

Verbena trágica

By Carl J. Mora

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Shortly after the advent of sound films, Hollywood began producing features in Spanish, French and German, but soon found that European audiences preferred seeing the original versions starring popular American stars. Only film production in Spanish, however, became established in Hollywood. In spite of these "Hispanic" pictures' general unpopularity with Latin American audiences, more than 113 were made between 1930 and 1938.

There seem to have been two principal reasons for the non-acceptance by the Latin American publics of the Hollywood Spanish-language films. First, there was the jumble of accents – Spanish, Cuban, Mexican, Argentine, Chilean, and others – which imbued these movies with an air of unreality. For the first time, through the medium of sound films, the average person of one country came to realize how their language was spoken in another.

The second factor that rendered Hollywood Hispanic films unacceptable to their intended audiences was the same one that doomed the making of American pictures in French, German or Italian; the Latin American audiences enjoyed seeing American stars and "would not easily accept their substitution by José Crespo or Luana Alcañiz." Hollywood's "dream factories" had already established the American movie as the favorite entertainment of millions throughout the world, irrespective of nationality or ideology.

A rather interesting film that was made after the regular production of Hispanic films ended was Columbia's "Verbena trágica" ("Tragic Festival," 1938). It starred the eminent Mexican actor, Fernando Soler, playing the role of Mateo Vargas, a Spanish immigrant in New York. As the film begins, we are shown a, or perhaps *the* Hispanic neighborhood in Manhattan, whose multinational residents are making preparations to celebrate *El día de la raza* – Columbus Day. This small, improbable neighborhood is a paean to Pan-Americanism since the inhabitants seem to represent every Latin American country. However, the



The film's stars Fernando Soler and Luana Alcañiz.

principal characters are Spaniards and as the fiesta celebrations – more reminiscent of a typical

Little Italy street *fiesta* – proceed, we see Mateo just released from a short stint in jail for hitting a police man. Mateo is a boxer and neighborhood hero and his return is eagerly awaited by everyone except his wife Blanca (Luana Alcañiz). This is because she happens to be a couple of months pregnant, and since Mateo has been in prison for eight months it does not take him long to realize that something has been going on in his absence. Blanca's lover is Claudio (Juan Torena), Mateo's best friend and fiancé of Blanca's half-sister Lola (Cecilia Callejo).

It is soon evident that the basic problem with all these émigré Spaniards (they are not refugees from the Civil War raging at that time: in fact references to Spain make the country appear completely normal) is their difficulty in adapting to life in New York. Claudio is disgusted because he cannot find a job and has no money to marry Lola; Mateo's problems, as reflected in his unexplained act of hitting a policeman, stem from his homesickness and his unhappiness with American ways – the "noise," the "bluff," the "hypocrisy." The rest of the movie is a melodramatic account of Mateo's finally realizing that it is Claudio who is Blanca's lover; with the street festivities as a backdrop, Mateo pursues Claudio, catches up with him on a fire escape, and punches him, causing Claudio to fall to his death in the street below. This time Mateo's temper and his exaggerated sense of honor have brought him serious trouble.

Directed by Charles Lamont, "Verbena trágica" is interesting in that it seems to be a last-ditch attempt by Hollywood to find some formula that would appeal to Latin American audiences. Although it is difficult to know what kind of distribution the film had in

Latin America, it probably was not extensive. By 1938-39, Mexican filmmaking was well established and expanding rapidly. It was well on its way toward exploiting the Latin American markets that Hollywood had failed to reach with its Spanish-language productions. It is difficult to tell whether “*Verbena trágica*” was designed to utilize Columbia’s remaining Spanish production facilities in an attempt to find a market among Hispanics in the United States. Employing an already-familiar actor like Fernando Soler with a back-up cast of leftovers from Hollywood’s Hispanic heyday would seem to indicate some such intent.

In the late 1930s, the major Hispanic group would have been the Mexican-Americans of the Southwest. This was before the great Puerto Rican influx of the late 1940s and 1950s that was to make New York City a major foreign market for the Mexican film industry; it also predated the much larger immigration, both legal and illegal (of Mexicans, Dominicans, South Americans), of recent decades. The Cuban population of Florida, centered at this time in the Tampa area, was minimal and unimportant as a motion picture market.

In any event, Fernando Soler recalls that when he went to Hollywood in 1938 to make “*Verbena trágica*” and “*El caudal de los hijos*” (“The Fortune of Children”) he was “unimpressed” with either film; the experience served only to corroborate his opinion

that in Mexico they “performed technical miracles.” Yet, whether the Columbia studio executives’ intention was to appeal to Latin American audiences or United States Hispanic audiences, their choice of an aggressively Spanish group of principal characters in “*Verbena trágica*” seems to betray a basic misconception of their market. The imagined problems of Spanish immigrants in New York would presumably hold little interest for movie audiences in Bogota or Lima and perhaps even less for a Mexican-American public in Los Angeles or San Antonio, even if one ignores the fact that Spanish immigration to the United States has always been statistically insignificant. It is true that throughout the film other obvious national types make brief appearances – Argentines, Mexicans and a black man who is supposed to be Cuban or Puerto Rican. Yet such obvious contrivances imbue the entire film with an air of unreality, and “*Verbena trágica*” serves as a fitting epitaph to Hollywood’s ill-conceived and ill-fated attempt to make movies in Spanish for Latin America.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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