

El gran calavera (The Great Madcap, 1949), directed by Luis Buñuel

Among the thirty-two films directed by the Spanish-born iconoclast Luis Buñuel between 1929 and 1977, in France, Mexico and Spain, *El gran calavera* is perhaps the most undiluted comedy of his career. The filmmaker called *películas alimenticias* (bread-and-butter films) those projects he directed from the late forties throughout the fifties, as an exile after the Spanish Civil War, first in the U.S. and then in Mexico, in need to feed his family. The adjective in Spanish is used both ironically and seriously, because these pictures allowed for his filmmaking career to resume after a long hiatus, started by two still shocking Surrealist films in France, *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'age d'or* (1930) and the no less disturbing documentary *Las Hurdes - Land without Bread* (1933). The huge commercial success of *El gran calavera* made possible *Los olvidados* (1950), an unsentimental and brutal chronicle about children in the slums of Mexico City. (*Amores perros* (2000) is, in part, Alejandro González Iñárritu's conversation with Buñuel fifty years later about those in the fringes of society).

Compared to Buñuel's Mexican masterpieces *Él* (1953), *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), *Nazarín* (1959), *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), and other melodramas and satirical comedies like *Mexican Bus Ride* (1952), *El bruto* (1953) and *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1954), *El gran calavera* can be dismissed as a hackneyed job, a white telephone comedy of errors with a by-the-numbers plot involving the downfall of a rich and selfish family, through layers of deception and intrigue. A world made topsy-turvy by a widowed drunkard patriarch Don Ramiro (Fernando Soler) wishing to teach a lesson to his family, becomes absurdly restored at the end, with everybody learning a lesson about the value of work and responsibility. The wealthy are ironized and the poor idealized – broad strokes that would be refined in his next films, showing that in this imperfect world, good and evil are intertwined.

Shot in less than three weeks, this nonsensical comedy, the second of his Mexican period, shows that the seeds of a Surrealist universe shaped by irony and absurdity have been transplanted in new soil: the satirical critique of the bourgeois family, the clash between desire and social conventions, and a counterpointing style that combines a popular film genre with a Spanish realism and acerbic wit. No idealized indigenous exaltation in the leading style of Emilio Fernández, singing *charros* or exuberant melodramas.

Two funny scenes stand out for their wonderful use of sound counterpoint. In the first one, the enterprising working-class Pablo (Rubén Rojo) courts Virginia (Rosario Granados), the millionaire's spoiled daughter, now barely making ends meet as a laundress. The courtship takes place in his van, fitted with loudspeakers for making commercial announcements. The private conversation, full of advances, retreats and

innuendos, is heard by the neighborhood because the loudspeaker has been accidentally left on. This foreshadows the film's climax, a perfectly timed duel between the words of a priest in a fancy church marrying Virginia and the aristocratic bum vying for her recovered fortune, and Pablo, announcing ham and female underwear outside of the church. This juxtaposition of the wedding vows with an over the top commercial speech yields pearls such as: "the chastity of marriage ... is only possible with stockings Sigh of Venus ..."

A wonderful gallery of sharply observed types – the hypochondriac aunt, the gambling uncle, the good-for-nothing son, a no-nonsense physician uncle, the conniving suitor and his over-bearing mother – give the story spice and flair.

Lightweight and fanciful, *El gran calavera* is still a pleasure to watch. The proof is in the pudding: last year Mexican director Gary Alazraki, from a well-known filmmaking dynasty, made *Nosotros los Nobles*, an updated version of Buñuel's comedy. Imitation is, after all, the sincerest form of flattery.

Essential bibliography

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