los cielos* (Andrés Wood—Chile)

## Ariel de Oro

Alfredo Joskowicz  
René Ruiz Cerón



## Obituaries

### Alfredo Joskowicz

Alfredo Joskowicz, a film director, teacher and former head of IMCINE as well as *both* Mexico City film schools (CUEC & CCC) and *both* major film studios (the Estudios América and the Estudios Churubusco-Azteca), died of leukemia on 5 July 2012. Joskowicz had just received the lifetime achievement Ariel de Oro at the 54<sup>th</sup> Ariel Awards on 2 June.

Alfredo Joskowicz Bobrownicki was born in Mexico City in August 1937. He studied electrical and electronic communications engineering at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and did post-graduate work in France, but upon his return to Mexico changed his career course and in 1966 enrolled in the UNAM film school, CUEC, from which he graduated in 1970. He also did post-graduate work in film and television in Belgium.

Joskowicz's first feature film was *Crates* (1970), followed by *El cambio* (1971). Throughout the rest of his career he would continue to make the occasional fictional feature (*Meridiano 100*, *Constelaciones*, *El caballito volador*, *Playa azul*), as well as documentaries, at the same time teaching several generations of aspiring filmmakers and working in various administrative posts.

In addition to his 2012 Ariel de Oro, Joskowicz was honoured two additional times by the Academia, receiving a special Ariel for *Constelaciones* in 1981, and the prize for Best Documentary Short for *Recordar es vivir* in 1994. He was also nominated three other times.



### Carlos Fuentes

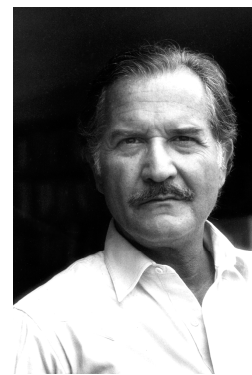
Carlos Fuentes, one of the most honoured Mexican

writers of the past half-century, died on 15 May 2012 in Mexico City; he was 83 years old.

Fuentes suffered a severe hemorrhage in his throat, possibly caused by heart medications he had been taking.

Carlos Fuentes Macías was born in Panama in November 1928; his father was a Mexican diplomat, and the young Carlos lived in various cities around the world, including Washington

D.C. from about 1934 to 1940. At the age of 16 he returned to Mexico and eventually graduated with a law degree from UNAM. Although Fuentes intended to follow



in his father's footsteps as a career diplomat (and in fact was ambassador to France for two years in the 1970s), he turned to writing as a career in the late 1950s. Over the next 50 years he wrote many novels, stories, essays, screenplays, and other works. He received numerous awards and honours during his long career in letters.

From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, a number of Mexican "intellectuals" took part in the film industry as directors, writers, even actors. Carlos Fuentes contributed to the scripts of *Tiempo de morir* (1965), *El gallo de oro* (1964), *Pedro Páramo* (1966), *Los dos Elenas* and *Un alma pura* (1965), and *Aquellos años* (1972), among other films (several in collaboration with Gabriel García Márquez, another famous author). Original works by Fuentes were adapted to the cinema as well, including *La strega in amore* (1966, an Italian film based on "Aura"). *Muñeca reina*, *Las cautivas*, and the Hollywood film *Old Gringo*.

Carlos Fuentes married actress Rita Macedo in 1959; they had one daughter, Cecilia, before separating and finally divorcing a decade later. Fuentes then married Silvia Lemus, who survives him. Fuentes and Lemus had two children, both of whom pre-deceased their father.



## Carlos Cobos

Less than two weeks after winning an Ariel as Best Co-Starring Actor for his role in *Pastorela*, Carlos Cobos died in Mexico City on 13 June 2012. Cobos had been hospitalised for about a month after suffering a stroke.

Cobos was born in 1958; he became a professional actor after attending the Instituto de Bellas Artes. Although best-known for his work on the stage, Cobos also appeared in numerous films and television series. In addition to his Ariel for *Pastorela*, Cobos also received the Best Supporting Actor prize for *Conejo en la luna*, and was nominated for his role in *El carnaval de Sodoma*. Other recent films in which he appeared include *El infierno* and *El atentado*.

Cobos is survived by his wife, Lucy Escandón.



## Patricia Medina

Patricia Medina, a British-born actress who made numerous movies over a 40-year career, died in Los Angeles on 28 April 2012. Medina was born in Liverpool in 1919, the daughter of a Spanish father and British mother. Her acting career began in the late 1930s in British films and continued in Hollywood after WWII. Medina was most popular as a leading lady—mostly in "B" pictures—from the late 1940s through the late 1950s, although she continued to work in the cinema, on television, and on



stage until the mid-Seventies. Her later films included productions shot in Mexico, Italy, Japan, Spain, and elsewhere.

Medina was married to actor Richard Greene from 1941 to 1951. She was the wife of Joseph Cotten from 1960 until his death in 1994.

Patricia Medina's only Mexican film appearance was in the 1956 U.S.-Mexican co-production *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*, in which she co-starred with Guy Madison and Eduardo Noriega.



## Richard Lynch



Actor Richard Lynch died of unknown causes at his home in California on or about 18 June 2012 (his body was found by a friend on 19 June). Lynch was born in 1936 in Brooklyn and became an actor after a stint in the Marine Corps. He was a member of the Actors Studio and

made his screen debut in the early 1970s. Lynch was severely burned in 1967, but later used the resulting facial scars as part of his stage and screen persona.

Although he apparently never worked in a Mexican movie, Richard Lynch had two peripheral connections to the Mexican film industry, appearing with Jorge Rivero in the 1996 movie *Werewolf* (a U.S. production shot in Arizona), and with Mil Máscaras in *Mil Máscaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* (2007).



## Ernest Borgnine

Ernest Borgnine, known to millions for his many film roles and the 1960s television show "McHale's Navy," died of kidney failure on 18 July 2012 in a Los Angeles hospital.

Ernest Borgnine was born in Connecticut in January 1917, the son of Italian immigrants. He served in the U.S. Navy for 10 years after high school, turning to



professional acting after World War II, and made the leap from Broadway to Hollywood in 1950. Borgnine won an Academy Award as Best Actor for the title role in *Marty* (1955), and continued to work steadily in films and on television until shortly before his death.

Ernest Borgnine appeared in an international co-production filmed in Mexico, *High Risk* (1981). He was also in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Devil's Rain* (1975), both made in Mexico.

The second of Borgnine's 5 wives was Mexican actress Katy Jurado, to whom he was married from late 1959 until



mid-1963; he was later the husband of singer Ethel Merman for just one month, but his fifth and final marriage lasted 39 years, from 1973 until his death.



## The “Best” of 2011

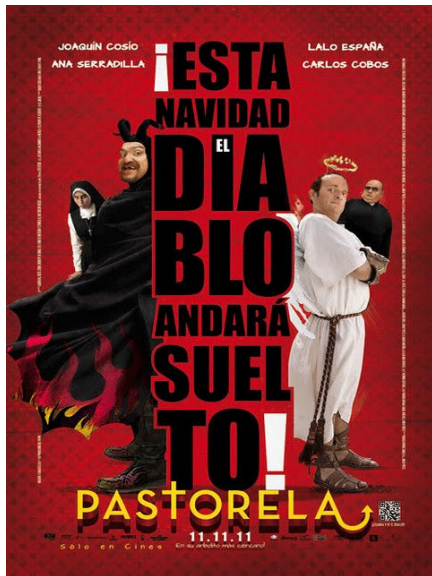
Thematically, it's interesting to note the common threads which run through the three Best Film 2011 nominees: all 3 deal with crime and corruption in contemporary Mexico. *Miss Bala* deals most specifically with drugs, while *Días de gracia* is hardest on the police, and both of these movies show the involuntary descent of a basically decent person into lawlessness. *Pastorela*, a comedy, is necessarily less acidic in its portrayal of Mexico's problems, with police who are depicted as more buffoonish and selfish than dangerously corrupt (although they certainly abuse their power and authority). *Miss Bala* is the most conventional in story and form; *Días de gracia* has a complicated but still relatively realistic plot that is obscured by the technique, while *Pastorela* is a bizarre comedy-fantasy told in a fast-paced but largely standard film style.



**Pastorela** [Christmas Play] (Las Prods. del Patrón-FIDECINE-IMCINE, 2011) *Exec Prod:* Rodrigo Herranz Fanjul, Emilio Portés, Iván Ruiz; *Prod:* Rodrigo Herranz; *Dir-Scr:* Emilio Portés; *Photo:* Damián García; *Music:* Aldo Max Rodríguez; *Line Prod-Prod Mgr:* Issa Guerra; *Film Ed:* Rodrigo Rios Legaspi, Emilio Portés; *Prod Design:* Alejandro García; *Special Makeup:* Roberto Ortiz; *Visual FX:* Gretel; *Special FX:* Chovy; *Sound Design:* Mario Martínez

**Cast:** Joaquín Cosío (*Chucho Juárez*), Carlos Cobos (*Padre Edmundo Posadas*), Eduardo España (*compadre Bulmaro Villafruerte*), Ana Serradilla (*nun*), Ernesto Yáñez

(“God”), Dagoberto Gama (*Comandante*), Héctor Jiménez (*possessed boy*), Eduardo Manzano (*Cardinal*), José Sefami (*El Tuerto*), Rubén Cristiany (*Archbishop*), Silverio Palacios (*Dr. Godínez*), María Aura



(*reporter*), Omar Ayala (*agent I*)

**Notes:** *Pastorela* won 7 Arieles--Best Film, Best Direction, Best Screenplay, Best Co-Starring Actor (Cobos), Best Costumes, Best Makeup, Best Visual Effects—and although *Días de gracia* won 8, taking home

the “big two” prizes (Best Film, Best Direction) gave *Pastorela* the edge overall. The film earned over \$3 million at the Mexican box-office, despite being released late in the year (November) to capitalise on its seasonal plot (in contrast, *Días de gracia* wasn't released theatrically until 2012).

It's difficult to discern a pattern in the Best Film Arieles in recent years. Some of these are clearly “festival films” (*Stellet licht*, *Lake Tahoe*), while others are more popular and/or Mexico-centric (*El infierno*, *Cinco días sin Nora*), albeit with enough of an international “hook” to make

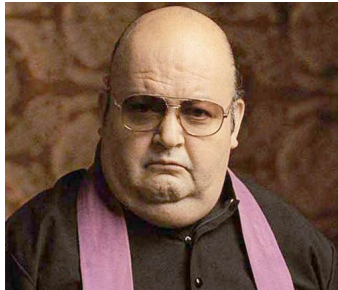


them exportable. *Pastorela* seems less likely to be intellectually accessible to foreign audiences, not necessarily because of its particular theme, but because of its anarchic formal structure.

This is a bizarre fantasy-comedy which is strange and confusing rather than hilarious (at least for me, a non-Mexican), though very well-made and -acted.

*Pastorela* is a more humorous take on the same sort of story—a man's obsession with a religious-social event—seen in *Ánimas Trujano* (1961) and *El Elegido* (1975). A printed message informs viewers that the *pastorela* (sort of a Mexican Christmas pageant) has evolved from a means of religious instruction to a form of entertainment in which the Devil has become the central, most interesting and amusing character (the *pastorela* scenes in Buñuel's *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* are a good example of this).

In the small Mexico City *barrio* of San Miguel de Nenepilco, police agent Chucho Juárez always plays the Devil, but in 2009, various events conspire to deny him the role: the parish priest dies (while having sex with a nun) and is replaced by exorcist Padre Mundo, who's told to run things with a firm hand.



Chucho misses the *pastorela* organizational meeting and his role is given to diminutive cabbie Bulmaro. Chucho is chagrined then outraged when Padre Mundo refuses to reverse his decision. Eventually, the priest apologises and

offers Chucho the role of the Archangel, replacing an unsatisfactory (drunken) parishioner. Chucho accepts, but he continues to scheme to regain his position as the Devil. Despite his fear of the larger man (who mobilises his colleagues in the police force to help), Bulmaro stubbornly refuses to yield.

After a series of difficult-to-describe (and/or explain) events, Chucho and Bulmaro are captured and stuffed in the trunk of a car by agents of the police (Bulmaro has been accused of murdering a prosecutor and a large reward

has been offered). The rest of the police, meanwhile, have been arresting everyone they can find in a Devil costume (picking up a Santa Claus as well—he doesn't have horns, but he's wearing a red suit) in hopes of finding Bulmaro. Padre Mundo is frantic, because the judges of the National Pastorela Contest are scheduled to watch his group's performance *and* the Cardinal himself will be in attendance, yet he has no Devil and no Archangel! Finally, the priest is convinced that *he* must play the Devil's part (and the tipsy Archangel will have to do his best in that role).

Chucho escapes, killing one of his fellow police agents, but leaves Bulmaro in the car's trunk. He arrives at the theatre and assumes the role of the Archangel opposite Padre Mundo's Devil. Meanwhile, the police (disguised as angels) surround the building in hopes of capturing (or



killing) the “assassin” Bulmaro and his accomplice Chucho, but are suddenly attacked by the horde of costumed Devils, who have escaped from detention. Bullets don't stop them, so the “angels” pull their swords and the battle is joined. Inside, Chucho and Padre Mundo duel on the stage: just when it appears evil has triumphed, Chucho plunges his sword into his opponent's chest. The “Devil” collapses and so do all of his minions outside, vanishing into thin air.

Several years later, we see Chucho in his Devil costume performing “Highway to Hell” as part of the National Prison Pastorela Contest. He was convicted of murder after the tabloid-fueled furor regarding the “Cursed Pastorela,” but since he keeps winning the prison-pastorela prize, he's never appealed his case. Bulmaro was acquitted of the charge of killing the prosecutor, but through a “legal error” is also serving a prison sentence (and participating in the *pastorela*).



*Pastorela* throws so many different things on the screen in such fast-paced fashion that it's never dull. Semi-incomprehensible, yes; but dull, no. The fantasy aspects are sprinkled throughout, but sparingly until the wild conclusion—before then, we see Padre Mundo involved in an exorcism (he's interrupted and the possessed victim reappears throughout the movie, stirring up trouble), Chucho has unexplained psychic powers (a beer slides across a table into his waiting hand) in addition to a James Bondian-like super-car, and so forth. The end of the movie pulls out all the stops, as Padre Mundo—possessed by the Devil?—repels the police and slams the theatre

doors shut with a wave of his hand, the imprisoned “Devils” somehow break free from jail, and finally Chucho vanquishes the Devil with his sword, carving a zig-zag of glowing light into the Evil One's chest (the horde of minions also display this “wound” and collapse).

Since I'd read very little about the film before I saw it, I was expecting a more “realistic” film about Chucho's attempts to regain his role (and his pride), rather than a wacky fantasy-farce. Not that *Pastorela* is a failed film (and certainly Emilio Portés can make whatever sort of movie he wants), but it probably would have *also* worked as a more conventional comedy, either character-driven or slapstick (or a combination of the two). Conversely, it's possible that a more *outré* version would have also been successful, leaning even more heavily on the fantasy elements, perhaps making it more explicit that this particular *pastorela* was a confrontation between Good and Evil. As it stands, the final sequences are confusing, because Chucho (who *wants* to be Devil) takes the role of the good Archangel (but he still acts crazy and violent) while the generally-sympathetic Padre Mundo is the evil Devil (is he acting? Or has he been actually possessed?). So when Chucho kills Padre Mundo, we're conflicted—did Chucho do a good thing or a bad thing? A little more clarity might have helped, I'm just saying...

There is a bit of social commentary in the movie, but mostly aimed at easy targets: the corrupt police, the corrupt Church...

*Pastorela* is very well made, with excellent use of location shooting, very good special effects, and fine acting all around. Joaquín Cosío, Carlos Cobos, and Eduardo España stand out—because they have the most to do and their characters are more developed as a result—but the supporting players are also fine. Unfortunately, the copy of the film I saw had no end credits (and the Internet is oddly unhelpful in this instance) so I cannot provide complete information about performers and their roles (for instance, I have been unable to identify the actress who plays Magdalena, Chucho's daughter).

Perhaps *Pastorela* was “too Mexican” for my taste, but I actually believe the formal aspects of the movie were a greater impediment to my enjoyment of the film than any cultural ignorance on my part. It's amusing enough, but too frenetic and disparate to be exceptionally entertaining, and its selection as Best Film of 2011 in the Arieles was an idiosyncratic and surprising choice.



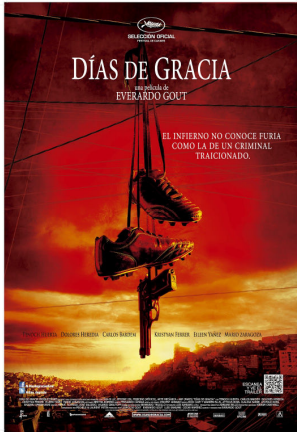
**Días de gracia** [Days of Grace] (Días de Gracia Prods.-FIDECINE-Casa B Prods.-ARP Sélection-Artemecánica Prods., 2011)\* *Exec Prod*: Adriana Bello; *Prod*: Leopoldo Gout, Everardo Gout, Luis Sansans, Ózcar Ramírez González; *Co-Prod*: Laurent Pétrin, Michèle Pétrin; *Line Prod*: Ózcar Ramírez; *Assoc Prod*: Vikram Chatwal; *Dir-Scr*: Everardo Gout; *Co-Author of Scr*: Ricardo Aguado Fuentes, David Rutsala; *Photo*: Luis Sansans; *Muci*: [2002] Nick Cave, Warren Ellis; [2006] Atticus Ross, Leopold Ross, Claudia Same; [2010] Shigeru Umebayashi; *Addtl Music*: Antony Partos; *Prod Mgr*: Ózcar Ramírez González, Alejandro Sánchez de la Peña;



*Asst Dir:* Víctor Herrera [McNaught]; *Film Ed:* Hervé Schneid, José Salcedo, Valerio Grautoff [aka Everardo Gout?]; *Prod Des:* Bernardo Trujillo; *Sound:* Fernando Cámara, Vincent Arnardi, Julién Pérez; *Makeup Chief:* Felipe Salazar

\*a Mexican-French co-production

**Cast:** Tenoch Huerta (*Lupe Esparza*), Kristyan Ferrer (*"Iguana" aka Doroteo*), Dolores Heredia (*Susana*), Carlos Bardem (*Victim X*), Eileen Yáñez (*Maxedonia*), Mario



Zaragoza (*Melquiadez*), José Sefami (*Cmdte. José*), Dagoberto Gama (*Security advisor*), Harold Torres (*Pulga*), Sonia Couoh (*Esperanza, Lupe's wife*), Paulina Gaitán (*Camila*), Miguel Rodarte (*witness*), Verónica Falcón (*Madrina*), Francisco Barreiro (*Rulo*), Vikram Chatwal (*Kalimán*), Sara Manni (*woman in hotel*), Humberto Yáñez (*Chema*), Juan Ríos (*Ramiro*),

Alberto Vargas (*Elías*), Marco Pérez (*Gabino*), Bobbie Sinylii (*Turco*), Eliazar Cabrera (*Bruno*)

**Notes:** It's been more than a decade since *Amores perros* helped put "new Mexican cinema" on the map, internationally, and it may or may not be a coincidence that *Días de gracia* is slightly reminiscent of the earlier film, in form and content. Both films have fractured



narratives and multiple stories.

Everardo Gout won the "Best First Work" Ariel, and *Días de gracia* also picked up 7

additional awards (Best Actor, Supporting Actress, Editing, Original Score, Production Design, and Sound). Unlike the other two Best Film nominees (*Miss Bala* and *Pastorela*), *Días de gracia* wasn't released theatrically in 2011--it opened in April 2012 and managed to remain in the top 30 list for 8 weeks, earning about \$435,000 (in comparison, *Pastorela* took in over \$3 million and *Miss Bala* \$1.1 million in Mexico).

The relatively restrained domestic reception of *Días de gracia* may possibly be attributed to its length (2 hours, 11 minutes), to competition (it opened the same week as *Titanic 3D*, and *The Avengers* and *Battleship*--which made \$3 million its first week in Mexico--followed shortly thereafter), and (if Mexican audiences were as disoriented as I was) to the film's difficult-to-follow narrative and excessively mannered style.

[Note: plot spoilers follow. Of course, some of these could be incorrect anyway!]

The film's title refers to the "days of grace" during the World Cup soccer tournament every four years, when most of the world is distracted by the matches. Events occurring in 2002, 2006, and 2010 are intercut. [As usual, I will not attempt to list the events in the order in which they appear in the film itself.] Lupe Esparza is an honest cop, married and with a child. As the movie begins, he takes two young boys to a shack in the desert and threatens them with death if they ever deal drugs again. One of the boys is Doroteo, brother of Maxedonia.

Years later, Doroteo--now known as "Iguana"--is involved in the abduction of "Victim X," the wealthy



husband of Susana, for whom Maxedonia works as a servant. Iguana and Victim X develop a friendly relationship of sorts, although Iguana is unable to prevent his accomplices from chopping off one of their victim's fingers

when his family is slow in paying the ransom ("You want to pay the ransom in installments, we'll return him to you in installments"). Susana learns her husband had been having an affair and had also transferred most of his money to offshore banks.

In 2006, Lupe distinguishes himself and is made a member of the "Dorados," an elite group of cops under Commander José. However, doing a favour for fellow cop and close friend Melquiadez, Lupe becomes involved in police corruption and runs afoul of gangsters like the Indian (from India) "Kalimán" and female gangster Madrina. After pressuring an informant, Lupe leads a raid that frees a kidnap victim. In revenge, his wife and child are abducted and murdered. He kills Melquiadez and Madrina, learning Cmdte. José is attempting to take over the latter's territory. Lupe confronts José, shooting the mans' wife and children in front of him before killing him as well.

In 2010, Victim X's family pays the ransom. But as he is being freed by Iguana, the kidnap gang's leader prepares to execute him.



Iguana refuses to allow this, and a three-way stand-off ensues--Iguana, the now-armed Victim X, and the leader...revealed to be

Lupe! Shots ring out and both Lupe and Victim X are mortally wounded. As the movie ends, Iguana takes Victim X's advice and goes straight, becoming a professional boxer.

There are so many twists and turns in *Días de gracia* that I'm not even sure the above is entirely correct, and there are many unanswered questions and additional aspects I omitted (to mention two: who is the father of Maxedonia's child? was Susana the mastermind of the

kidnaping we see at the end of the movie?). Though I *tried* to pay attention, perhaps the film was simply too complex for me to grasp, who knows? So I won't criticise the plot or narrative of *Días de gracia*, but the formal aspects of the film seem awfully self-indulgent and unnecessarily complicated to me.



It's not just the hand-held camera, bizarre camera angles, rapid-cutting, deliberately arty compositions, but also things like the voice-over interior dialogues of Victim X and the inconsistent (some might say eclectic) music score. It's as if the filmmakers

found an "Encyclopedia of Film Techniques" and decided to try *every single one* in the same movie.

There are many excellent aspects to *Días de gracia*--scenes and sequences which are powerful and effective--but the overall style is far too hyper-active. Combined with the complexity of the narrative, the film form makes *Días de gracia* almost incomprehensible at times, not a pleasant experience for an audience. Certainly, filmmakers aren't required to cater to the lowest common denominator and make a simplistic work--a film which demands an attentive and analytical viewer is not a crime--but there comes a point when the intelligence and interest of the audience aren't the issue. Of course, this may only be my opinion: everyone else might find the intricately-entwined stories and the frenetic film form perfectly complementary and delightfully challenging.

The performances in *Días de gracia* are very good, although most of the attention is focused on Lupe, Doroteo, Maxedonia, Susana, and Victim X, with flashy support from Cmdte. José, Madrina, etc. Tenoch Huerta (Lupe) and Eileen Yáñez (Maxedonia) both won Arieles for their work, but such awards are so subjective that suggesting they "deserved" the prize more than Krystan Ferrer or Mario Zaragoza (both of whom were also nominated) or Dolores Heredia (who wasn't) is pointless. One curious casting choice should be mentioned--Vikram Chatwal, a well-known businessman of Sikh extraction, plays a turbaned gangster nicknamed "Kalimán." Chatwal (who has appeared in other films) is also credited as an associate producer, which makes one wonder--which came first, his investment in the movie or his role in it? Nonetheless, he's fine in the role, adding an exotic touch to the otherwise Mexican cast (Carlos Bardem, Javier's brother, plays Victim X but is not stereotypically "Spanish" in his role).

My criticism of the formal aspects of *Días de gracia* is more philosophical than technical--the cinematography, editing, sound (all Ariel winners) are fine in and of themselves, as much as I might carp about the final result. The French contribution to the film isn't obvious (it was probably mostly \$\$), but Hervé Schneid (*Amélie*) did co-edit the picture.

*Días de gracia* is frustrating and challenging to watch, yet my preference for more conventional film form does not blind me to the fact that it is entertaining and dramatically compelling as well.



**Miss Bala** [Miss Bullet] (Canana-Fox International Prods.-IMCINE-CONACULTA-FIDECINE-PROMECAP S.A.-Nuevos NegociosDM San Luis S.A., 2011) *Exec Prod:* Geminiano Pineda, Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna; *Prod:* Pablo Cruz; *Dir:* Gerardo Naranjo; *Scr:* Mauricio Katz, Gerardo Naranjo; *Photo:* Mátyás Erdély; *Music:* Emilio Kauderer; *Line Prod:* Gabriel Heads; *Asst Dir:* Hiromi Kamata; *Film Ed:* Gerardo Naranjo; *Art Dir:* Ivonne Fuentes; *Sound Design:* Pablo Lach, Salvador Félix; *Union:* STIC

**Cast:** Stephanie Sigman (*Laura Guerrero*), Noé Hernández (*Lino Valdez*), Lakshmi Picazo (*Azucena "Suzu" Ramos*), Leonor Victorica (*Laisa James*), Irene Azuela (*Jéssica Verduzco*), José Yengue (*Kike Cámara*), James Russo (*Jimmy*), Miguel Couturier (*Gen. Salomón Duarte*), Gabriel Heads (*Agent Raymond Bell*), Juan Carlos Galván (*Arturo*), Javier Zaragoza (*Ramón Guerrero*), Eduardo Mendizabal (*Quino*), Sergio Gómez Padilla (*Parca*), Gabriel Chávez (*pageant emcee*), Felipe Morales (*Tío*), Sergio Miguel Martínez (*Cali*), Luis Francisco Escobedo (*Roca*), Leticia Huijara Cano (*dress shop salesperson*)

**Notes:** though nominated for 3 Arieles (Best Film, Director, and Actor) and Mexico's official entry in the U.S. Oscars, and one of the top 10 box-office Mexican films of the year, *Miss Bala* probably did not achieve the level of success the filmmakers might have expected. Largely a conventional film--particularly compared to *Pastorela* and *Días de gracia*, the other two Best Film nominees--*Miss Bala* is an excellent, well-made drama but doesn't offer the sort of flashy novelty that might have drawn more attention.

Intended or not, *Miss Bala* can be read as an allegory of Mexico's struggles with the drug trade. Protagonist Laura (= the Mexican people) is beaten, raped, exploited, abused, and humiliated, receiving a few crumbs of reward but--since she doesn't commit to the side of the narco-traffickers--is eventually discarded when her usefulness is



at an end. She lives in a hellish world where people try to carry on some semblance of normal existence, but gun battles erupt in the streets, explosions are heard in the distance, anyone (especially the police and government officials) can be (and probably is) corrupt, and every aspect of one's life is tainted by the drug trade.

An alternate (or complementary) reading would be a feminist one: Laura represents women who are exploited and abused by men, who serve as passive sex objects, and who have no control over their own destinies in the male-dominated world. There certainly have been films about men caught up in the narcotics trade, but *Miss Bala* adds some specific touches which emphasize the "double jeopardy" of Laura Guerrero, both as a Mexican and a woman.

[The film is loosely based on the real-life case of Laura Zúñiga, who participated in the 2008 "Nuestra Belleza" pageant as the representative of Sinaloa, and later won the "Reina Hispanoamérica" title, before being arrested in Jalisco with her *narco* boyfriend. She later claimed to have been kidnaped and to have been unaware of her boyfriend's criminal activities, but it was rumoured that her beauty pageant success had been purchased with drug money.]

23-year-old Laura sneaks out with her friend Suzu to apply for a spot in the "Miss Baja California" contest. She's accepted, but that night she and Suzu are in a nightclub when a group of armed men



assault the customers. Laura escapes; the next day, she tries to locate Suzu but is betrayed by the police to the drug gang led by Lino Váñez, one of the men who attacked the club. Lino has Laura serve as a decoy for some drug agents, then arranges to have her reinstated in the beauty pageant, giving her a cell phone and some money to buy a gown for the event. Laura starts walking out of town, but is caught by DEA agents, who confiscate the telephone. Returning to her home that night, Laura is shocked when a wounded Lino and some henchmen arrive.



(taped to her body); she is given a name and a message for Lino. Returning to Mexico, she's caught in a violent street battle but rescued by Lino's men.

She understands her father and brother's lives are at stake, so she agrees to cooperate with the drug smuggler. Lino sends her to the USA with a large sum of cash

After all this, Laura is dropped off again at the "Miss Baja California" contest where--despite her stunned state which renders her incapable of answering the simplest question posed by the emcee--she is chosen the winner (to the obvious dismay of the other contestants). Lino picks her up afterwards and drives her into the desert. He gives her a choice: she can stay with him or walk away, but has to leave the area forever. She stays and has (uncomfortable) sex with Lino in his truck. The next day, Laura attends a reception and is introduced to General Duarte: Lino instructs her to agree to meet the police official in his hotel room. She does, and is present when the suite is attacked and various people are killed. Lino is reported dead, but it was merely a ruse--Duarte, in on the farce, also survives. Laura is arrested and paraded before the press with some other fall guys. As the film concludes, she's driven off to prison, but the van stops and she's unceremoniously dumped out in the street, still handcuffed.

Some have criticised *Miss Bala* for the passive nature of its protagonist. Laura is manipulated and exploited by Lino and goes through the film in a sort of daze. This is understandable, and in fact she does rebel in a few, small ways--she tries to leave town, she withholds an important message she was supposed to pass to Lino, she attempts to warn General Duarte of the impending attack--but she has little chance of escaping the quagmire into which she's stumbled. Even Lino's offer to let her walk away is a mirage: she's in the desert in the middle of the night, wearing an evening gown and high-heeled shoes, how far could she go? And she's also told she must leave town and can't even go home to her family. Her reactions are actually fairly realistic, definitely moreso than if she'd suddenly turned into a kind of female Charles Bronson, fighting back against the drug trade.

On the other hand, Laura's character is hardly developed at all, making it difficult to truly empathise with her. We don't know what she does with her time, what her personality is like, why she wants to enter the beauty pageant, and so forth. Even before she becomes embroiled in the violent world of drug smuggling, she seems rather quiet and diffident, even colourless. Although actress Stephanie Sigman is an attractive young woman, Laura looks far more "ordinary" than the other pageant contestants--which was almost certainly deliberate on the part of director Naranjo--and seems less out-going and self-assured. Sigman does a decent job in the role but she doesn't have a lot to work with.

Similarly, Noé Hernández is satisfactory as Lino--although his nomination for a Best Actor Ariel was a bit of a surprise--but has no scenes or dialogue which reveal his inner feelings, background, or character. He's efficient and ruthless in his "job," takes an instant liking to Laura and





treats her (in the main) fairly kindly, but that's about it. Lino is not a typical movie drug kingpin--he looks more like an auto mechanic--and in fact his exact position on the totem pole is another thing *Miss Bala* never bothers to explain. Is he a really powerful boss, or the leader of a minor, local gang, or a mid-level functionary of a large organisation?

The production values of *Miss Bala* are adequate. Much of the movie was shot on location (the filmmakers disguised the nature of the plot to avoid trouble from the local drug cartels) and the technical aspects are slick and professional. The action scenes aren't glamourised, but are instead loud, chaotic, and frightening.

*Miss Bala* is a well made movie but it's not a completely satisfying viewing experience. There's no happy ending, but even more daunting for the spectator is the absence of any sort of resistance or objection to the reign of terror on the part of the film's characters. There is no hero or heroine who protests, who stands up for their basic rights, who even verbalises a



desire for progress. Some might say this is a "realistic" picture of conditions in certain areas of Mexico, and to suggest otherwise would be deceptive and lessen the impact of the message. But what message? That organised crime has made life unbearable and there is no way out? *Miss Bala* is thus made a profoundly depressing film by its **lack of hope**.



## Even More Juan Orol!

### **Pasiones tormentosas** [Stormy Passions]

(España-Sono Films, 1945) *Prod-Dir-Adapt:* Juan Orol; *Story:* Alfonso Díaz; *Photo:* Domino Carrillo; *Music Dir:* Max Urban; *Prod Chief:* Guillermo Alcayde; *Asst Dir:* Julio Cahero; *Film Ed:* José Marino; *Art Dir:* José Rodríguez G.; *Camera Op:* Enrique Wallace; *Makeup:* Conchita Zamora; *Sound Op:* B. J. Kroger, Francisco

Alcayde; *Sound Ed:* Lupe Marino

**Cast:** María Antonieta Pons (*Fabiola*), Crox Alvarado (*José Morúa*), Yadira Jiménez (*Sandra*), Jorge Mondragón (*priest*), Salvador Quiroz (*Tomás*), Kiko Mendive (*Canillitas*), María Enriqueta Reza (*witch*), Richard



Roberson (*Ramón*), Pitouto [Pedro Elviro] (*Francisco*,

*sacristan*), Juan José Laboriel (*Apolonio*), Juane Niles (*Siro*), Lupe Melin (*Margarita*, *Fabiola's mother*), Juan Orol (*offscreen narrator*)

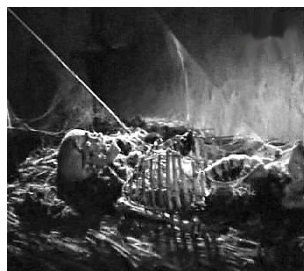
**Notes:** *Pasiones tormentosas* is a fairly unique film in Juan Orol's *oeuvre*, as it is one of the few movies he made that has a supernatural theme (*Zonga, el ángel diabólico* has some vague witchcraft overtones, but it was based on a pre-existing comic strip). Add good, authentic music, a relatively short running time (76 minutes), decent production values and photography, and María Antonieta Pons looking extremely beautiful, and the result is an entertaining picture. On the negative side, Orol overwhelms the viewer with musical numbers at the expense of the drama--the actual plot is extremely thin--and the paucity of drama gives the performers little chance to shine: Crox Alvarado is wooden, Yadira Jiménez is a stereotyped bad-girl, and Pons looks marvelous but plays a not wholly sympathetic character despite being the nominal heroine.

The film begins with voice-over narration by Juan Orol. On a dark and stormy night in a tropical region, a small town priest is awakened by the arrival of Fabiola, a young woman who says he's needed to hear the confession of a dying man. The priest, new to the region, is told by his sacristan Francisco that the village Fabiola refers to is long-abandoned, but they agree to accompany her anyway. After an arduous journey, they enter the ruined town. In one of the houses, José lies on a bed, mortally injured. He tells the priest his story...

José and Fabiola live in the happy, lively village. They are engaged to be married, but Fabiola's half-sister Sandra is jealous and covets José. He rejects her. Fabiola and José wed, but Sandra obtains a love potion from the local witch (doesn't every village have one?) and



bewitches the groom. They are discovered in bed together. Since this betrays the traditions of the town--depicted as a place ruled by superstition and custom--José and Sandra are tied to racks and stoned in the village square. Fabiola tries to protect José but is struck by a stone herself and carried off, unconscious. José breaks free and bitterly clubs the bound Sandra to death, then staggers off badly injured, as the villagers continue to pelt him with rocks. [end of flashback]



The priest absolves José of his sins. The priest and sacristan depart, but have to return to the house to retrieve

their umbrella. As they watch, José turns into a skeleton before their eyes, Fabiola vanishes into thin air, and the interior of the house becomes a dusty ruin.

The priest explains what occurred: "50 years" before, José died of his injuries but because he didn't receive the last rites, his soul was never laid to rest. Fabiola also perished, but she went to Heaven and interceded for her husband, allowing them both to return to Earth so José could confess his sins (not that he actually did anything wrong, it was all Sandra's fault). Once this was done, his body--which was never buried--became a skeleton. Fabiola merely vanished because she had been buried in sacred ground years earlier. [How the priest knows all of these things is unexplained.] The priest and his assistant leave the abandoned, cursed village.



*Pasiones tormentosas* could have been a much better film had Orol chosen to elaborate on the story and dispense with a few of the songs. The idea that the village is ruled by some sort of pagan rites is interesting. There are references to José being part of a "tribe" (although no one looks too indigenous--the villagers are a mix of whites, mestizos, and blacks), there is a tradition requiring lovers to sit under a sacred palm tree before they are married, the "wedding" itself is performed by Fabiola's father (the village headman, not a priest) who smashes a cup as part of the ritual, the adulterers are condemned to death by stoning, and so forth. The *bruja* is a stereotypical Mexican cinema witch who lives in a hut cluttered with herbs, idols, a live owl, etc., and cackles madly for no reason at all.



Unfortunately, the dramatic portions of the movie are brief interludes between the various songs and dances.



[Sandra: "I love you José!" José: "Well, I don't love you, I love Fabiola!" Fabiola: "Sandra, stop trying to steal my fiancé!" Sandra: "You'll see, I'll take him away from you!" And so on and so forth.] As usual for Orol, there are

sub-plots which never really develop, including the unrequited love of another villager for Sandra (there's also an amusing motif--not

really a joke--in which Fabiola's mother repeatedly criticises Sandra, her step-daughter).

Technically, the picture looks very good. Filmed almost entirely in the studio, the sets are extensive (but still obviously studio-shot "exteriors") and well-lit. Orol even uses some discreet camera movement (mostly slow tracking shots) during the musical numbers. There are a few gaffes, including one sequence in which a villager's



singing drowns out the dialogue between José and his friends, and an out-of-sequence shot (Sandra is suddenly shown sitting at the lovers' palm tree, clearly part of a later scene), but for the most part *Pasiones tormentosas* looks very slick and professional

(particularly considering *Los misterios del hampa*, Orol's prior effort, was quite shabby in appearance).

Although there are too many musical numbers, it's only fair to concede that these are rather entertaining on their own. One of the songs is a *cumbia*, a rather unusual musical genre for the period. Pons, Jiménez, Kiko Mendive, and several other performers demonstrate their singing and/or dancing talent (Crox Alvarado even "sings" a duet with Pons, but is obviously dubbed). In-joke: one of Kiko Mendive's songs references "María Antonieta Pons," and Fabiola asks "Who's that?" to which he replies "Oh, some dancer." Pons, as noted above, looks marvelous and seems to be enjoying herself immensely as she dances.

*Pasiones tormentosas* was her penultimate movie with Juan Orol: almost immediately after shooting this one in the fall of 1945, she made *Embrujo antillano* and then their personal and professional relationship came to an end.

*Pasiones tormentosas* represents a missed opportunity in some respects, but is still an interesting and generally entertaining film.



## Friends in High Places

The new First Lady of Mexico, assuming the election of Enrique Peña Nieto is confirmed, will be actress Angélica Rivera (mostly a *telenovela* performer, but she can be seen in the film comedy *Aquí espantaan!*). Rivera married Peña Nieto in 2010 (he was a widower) and thus becomes the latest in a long line of Mexican film performers to have close connections in the upper regions of politics.

This does not count those who've actually participated in the political process themselves, such as María Rojo, who served in Mexico's national legislature.

Some random examples:

**Rodolfo Landa:** brother of Mexican president Luis Echevarría

**Christiane Martel:** married to Miguel Alemán Velasco, son of former Mexican president Miguel Alemán Valdés and himself governor of Vera Cruz



**Sasha Montenegro:** wife of former Mexican president José López Portillo

**Irma Serrano:** by her own account, mistress of Mexican president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz; she also served in Mexico's legislature

**Silvia Pinal:** married to Tulio Hernández, governor of the state of Tlaxcala; she also served in Mexico's legislature

**Natalia "Kiki" Herrera Calles:** granddaughter of Mexican president Plutarco Elías Calles

**Gastón Santos:** son of Gonzalo N. Santos, governor of San Luis Potosí



## Alfredo Juskowicz Films



**Crates** (CUEC, 1970) *Dir:* Alfredo Juskowicz; *Scr:* Alfredo Juskowicz, Leobardo López; *Photo:* Luc Toni Kuhn; *Prod Chief:* Guillermo Díaz Palafox; *Film Ed:* Juan Ramón Aupart; *Sound:* Rodolfo Sánchez A.

**Cast:** Leobardo López [Aretche] (*Leobardo Crates*), María Elena Ambriz (*young woman*), José López [Aretche] (*brother*), Gonzalo Martínez [Ortega] (*Adrián Armendáriz, TV host*), Javier Audirac (*"disciple" of Crates*), José Rovirosa, Brian Nissen, Monserrat Pecanins (*woman in Crates' house*), Emilio Cárdenas (*man in Crates' house*), Alfredo Juskowicz (*man in Crates' house*), Carlos Ancira (*voice of Crates*)

**Notes:** *Crates* was the second feature--and the first fictional feature--produced by students at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC). Shot on 16mm and in black-and-white, the movie was never released commercially and shown only on college campuses and in cine-clubs (director Juskowicz, in the liner notes for the 2007 UNAM DVD release of *El cambio* and *Crates*, says only 2 or 3 prints were ever struck). Co-writer and star Leobardo López Aretche (director of *El grito*, the first CUEC feature) committed suicide several months after *Crates* was shot, and his (minimal) dialogue was post-dubbed by actor Carlos Ancira.

After making *Crates*, Alfredo Juskowicz directed *El cambio*, which--while still not a "commercial film"--was at least in colour, had sync sound, and featured several professional actors (Sergio Jiménez and Héctor Bonilla). *El cambio's* very late-'60s hippie-like theme of the rejection of modern society and its possessions was carried over from *Crates* (which in turn was based on the life of

Crates of Thebes, a Greek philosopher who renounced all worldly goods), although the tone of *El cambio* is more blackly humorous than that of *Crates*.

A TV crew from the program "Siete Sorpresa" ("Channel 7, the favourite of housewives") pays a random visit to the home of Leobardo Crates, only to discover a news story in the making: he is giving away his possessions (and money) to his friends and acquaintances.

When one man (played by director Juskowicz) suggests Crates is joking or may change his mind, Crates threatens to burn down his own house to prove his point. Some time later, Crates is living on the street (and in the



forests and fields), eating from the trash, consorting with derelicts, and engaging passersby in conversation (as he offers them fragments of a loaf of bread). He is joined by one young man who, after Crates falls asleep, ransacks his bag in search of valuables. Later, a young woman who has (apparently) over-dosed on drugs leaves her hospital room



and--along with her brother--decides to share the lifestyle of Crates (since they were both present in his house in the opening sequence, apparently they are old acquaintances). After some time, the brother rejects living

in poverty and returns to his bourgeois home. The young woman becomes pregnant and eventually gives birth to Crates' child in a cave (Crates severs the umbilical cord with his teeth). As the film concludes, the little family strolls off, observed from afar by the brother.

Little or nothing really happens in *Crates*, and the 73-minute running time feels much longer. After the opening sequence, there is almost no dialogue, and all of the scenes



play out in an extremely leisurely pace. There is no discussion of the reasons for Crates' actions, and the movie alternates between images of extreme poverty, filth, and degradation and sequences which are almost ludicrously idyllic and romanticised

(there are probably more of the former than the latter, however). In the *El Cambio/Crates* liner notes, Juskowicz writes "what was important then was to film with the most absolute freedom of expression," and *Crates* features nudity, a discrete sex scene, urination, defecation, and the aforementioned childbirth footage, all of which would have been highly unlikely to appear in an "industrial" production of the period.

Given the paucity of dialogue (and what dialogue exists was post-dubbed), the performances are difficult to evaluate. Leobardo López Aretche had studied acting with Seki Sano and is very naturalistic in the title role (viewers today may be struck by his resemblance to Zach Galifianakis) although, again, he mostly just wanders around and we never *hear* most of his conversations with people or get any sense of why he "dropped out" or whether he's content with his new life. Presumably he is: the final shots of the movie suggest that he and his new family are "free" and happy as they wander along a country road.

*Crates* is technically satisfactory: although a few sequences are marred by spots on the camera lens or something, the film has a distinctive yet not amateurish "look." Editor Ramón Aupart and sound engineer Rodolfo Sánchez were both instructors at CUEC and industry professionals; the cinematographer was Toni Kuhn, who would shoot most of Joskowicz's features and work with many other independent directors of this generation. The score consists of canned music, ranging from classical to folkloric, and is generally appropriate. Not especially entertaining or profound, *Crates* is nonetheless an interesting and relatively accomplished first work, in addition to being historically important as the first fictional feature made by CUEC students.



## El caballito volador

[The Flying Pony]

(CONACITE DOS, 1982)

Dir: Alfredo Joskowicz; Scr: Francisco Serrano,

Patricia Van Rhijn; Collab: Alfredo Joskowicz,

Joaquín Torres; Photo: Toni Khun [sic];

Music: Rafael Elizondo; Prod Mgr: Hugo

Green; Asst Dir: Daniel González Dueñas; Film Ed:

Federico Landeros; Art Dir/Costumes: Francisco Magallón; Visual FX Director: Juan Muñoz Ravelo; Visual FX Realisation: J. Carlos Muñoz Amicuz; Cameraman: Antonio Ruiz; Camera Op: Alberto Arellano; Lighting:

Fernando Moreno; Makeup: Graciela González M.; Sound: Víctor Rojo; Union: STIC

**Cast:** Blanca Guerra (*mother; La Ondina*), Roberto Sosa (*Diego*), Sergio Jiménez (*Fulgor*), Tomás Leal (*Crescencio*), Sergio Bustamante (*don Abusivo*), Manuel Ojeda (*Esteban*), Evangelina Sosa (*Azucena*), Guillermo Ríos, Ignacio Retes (*compadre*), Jorge Fegan (*municipal president*), Roberto Sosa Rodríguez, Francisco Zañudo, Andrés Caballero, Rafael Padilla, Pablo Mandoki, Brigitte Broch; Grupo "Tres"--Eduardo Borbolla, Agnes Limbos, Rafael Degar, Fernando Baena; Jorge Humberto Robles (*voice of Zirán*)

**Notes:** *El caballito volador* was a change of pace for director Alfredo Joskowicz, whose previous features were, if not overtly "experimental," at least serious and adult-oriented independent films. However, *El caballito volador* is a children's film (although entertaining enough for



adults) made for one of the government "commercial" production companies. Although the special effects may today seem quaint and crude, at least some of this seems to have been a deliberate attempt to incorporate

folkloric motifs into the picture. Furthermore, one wonders if slicker, more "realistic" effects, costumes, and sets would have been effective or would have changed the tone of the film significantly.

The music score is worth noting, since it won an Ariel for Rafael Elizondo. Some of the music is quite nice, and various folkloric themes (as well as a song by Francisco Gabilondo Soler "Cri-Cri") are incorporated, but at other times the score is overly emphatic and tries too hard to reinforce the humour of what's occurring onscreen. Perhaps this is a result of the designation of *El caballito volador* as a "children's movie," but it seems slightly heavy-handed nonetheless. In balance, however, the score is effective and pleasant.

Diego lives with his mother and father in a rural area of Mexico (much of the film was shot on location in Hidalgo) that has been suffering from a protracted drought. Diego's father Esteban is ready to relocate to Tabasco, where he's been told there is plentiful rain for crops, and the soil is so rich one doesn't even need to fertilise when planting. Local *cacique* don Abusivo--who has plenty of water on his land--has been conspiring with the corrupt local municipal president to take over the "abandoned" farmland for his own benefit.



On his saint's day, Diego receives a wooden horse from his godfather. That night, he flies away on the horse--which can talk, and is named Zirán--to a magical land. He's told that the water fairy, Ondina, can help him locate



water on his father's farm. After many arduous adventures in fantastic locations, Diego meets Ondina and receives a dowsing rod as a gift.

When he awakes the next morning, Diego uses the rod to locate water, forestalling the forced emigration of the local farmers, and foiling the scheme of don Abusivo.

The first third of the film takes place in the "real" world, and depicts the farmers' fruitless search for water, as well as the sinister but bumbling attempts of Abusivo and his two incompetent henchmen--Fulgor and Crescencio--to gain control of the land.



Abusivo is vain, slightly effeminate (although he has a daughter, Azucena, who befriends Diego), and (as one would expect) abusive towards his employees and everyone else. Fulgor (who wears an eye-patch) and Crescencio (who has an injured hand) are cowardly bullies.

In the fantasy world, Diego and Zirán are still pursued by Fulgor and Crescencio, now henchmen of the Devil (who strongly resembles don Abusivo). Azucena also exists in this alternate dimension, but here she is the goddaughter of La Ondina. Diego and Zirán travel through various locations, including a fantastic garden, the land of fire, a room with



multiple doors (at different angles), and the land of the dead (basically, skeletons having a party in a graveyard). These are a combination of sets and very obvious optical



effects (for the backgrounds), and most of the denizens of the world are clearly wearing masks (in other words, no particular effort is made to disguise the fact that these are people in costumes). While this artificiality makes *El caballito volador* look rather like a stage presentation or a low-budget children's

television program, it's not necessarily a fatal blow to the film's effectiveness.

More importantly, the main characters perform in a very sincere fashion, although this ranges from naturalistic (Diego, his parents, their friends) to ultra-hammy (don Abusivo, Fulgor, Crescencio). The creatures in the fantasy world, on the other hand, perform in a very broad manner, reinforcing the feeling of unreality.

Although *El caballito volador's* plot is reasonably straight-forward, there are a few minor problems. For example, although Diego recognises Azucena in the

fantasy world, he apparently doesn't notice that La Ondina is identical in appearance to his mother, or that the Devil = don Abusivo, or that Fulgor and Crescencio are the same in both planes of existence. Additionally, the conclusion of the fantasy sequence is odd, with both Zirán and Azucena abandoning Diego before he reaches La Ondina.

The performances, as noted above, vary in style. Sergio Bustamante is extremely entertaining every moment he's on-screen: he's so flamboyant that it's difficult to take him seriously, but he's hilarious nonetheless. Sergio Jiménez is also good (and from a 2012 point of view, looks a *lot* like Jim Varney) but Tomás Leal has little to do (and his injured hand is a bit off-putting: unlike Fulgor's eye-patch, which is



part of his characterisation, one feels Leal's hand was *actually* hurt at this time, and at least subconsciously this affects our perception of him). Roberto Sosa is completely natural as Diego, and it's not difficult to see why he grew up into a fine adult actor; his sister Evangelina Sosa is cute and competent but has little to do. Blanca Guerra and Manuel Ojeda are professional as usual.

Interestingly enough, Zirán the Flying Pony has



virtually *no* personality. Voiced by Jorge Humberto Robles, Zirán is minimally animated (his eyes blink, his mouth opens a bit, and his legs move in a mechanical fashion) but has little to say and nothing especially profound. He's essentially just a wooden horse who can fly and talk, not a true spirit guide or mentor for Diego.

*El caballito volador* is interesting and never boring. The open artificiality of the fantasy world and the occasionally crude special effects may not be to everyone's taste, but the film is worth watching for Sergio Bustamante (and to a lesser extent, Sergio Jiménez) alone.



**Playa azul\*** [CONACULTA-IMCINE-FFCC-Noos Films, 1991) *Exec Prod*: Gerardo Moscoso; *Assoc Prod*: Miguel Necoechea; *Dir*: Alfredo Joskowicz; *Scr*: Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Alfredo Joskowicz; *Collab*: Teresa Velo; *Orig. Play*: Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda; *Photo*: Rodolfo Sánchez Santinelli; *Music*: Amparo Rubin; *Prod Mgr*: Esteban Osorio; *Asst Dir*: Javier Durán; *Personal Asst to Dir*: Francisco Athié; *Film Ed*: Francisco Chiu; *Art Dir & Costumes*: José Méndez; *Sound*: Miguel Sandoval; *Makeup*: Lucrecia Muñoz; *Union*: STIC

\*U.S. DVD title: *Beach Hotel*

**Cast**: Sergio de Bustamante (*The Engineer*), Pilar Pellicer (*The Señora*), Mercedes Olea (*Silvia*), Lourdes Villareal (*Teresa*), Ignacio Retes (*Matías*), Mel Herrera (*Sergio*), Juan Carlos Colombo (*Magallón, lawyer*), Guillermo Gil (*governor*), Guillermo Ríos (*policeman*)

rapist #1), Gerardo Moscoso (*police chief*), Ana Luisa Pardo & Yadira Santana (*rape victims*), Adrián Gómez



(*Sergio's friend*), Martín López & Jesús García Ramón (*policemen rapists #2 and 3*)

**Notes:**

Alfredo Joskowicz's

final fictional feature (he subsequently made several documentaries), an adaptation of a well-known play by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, was produced in 1991. Well-made and acted, *Playa azul* is still recognisable as a film made from a play--it's structured around a series of conversations--although Joskowicz and Rascón Banda make several attempt to open it up for the cinematic medium. For example, some dialogue takes place on an actual beach, Pilar Pellicer's character wades into the sea, there is a flashback sequence to an earlier assault, and one scene--a reception attended by the governor and some beauty contest queens-- is set away from the Hotel Playa Azul. One assumes most if not all of these were added for the film version, and while *Playa azul* remains rather talky, it's not boring or static.

Contrary to the description in *The Mexican Filmography* (written before I'd seen the movie), *Playa azul* is not specifically set in the 1950s. Indeed, the costumes and cars seem more or less contemporary (it's possible the original play, first performed in 1982, was a period piece). My bad!

The protagonist of the film is referred to as "El Ingeniero" (The Engineer): the English sub-titles on the U.S. DVD usually translate this as "Sir," and translate "The Licenciado" as "The Man." In Mexico, individuals with university degrees are often referred to by their degree as a sign of respect--Licenciado, Ingeniero,



Arquitecto--regardless of the actual profession they are practicing. In fact, in *Playa azul* "The Engineer" has just left his post as a bank president, although previously he had apparently worked as a civil engineer, in addition to being the right-hand man

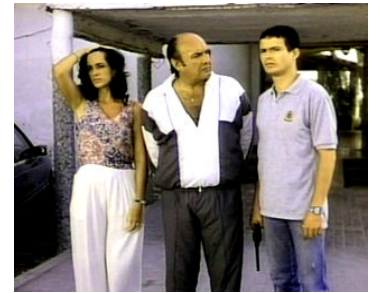
of the late Licenciado, a powerful politician.

Accusing of fraud, the Engineer has fled to the Hotel Playa Azul, a run-down resort he owns in the state of Nayarit. The hotel is closed to the public for the season, and is occupied only by the manager Teresa and handyman Matías. The Engineer assembles his family: his wife (referred to as La Señora), son Sergio, daughter Silvia. He tells them the matter is serious but not insurmountable, each new administration says the previous administration was corrupt, and he's been chosen as the sacrificial lamb this time. In a few months, everything will blow over,

although at the moment it's awkward because his bank accounts have been frozen due to the investigation.

Over the next several days, the relationships between the family members are exposed.

Silvia says she heard her father procured women for the Licenciado, and that her mother once worked in a brothel. Sergio,



some time before, was abducted and assaulted by 3 corrupt policemen who killed his friend and raped two girls who were with him; he accuses his father of not having paid the ransom to save him, and has been under psychiatric treatment ever since. The Señora is estranged from her husband and Silvia, but dotes on Sergio.

The Engineer asks Teresa to take a letter to the state governor--whom she knows--requesting assistance in his current troubles. In addition to his own legal troubles, the Hotel Playa Azul is to be destroyed so a new highway can be constructed through the property. The governor



promises only moral support, and the Engineer realises his situation is growing desperate. He asks his family to rally around, saying they can revive the Hotel Playa Azul and use it as the means of recovering their

fortune. Silvia refuses: she has a young daughter, a new apartment, and a responsible job waiting for her in Mexico City. The Engineer's wife also won't stay; Sergio agrees to work with his father, but when he's promised the position of hotel manager, this upsets Teresa, who has been faithfully employed by the family for years. After Silvia says she has no room for Teresa in her Mexico City apartment, the older woman commits suicide, setting off to sea in a small boat. A telephone call from his lawyer informs the Engineer that he has two choices: leave for exile in the USA (although earlier the Engineer told his family he'd never stashed money in overseas bank accounts, considering this unpatriotic) or surrender to the authorities. When the local police arrive to arrest him, they find the Engineer dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.



*Playa azul* is a typical "dysfunctional family" drama, albeit one which has the additional interest of some oblique references to Mexican politics. The performances are all very good. This is an actors' movie--all of the main



characters (the Engineer, La Señora, Silvia, Sergio, Teresa and Matías) have a "big scene" (or more than one) to show



off their talent. It's interesting to compare Sergio Bustamante and Ignacio Retes in *El caballito volador* and *Playa azul*--Bustamante is flamboyantly over-the-top in the first film and a solid dramatic actor in the

second, while Retes plays a straight dramatic role in the earlier film and an eccentric character part in the later movie.

The production values are fine. As noted earlier, *Playa azul* was shot on location in the state of Nayarit, and this adds a feeling of verisimilitude to the drama. The photography is quite nice, and Amparo Rubin won an Ariel for her restrained musical score.

Certainly no masterpiece nor a really important film, but an entertaining "serious drama."



## Hay Moros en la costa!



**El príncipe del desierto** [The Prince of the Desert] (José Luis Calderón, 1946) *Prod*: José Luis Calderón; *Dir-Adapt-Dialogue*: Fernando A. Rivero; *Story-Continuity-Dialogue*: Nagre M. Ganew, Fernando A. Rivero; *Photo*: Ezequiel Carrasco; *Music*: Francisco Argote; *Lute Soloist & Arab Music Collab*: Dr. Luis J. Suicke; *Prod Mgr*: Rodolfo Montiel C.; *Prod Chief*: Antonio Sánchez B.; *Asst Dir*: Américo Fernández; *Film Ed*: Jorge Bustos; *Art Dir*: José Rodríguez Granada; *Camera Op*: J. Guadalupe García; *Makeup*: Román Juárez; *Choreog*: Lucila Franco; *Sound Engin*: Jimmie Fields; *Sound Op*: Galdino Samperio

**Cast**: Abel Salazar (*Prince Achmed*), Malú Gatica (*Lucila Alborno*), René Cardona [Sr.] (*Omar*), Esperanza Issa (*Salna*), Eduardo Casado (*Giafar*), Luis Mussot (*Abdalah*), Arturo Soto Rangel (*Sr. Alborno*), Eugenia Galindo (*Sra. Monroy*), Violeta Guirola (*Teresa Monroy*), Jorge Mondragón (*Sr. Monroy*), Mary Montoya (*Lucila as a girl*), Norma Ancira, Lilia Acleamar (*dancer*), Humberto

Rodríguez (*apartment house porter*), Chel López (*Omar's henchman*)

**Notes**: a slow but moderately entertaining piece of exotica, *El príncipe del desierto* anticipated--by about a decade--a brief flurry of Mexican "Arabian" adventures in the late 1950s. Part of the cosmopolitan trend in Mexican cinema of the early-mid 1940s, *El príncipe del desierto* is also slightly reminiscent of classic films such as Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*.

The film is not as interesting as it could have been, and this can largely be blamed on the script, which has several problems. First, the film is told in flashback, with Lucila shown reading Achmed's journal. Right away, this signifies that the movie won't have a happy ending--either Achmed is going to be killed, or he'll renounce Lucila for reasons of state, or something. Additionally, after a very brief flashback scene to Lucila and Achmed as children in Arabia, at least the first third of the picture's running time is spent in Mexico, achieving only two things: Achmed and Lucila meet again and fall in love, and Lucila clashes with her father over this. It's not until we get to "Arabia" that there is any action, intrigue, exotic scenery, and so forth, thus *El príncipe del desierto* gets off to a very slow start. The rest of the picture isn't too bad, with a modicum of action, lots of sinister goings-on, torture, swordfighting, and such, but it was a long time coming.

As a child, Lucila lives in Arabia with her parents, and makes friends with Arab boy Achmed. Before she leaves, he gives her a necklace. 20 years later, Achmed and his retainer Giafar visit Mexico. He's the prince of his...tribe? Country? Region? On the train, Achmed meets Sra.

Monroy and her grown daughter Teresa, who is interested in the handsome, rich foreigner. When they arrive in Mexico City, Achmed is invited to a party at the Monroy home, and meets Teresa's cousin



Lucila, who *just happens* to be the same Lucila who was Achmed's childhood friend! What a small world! Achmed and Lucila fall in love, which causes some problems: Achmed is Muslim and Lucila is Christian, Achmed has responsibilities in his own land (his rival Omar is stirring up trouble), and Lucila's father opposes the relationship. Achmed is urgently recalled to Arabia, but Lucila promises to follow.

Back in the desert, Omar spreads tales of Achmed's dalliance with an infidel. He convinces Abdalah to



support his cause, and to terminate the arranged engagement between Achmed and Abdalah's daughter Salna, whom Omar covets. When Achmed arrives, his men foil an ambush by the rebels. Lucila shows up but is

kidnaped by Omar and Salna, who use her as bait to capture Achmed. Salna changes sides and frees Achmed and Lucila, at the cost of her own life. Achmed kills Omar but is mortally wounded himself. Lucila returns to Mexico, alone.

*El príncipe del desierto* sets up various conflicts, but gives most of them rather short shrift. The Mexican section plays out both as a rocky, cross-cultural romance (although Achmed dresses in Western style and isn't a stereotypical "Arab," at one point he says "neither race nor religion" matters, which suggests these *are* issues) and as a mild romantic triangle (Achmed briefly courts Teresa, but dumps her for Lucila, which bothers Teresa and her mother, particularly when they learn he's a wealthy prince). In the Arabian part of the movie, there is political intrigue—Omar is a sinister usurper, but much of what he says is true, Achmed *is* neglecting his people to consort with a Christian woman in another land—as well as



personal rivalry between Omar and Achmed, with the spurned-woman Salna added to the mix. The final sequences are the best in the movie: florid

melodrama with Lucila and Achmed in the dungeon, Omar ordering Achmed to be flogged, Salna begging for his life and being cruelly mocked and then fatally stabbed by Omar, a protracted sword duel between the two men as Lucila dashes around locking doors to keep Omar's men out, the (too late) arrival of Achmed's forces and a large, pitched battle, and so forth.

An interesting thing about *El príncipe del desierto* is its fair-minded portrayal of the various Arab characters, and particularly their Muslim religion. There is no proselytising in the movie, Lucila and Achmed apparently have no problem in their relationship, even if others don't like it: the Arabs especially don't appreciate the idea of their leader having an affair with an infidel (there is even a curious flashback-fantasy sequence in which a storyteller relates the tale of a Greek woman who seduces a good Muslim man, with fatal results). However, the film doesn't portray the Arabs as fanatics or heathen savages

(there is even a scene in which they are shown praying) and Achmed doesn't "see the light" and convert to Christianity (although it's possible the tragic ending of the picture forestalled any such problems, as did the death of the Muslim-Christian pair of lovers in *En los tiempos de la inquisición* earlier the same year).

The performances are generally good, although Abel Salazar has little to do other than be handsome and stiffly profess undying love for Malú Gatica. Gatica sings two songs, clumsily inserted into the picture, and is satisfactory in the acting department, but Esperanza Issa and René Cardona Sr. steal the show as the irate-then-repentant Salna and the evil Omar.

The production values are decent: this was shot at the then-new Estudios Churubusco (coincidentally, Abel Salazar had starred in the first movie made there, *La morena de mi copla*, in 1945) and while the sets aren't huge and elaborate, they are adequate and not cheap-looking. There are sufficient extras when needed, and the costumes and so on are satisfactory. The Churubusco studios were a top-flight facility (partially financed by RKO) and while *El príncipe del desierto* is a little studio-bound (there are only a few exterior shots) it is a glossy, good-looking film. [Unfortunately, the version shown on the Cine Nostalgia channel had muffled sound which at times made the dialogue difficult to understand.]



### El colmillo de Buda [Buddha's Eyetooth]

(Orofilms-Prods. Dyana, 1949) *Prod:* Gonzalo Elvira; *Dir-Scr:* Juan Bustillo Oro; *Orig. Play:* Pedro Muñoz Seca; *Photo:* Jorge Stahl Jr.; *Music:* Gonzalo Curiel; *Prod Mgr:* Alberto Zacarías; *Prod Chief:* Guillermo Alcayde; *Asst Dir:* J. López Portillo; *Film Ed:* José W. Bustos; *Art Dir:* Xavier Torres Torija; *Camera Op:* Carlos Carbajal, José León Sánchez; *Lighting:* Horacio Calvillo; *Photo FX:* Jorge Benavides, Juan Muñoz; *Sound Dir:* James L. Fields;



*Dialog Rec:* Javier Mateos; *Music/Re-rec:* Galdino Samperio; *Makeup:* Margarita Ortega

**Cast:** Ángel Garasa (*Exquisito Chorro*), Fernando Cortés (*Benítez*), Amalia Aguilar (*Adjacapatra*), Sara Montes (*Egdisa*), Consuelo Guerrero de Luna (*Emérta*), Charles Rooner (*Mr. Elder Hale*), Rafael Alcayde (*Prince Kalamor*), Fernando Galiana (*cult member*), José Baviera (*Rajah Perotunkatagaya*), Nicolás Rodríguez (*Mebombo*), Eugenia Galindo (*Botama*), Francisco Reiguera (*old cult member*), Max Langler (*Locmé*), Luis Mussot (*Tinako*) Julián de Meriche (*cult member*); *exotic dancers:* Turanda, Tayluma, Medalia, Gina, Silvia; Salvador Quiroz (*Adjacapatra's servant*), [Armando Arriola] Arriolita (*"Martínez"*), A. Brillas, Tarzán Sánchez, Humberto Rodríguez (*"Nicotino"*), Gladys Vasconcelos, Juan José Laboriel (*black palace guard*), Jorge Danieri (*palace servant*), "Hombre Montana" (*gorilla Galaor*), Stefan Verne (*gong striker*)

**Notes:** *El colmillo de Buda* was based on a Spanish play Juan Bustillo Oro had seen around 1920. Bustillo Oro



adapted this to the cinema as a vehicle for Luis Sandrini, but the Argentine comedian was under contract to Filmex, and when that company demanded too much money for his services, Spanish actor Ángel Garasa was given the part. Garasa had played leading

roles in a handful of Mexican films of the 1940s, but was more often used in support of other comedians like Cantinflas, or as comic relief. In a curious coincidence, Luis Sandrini did star in a film based on a Pedro Muñoz Seca play in 1949, *El baño de Afrodita*, which went before the cameras about 3 weeks before *El colmillo de Buda* started production.

The stage origins of *El colmillo de Buda* seem obvious: the first two "acts" take place in Mexico City, while the concluding section is set in the fictional Far East nation of "Frangistan." While the film is not shot in a "stagey" manner--Bustillo Oro varies his shots and keeps the pace brisk, although this is a dialogue-heavy picture--no particular effort has been made to "open up" the work, with the majority of the Mexico City sequences taking place in the home of Mr. Hale, and the Frangistan scenes largely limited to some palace interiors. These sets are well-appointed and reasonably spacious, but there are only a few of them.

Mr. Elder Hale is a British collector of Oriental antiquities, who has moved to Mexico to escape the clutches of the cult called "the Sons of Buddha." They are after him because he stole their most precious relic, the Eyetooth of Buddha. He also abducted princess Egdisa and intends to marry her. Keeping Egdisa company are Adjacapatra and their maid Botama. When an attempt is made on Hale's life (a shot is fired and a knife is tossed through his window), his servant Tinako says the Sons of Buddha have tracked them to Mexico.

Hale's butler Benítez pays a visit to his friend, the lazy and impoverished Exquisito (and his irritable wife Emérta). He makes a proposition: Exquisito will take the job of Hale's butler on Benítez's night off, Benítez will disguise himself as Hale's guard-gorilla and attack his employer, only to be defeated by the "brave" Exquisito.

Hale will certainly reward Exquisito handsomely and Benítez will get half the cash. Wouldn't you know, as in so many other similar situations in movies, Benítez fails to show up in his gorilla costume and Exquisito



unknowingly fights the *real* gorilla. This convinces Hale that Exquisito is fearless and invulnerable and he hires him as his bodyguard. Exquisito refuses until Benítez lies and says it's all a joke to entertain Hale, that there will never be any danger. Hale gives Exquisito the Eyetooth of Buddha for safekeeping.

Prince Kalamor, a secret member of the Sons of Buddha, visits Hale and tries to have Exquisito murdered by one of his seductive aides during a "dagger dance," but



she prostrates herself after spotting the Eyetooth on a necklace. The other assassins are helpless as well: as long as Exquisito has their priceless artefact, they are not permitted to harm him.

However, the Sons of Buddha abduct Emérta and say Exquisito must move to Frangistan or he'll never see his wife again.

In Frangistan, Exquisito lives a life of luxury with many servants (whom he gives nick-names like "Coca Cola" and "Nescafé") and a harem of beautiful women (he also puts on a boxing glove and punches people for no reason, simply because he knows they can't retaliate). He intends to divorce Emérta and marry



Adjacapatra. "Someone" steals the Eyetooth of Buddha while Exquisito sleeps. After an extended sequence in which a variety of exotic dancers perform, the loss of the sacred relic is discovered and Exquisito and Benítez are sentenced to death. However, Emérta reveals *she* has the Eyetooth of Buddha and trades it to the cult in exchange

for safe passage back to Mexico for herself, her husband, and Benítez, and enough money to open a taco shop!

*El colmillo de Buda* is quite diverting, although most of the humour comes from the characters rather than the specific situations or/and slapstick or verbal humour. Ángel Garasa and Consuelo Guerrero de Luna were never less than amusing in their Mexican cinema appearances, and they don't disappoint in *El colmillo de Buda*, playing off each other and the rest of the cast with consummate comic timing and delivery. In one scene, Exquisito even breaks the fourth wall: when the sexy Adjacapatra says she'll be his love slave, he turns to the audience and says, "Sirs, isn't this truly a woman and not that mess [*porquería*] I have in my house?"

There are also repeated gags such as the penchant of the Sons of Buddha for biting their own fists in rage and frustration when their bloodthirsty plans are thwarted. Assassin Locmé is so upset in one scene that he literally falls to the floor and begins chewing the carpet! Other catch phrases and gestures by the cult are also eccentric and amusing. Less effective is the attempted humour of Mr. Hale's malaprop-laden Spanglish (Charles Rooner could speak intelligible, if accented Spanish when need be, but the script has him mangle the language for comic effect).

Special mention should be made of the parade of "exóticas" in the film--the Princess who serves as part of the Sons of the Buddha assassination group is extremely



attractive, and the sequence towards the climax featuring a bevy of assorted dancers (of all skin colours and body types) is also eye candy. In addition to Garasa and Guerrero de Luna, the rest of the cast is



satisfactory: everyone seems to know their place, from those charged with deliberately mugging for the camera to other playing their roles absolutely straight.

Trivia note: a curious rumour persists that Buster Keaton had a cameo role ("Moe" according to IMDB) in *El colmillo de Buda*. This seems highly unlikely, although the famed comic actor had worked in Mexico on *El moderno Barbazul* (which also featured Ángel Garasa) in 1946. Why Keaton would have taken an unbilled bit part in a Mexican movie is different to imagine, and his whereabouts in January 1949 (when *El colmillo de Buda* was shot) can probably be ascertained (his other 1949 movies were all Hollywood productions). Suffice it to say that no one even slightly resembling Buster Keaton (other

than Ángel Garasa, who looks somewhat like the American actor) appears in the movie, as far as I can tell.

The production values are good, although the Frangistan sets are slightly skimpy (albeit not really cheap in appearance). Juan Bustillo Oro's direction is not especially stylish, but it gets the job done. He was perfectly capable of creating eye-catching films (*Retorno a la juventud*, *El hombre sin rostro*, *El misterio del rostro pálido*, etc.) but was also comfortable making zero-degree style pictures when the subject matter required it.

Overall, a very pleasant adaptation of a stage comedy, bolstered by some fine performers and a number of clever and amusing touches.



**El corazón y la espada** [The Heart and the Sword]\* (Prods. García Besné-Campeón Films, 1953)\*\*

*Prod:* Jorge García Besné; *Dir:* Carlos Véjar C. and Edward Dein; *Scr:* Mildred & Edward Dein; [*Adapt:* Rafael García Travesí, uncr.]; *Photo:* Enrique Wallace; *Music:* Antonio Díaz Conde; *Prod Mgr:* Eduardo Sánchez Frausto, Frank Fox; *Prod Chief:* Manuel Rodríguez; *Asst Dir:* Valerio Olivo; *Film Ed:* Carlos Savage; *Art Dir:* Jorge Fernández; *Camera Op:* Felipe Mariscal; *Lighting:* Luis Medina; *Makeup:* Carmen Palomino; *Sound Dir:* Jesús González G.; *Dialog Rec:* José Pérez; *Script Clerk* [*Anotador*]: Ycaro [sic] Cisneros; *Sound Ed:* Teodulo Bustos; *3D Technical Supervisors:* Howard Anderson, Don Carlos López, Russell Ray Heinze; *Fencing Master:* Antonio Haro Oliva



\*aka as *Sword of Granada* (Manson Distributing, 1956?) and *The Naked Sword* (this title was used as early as 1953 in a Louella Parsons newspaper column and some sources indicate the movie was released as late as 1960 under this name).

\*\*some sources (including my *The Mexican Filmography*) cite this as a Mexican-U.S. coproduction but no Hollywood company or producer is credited on the



Mexican print. However, the presence of Edward Dein as co-director suggests the project was conceived as a "crossover" film from its inception.

**Cast:**

Cesar Romero (don Pedro de Rivera), Katy Jurado (Lolita), Rebeca Iturbide (Princess Esmé), Tito Junco (Juan

Ponce de León), Miguel Ángel Ferriz (Padre Angélico), Fernando Casanova (Captain of Caliph's guard), Gloria Mestre (Sara, servant), Victor Alcocer (Caliph of Granada), José Torvay (Caliph's aide), Norma Ancira, Manuel Casanueva (alchemist), Antonio Haro Oliva

**Notes:** a printed credit on-screen and publicity materials cite *El corazón y la espada* as "the First Mexican Film in 3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension," but it looks like *El valor de vivir* went into production at Churubusco one or two weeks before *Corazón* did at the Tepéyac studios. By the time the picture made it to the USA in 1956 (some sources indicate it was released as early as 1954), the 3-D boom was long gone and it was shown "flat," as *Sword of Granada*. [Emilio García Riera says the film never played in Mexico City.]

Interestingly enough, the 3-D Film Archive LLC ([www.3dfilmarchive.com](http://www.3dfilmarchive.com)) indicates it owns the rights to the Spanish-language version (and presumably has 3D copies). *El corazón y la espada* has been recently shown on both Mexican and U.S. television but *Sword of Granada* doesn't seem to be available.

There is a question as to whether *Sword of Granada* was dubbed or if it represents an "alterate" version shot in English: according to García Riera, this was a dual-language production (although he also lists 20th Century-Fox as the U.S. distributor, which doesn't seem to have been the case). Cesar Romero, while of Cuban heritage, was born in New York City and his Spanish dialogue is dubbed by someone else in the Mexican version (he later

made *Mis secretarias privadas* in Mexico and his "odd" accent drew some attention then).

Unfortunately, in whatever language, *El corazón y la espada* is not a particularly good film. The script is hackneyed and minor in scope, the entire movie was shot on cramped interior sets, the cast is small, the costumes look cheap and inauthentic, the action scenes are clumsy, and there are far too many things tossed and thrust at the camera (which looks really stupid in 2-D). Early in the movie, Ponce de León and Pedro creep through a series of narrow tunnels, a sequence which seems as if it *might* have had some visual appeal in 3-D; otherwise, there's nothing other than the aforementioned clumsy, eye-jabbing shots.



During the Moorish occupation of Spain in the 15th century, Pedro and Ponce de León penetrate the castle of the Caliph of Granada. This was formerly Pedro's family home, and he wants to assassinate the Caliph and rally the local population to resist the invaders. Ponce de León, on the other hand, is seeking an amulet called the "Rose of Granada," which is alleged to bestow eternal life on the owner--he's heard the Caliph owns the artifact. Inside, the two men meet captive priest Padre Angélico and thief Lolita, who also have their agendas: Angélico wants to restore the cross to the castle tower, and Lolita believes the Caliph's alchemist has a formula to make gold out of base metals.

Angélico has been commissioned to paint a portrait of the Caliph of Córdoba, to whom Princess Esmé--niece of the Caliph of Granada--has been promised in marriage. Having never seen the Caliph of Córdoba, Angélico paints Pedro's image instead. Esmé is struck by his handsome looks.



When he delivers the portrait, Angélico slips a drug into Esmé's wine so she'll sleep soundly that night, thus allowing the four adventurers to enter the castle through her bedroom window. However, they are captured by the Caliph's guards and taken to the dungeon instead, where they are whipped on suspicion of being Spanish spies.

Esmé finds a map of secret passages in the castle, dropped by Pedro. She uses it to free Angélico, Pedro, Ponce de León, and Lolita. Lolita confronts the alchemist but the man denies he has a formula to make gold. Esmé's betrayal is exposed and she's tortured by the Caliph. In a

battle to rescue her, Pedro reveals his identity to one of the Caliph's men, who switches sides (his father had served with Pedro's father). The Caliph is killed by Pedro in a duel, and dies without revealing the location of the Rose of Granada. Pedro rings the castle bell to summon loyal Spaniards to his side. As the film concludes, he and Lolita embrace.



Although all of the sympathetic characters in *El corazón y la espada* have some sort of back story, these are mostly two or three-line statements tossed in "on the run" and have little or no dramatic bearing on the plot. The majority of the film consists of people dashing up and



down the corridors of the castle, interspersed with occasional scenes of swordplay and torture (you have to hand it to the filmmakers, this isn't just *threat* of torture, people are actually whipped and tortured with knives and they moan and scream in pain, too). The four Spaniards--Angélico, Pedro, Ponce de León, and Lolita--spend a fair amount of time arguing with each other (especially Lolita), but everything is so perfunctory that there's no real sense of tension among the group, no suggestion that their differing aims might fracture their partnership. Lolita is the odd "man" out, constantly clashing with Pedro and Ponce de León--I have to confess



Romero is very obvious. Víctor Alcocer is completely

I expected Pedro to wind up with Esmé and Ponce de León to pair off with Lolita, particularly given the antipathy between the latter two (which in movies usually means they'll fall in love), but the Deins threw me a curve on that one.

The performances are adequate, although as noted above, the dubbing for Cesar

unrecognisable under a fake beard and moustache, although his distinctive voice betrays his identity, Fernando Casanova is mostly wasted until the final moments, Katy Jurado plays a shrewish character and goes through half the movie with smudges on her face, and Gloria Mestre is completely wasted in a bit part as a servant. There is a curious montage of dances and acrobatic acts early in the movie--entertainment for the Caliph--and one suspects perhaps Mestre had a dance number that was trimmed in the final edit (the movie runs only about 80 minutes).

Overall, this is a very minor film without much to recommend it.

#### Additional note:

according to the excellent documentary *Pérdida* by Vivian García Besné, producer Jorge García Besné (her grandfather) intended to make a second 3-D movie in Mexico, this one in English. Based on a story by Lee Hewitt (*Kentucky Rifle*, episodes of "Science Fiction Theatre"), the film was to be entitled *La diosa de Marte* (The Goddess of Mars) or *Morning Star*, and would have dealt with an expedition to Mars to prove that the Aztecs were the descendants of visitors from the Red Planet. Unfortunately, the Calderón family--that García Besné had married into--allegedly used its influence to stymie the producer's projects around this time (including *Morning Star*), as punishment for his philandering. García Besné did continue his producing career, but the propitious moment for this 3D project was lost.



**The Mexican Film Bulletin** is published 6 times a year by David Wilt, 6803 Dartmouth Ave, College Park MD 20740, USA. contact: [dwilt@umd.edu](mailto:dwilt@umd.edu)  
Contents ©2012 by David E. Wilt, except for material already copyrighted, which is used under the Fair Use provisions of the law. Read *The Mexican Film Bulletin* online at: [www.terpconnect.umd.edu/~dwilt/mexnews.html](http://www.terpconnect.umd.edu/~dwilt/mexnews.html)