

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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**WHEN A MEXICAN IS IN LOVE
(THE ARGENTINE COWGIRL AND THE MEXICAN COWBOY)**
Cuando Quiere Un Mexicano (La Gauchita Y El Charro) (1944)
Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre: Comedy

To view: https://youtu.be/U1mUXX_PW2g

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OVERVIEW

Cuando Quiere un Mexicano is one of the earlier of the Jorge Negrete musical comedies, of which he would ultimately make over 40. Juan Bustillo Oro proved himself to be adept at showcasing Mexican culture and appealing to a broad audience of the Mexican working and middle class that had flocked to the “carpas” and now packed movie theaters. Jorge Negrete, who, with Pedro Infante and Javier Solis, formed the “3 Gallos,” represented a tremendous opportunity to expand the musical comedy genre, and record for posterity some of the most beautiful renditions of rancheras of that time. What sets “Cuando Quiere un Mexicano” apart is the “Battle of sexes” and “Battle of cowboys” as a Mexican cowboy (charro) confronts an Argentine cowgirl (gauchita), and they have musical duels as they tussle for dominion and libidinal sparks fly. The highly nationalistic Mexican audience would have delighted in seeing Bustillo Oro exaggerate all the cultural stereotypes of Argentines: their arrogance, self-importance, strange accent, lack of indigenous culture (overly Europeanized). They would have also enjoyed the subversion of social hierarchy as the manservant is foisted into the role of “patron” the wealthy landowner, Don Guillermo del Valle, is treated as though he is a lowly servant. Contributing to the populist appeal of the film is a powerful “Taming of the Shrew” story arc that includes “comedy” that is, in reality, rather disturbing psychological and physical abuse toward women.

SYNOPSIS:

Mercedes Rico is doted upon by her father, a wealthy Argentine business magnate. She is besieged by suitors drawn to her inheritance as much as to her beauty and talent at dancing and singing Argentine sambas. When her father suddenly dies, she finds out that she will not inherit unless she marries within a year of his death. To escape the pressure in Buenos Aires, Mercedes and her assistant, Agripina, fly to the United States. Unfortunately, their plane crashes in the Mexican chaparral near a volcano and a hunting lodge occupied by Don Guillermo del Valle, a wealthy landowner and talented charro singer, accompanied by his assistant, Nerón. Mercedes and Agripina find refuge at the hunting lodge. What ensues is a comedic battle of the sexes and mistaken identity as the insufferably vain and entitled prima donna, Mercedes, clashes with Guillermo (thinking he is the servant, not the owner), and Agripina and Nerón are attracted to each other. As time ticks away toward the one-year anniversary, Mercedes proposes to Guillermo that he marry her. She will pay him \$10,000 for a temporary marriage. He agrees, not for the money, but to torment her. As they bicker, it becomes clear there is real attraction, especially as they sing to each other and improvise the lyrics. They marry, and although Mercedes claims she will never grant Guillermo conjugal privileges, they clash and ultimately engage in a rapprochement, leading to true love. In parallel fashion, Agripina and Nerón profess their love to each other, although Nerón has not yet admitted to Agripina that he’s actually the servant and not the patron.

STORY

ARGENTINIAN RICH LADY The movie opens with scenes of the elite in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Don Santiago Rico is a business tycoon and widower whose daughter, Mercedes, lives a highly privileged life of polo, sport, music and elegant soirees. Mercedes arrives late to an event, dances and sings in jodhpurs, with dozens of suitors clamoring for her attention. Don Santiago chides her for being late. She sings, and her aunt (Tía Raquel) smiles with approval as she invents witty lyrics. Used to being swarmed by sycophantic suitors, Mercedes does not bother to dress up for an event at her home, but instead strides in late, garbed in jodhpurs, implying she has been playing polo



INHERITANCE Don Santiago dies unexpectedly. The will was recently changed. For Mercedes to inherit, she must marry within a year. Otherwise, the inheritance will go to charity. Mercedes decides to travel to the United States. She is accompanied by her assistant, Agripina. The headlines in the Buenos Aires daily newspaper announce the sudden death of Mercedes's father, Don Santiago Rico.



PLANE CRASH The small plane carrying Mercedes Rico and Agripina crashes. Apparently, it killed the pilot and co-pilot, but Mercedes and Agripina are able to walk away. Mercedes and Agripina find the little lodge, knock on the door, and demand to be attended to. They are immediately rejected. Mercedes proceeds to break the French door window to the bedroom. They're in. True to the stereotype of a privileged Argentine elite, Mercedes makes insufferable demands and treats the little hacienda / hunting lodge as if she owned it and their owners were her servants. A number of comical scenes ensue: Mercedes demands dinner, and tries to snatch the grilled chicken off Guillermo's plate in front of him. He slaps her hand away. Mercedes demands a hot bath, pajamas and comfortable beds. There is only one bed and it is Guillermo's. He refuses to share.



MEXICAN LANDOWNER In the meantime, a wealthy landowner, Don Guillermo del Valle, is teasing his comically pompous assistant, Nerón, for wearing formalwear (a tuxedo) at a humble, one-bedroom hunting lodge. The plot device of the servant believing himself to be of a higher social rung is found in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The servant sporting formal attire, and speaking in a flowery, literary mode is also found in Bustillo Oro's *Solo Veracruz Es Bello*.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY Mercedes sees Nerón's formal attire and automatically assumes that he is the patron, and that Don Guillermo, garbed in charro attire, is a "criado" – a lowly ranchhand / servant. The haughty and vain Mercedes proceeds to treat Nerón with deference, but she shows nothing but disdain for Guillermo. Not wanting to be bothered by the attentions of the haughty, demanding, and overbearing Mercedes, Guillermo hatches a plan to play along with the mistaken identity and pretend that Guillermo is the criado / servant and that Nerón is the owner and the boss.



MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE As the deadline for her marriage is approaching, Mercedes thinks it would be convenient to manipulate Guillermo, who she considers a penniless drunk, to marry her so she can claim her inheritance. It would be a “marriage of convenience” with NO marital privileges.

Mercedes offers a contract of marriage to Don Guillermo, principally because she thinks he is so lowly and poor that he is the most easily suborned into a marriage of convenience. She offers him \$5,000. He is offended. She raises it to \$10,000 and he agrees. They marry at a justice of the peace / notary’s office.



MARRIED LIFE The wedding party is beautiful, with mariachis and dancing. But, back at the little hacienda, Mercedes locks Guillermo out of the house. He responds by breaking in the window in the same manner that she originally entered. Guillermo professes his love and tells her that he has fallen profoundly in love with her. Mercedes is haughty and disdainful. Mercedes taunts Guillermo and states that he has simply married for money. She has no respect for him. She continues to say hateful, insulting things. Losing his patience, Guillermo slaps her in the face. She bursts into tears and embraces him, as true passion boils forth (or mutual Stockholm Syndrome sets in).



THEMES

Vanity: Mocking snobbish, haughty, self-preoccupying individuals is a characteristic of the highly popular films of the Grovas-Bustillo Oro association which successfully appealed to the working and middle class. The films were released not long after land reform and dramatic restructuring of the Mexican economy and land ownership which gave new impetus to dreams of the middle and working class. In *Cuando Quiere un Mexicano*, there is also a nod to Mexican identity and nationalism as one of the most absurdly haughty and obnoxious characters is the Argentinian Mercedes Rico, whose behavior, accent, and outfits distance her from the Mexican countryside in which she finds herself. Her sense of entitlement is exaggerated for comic effect, but even so, it reinforces the fact that Mexican values include humility and generosity. The other character who demonstrates a ridiculous level of pride and vanity is Nerón, who takes his imperial namesake (the Roman emperor, Nero) to heart. He dresses in formal attire in the country on a hunting trip, and uses abstruse references and vocabulary. For example, when referring to the painful situation of wanting something just out of reach, he refers to “the torments of Tantalus” which is a wonderfully illustrative allusion, but unlikely to be understood by those who had not read Greek and Roman mythology.

Social class: When Mercedes reacts in horror when she sees Guillermo (whom she thinks is the servant) cheerfully eating at the table and occupying the patrón’s position, Guillermo continues eating and placidly replies, “We’re more democratic here in Mexico.” That makes the film seem subversive with respect to social hierarchy and class. However, the film is actually more normative than that, and it places the wealthy landowner charro firmly at the top of the hierarchy.

Battle of the sexes: The *Taming of the Shrew* motif is taken almost to the extreme, which ordinarily would not be accepted by the audience, but since Mercedes is from Argentina, and Argentinians had a reputation for considering themselves superior to everyone, the exaggerated entitlement and rude behavior was somewhat believable, and when she finally capitulated it was comical. Mercedes and Guillermo battle each other, but much of it is impelled by sparks of

attraction, and the audience sees the chemistry and their affinity, not only through music, but also because each is from wealth, although Mercedes does not realize it.

Love: The two eligible bachelors and the two eligible young women are flung together in an isolated “island” where it would have been unusual if they had not fallen in love, particularly with the romantic inclinations of Nerón and the fact that Mercedes is, at heart, a romantic. The relationship they form is disruptive to the close relationships that Guillermo had with Nerón and the one between Mercedes and Agripina. The fact that they are employed does not actually change the fact that they could be considered tighter and more authentic love bonds than the “romantic love” that flows from chemistry and societal norms. The Guillermo-Nerón / Mercedes-Agripina relationships are long-term, dedicated and there is even a bit of costume coding / cross-dressing that suggests “queer” relationships. Mercedes wears jodhpurs as she torments and rejects her suitors, while Nerón dresses as quite the dandy.

CHARACTERS:

Guillermo del Valle	Wealthy Mexican landowner
Mercedes Rico	Wealthy Argentine heiress
Nerón de Jiménez y de González	Guillermo’s assistant
Agripina	Mercedes’s assistant
Don Santiago Rico	Father of Mercedes, who dies unexpectedly
Tía Raquel	Mercedes’s aunt

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Guillermo del Valle: The wealthy landowner “charro” who is in a small hacienda hunting lodge in the middle of the Mexican countryside. He is accompanied by his assistant, Nerón.

Traditional Mexican values: Guillermo is the embodiment of the “charro” who not only dresses in the tight pants, cropped jacket, and ornamented sombrero, but also sings rancheras both as solos and with mariachis. His values are those of honor, dignity, and humility.

Quick-witted: Guillermo is quite quick-witted and defeats the upstart intruder, Mercedes, at every turn. He has quick wordplay with her, and also thinks ahead about how to have her moment of comeuppance.

Stubborn: When Guillermo is refused his conjugal rights after marrying Mercedes, he insists, not precisely because of attraction to her, but because he stubbornly refuses to be defeated in their battle for dominance.

Mercedes Rico: The wealthy heiress who is accustomed to being indulged by her father and doting aunt, which resulted in a woman with an insufferable attitude of entitlement.

Haughty: When Agripina and Mercedes are marooned in the wilderness, they assume that any small hacienda or lodge would happily offer them aid and give them a privileged position, simply because she has come to expect it. Her expectations are so extreme, that they become very comical.

Enterprising: When Guillermo refuses to help her, she insists, and quickly decides to use her high-heel shoe as a hammer to break the French door window and simply walk into his bedroom. She is also enterprising when she offers Guillermo \$5,000 pesos to marry her so that she can secure her inheritance.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW:

1. The “haute monde” occupied by Santiago Rico, Tía Raquel, and the adored Mercedes is one of privilege and connections to European culture and traditions. Describe three scenes that illustrate European “elite” traditions in Argentine society. They can include polo, soirees, ballroom dancing, and more.
2. There is a nationalistic pride in the respective traditional cultures of Mercedes and Guillermo. Compare and contrast the elements of Argentine zambas sung by gauchos vs. Mexican rancheras sung by charros with a mariachi band.
3. Describe the ways in which gender roles are challenged in *Cuando Quiere un Mexicano*. For example, when Mercedes arrives wearing jodhpurs from playing polo, what are the messages conveyed by the clothing? When Nerón finds traditional “tapatía” dresses for the Mercedes and Agripina, how does he challenge traditional gender roles?
4. Describe how the “real” conversation between Mercedes and Guillermo takes place through their songs and singing, and how their improvised lyrics communicate their true feelings more than their verbal sparring when not singing. Explain how the improvised lyrics tie into traditional Mexican songs and festivals that encourage a kind of “duel” between singers, with winners and losers. How does the “duel” dynamic play into the plot and tension in *Cuando Quiere un Mexicano*?