

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

THE SETS OF THE PRINCIPAL / Las Tandas Del Principal (1949) Juan Bustillo Oro (Mexico)

Genre: Comedy

To view the film: <https://youtu.be/A2OvC0XAP-Y>

Contents (Overview – Synopsis -Story – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Although the protagonist is a comedienne in a traveling theatrical show in late 19th century Mexico, *Las Tandas del Principal* is in reality a dramatic defense of the “carpas” – the tents and traveling theatrical troupes, which were generally held out to be of “low” cultural value, and to appeal to society’s working class. When Carlos de Gracia, the son of a wealthy member of the elites, falls in love at first sight with Lucero Reyes, he must overcome prejudice and negative attitudes about female stage performers. Like other Bustillo Oro films featuring the “clowns” and broad comics of the 40s and 50s, *Las Tandas del Principal* exposes the snobbery, hypocrisy, and chauvinism of the elites to appeal to working and middle class audiences. By being set in the times of President Porfirio Díaz, the president credited for dramatically modernizing Mexico and building the gorgeous arte nouveau buildings and public spaces in Guanajuato, Mexico City, Querétaro, and other cities, there is also a sense of nostalgia that resonates with other Bustillo Oro films. The film’s primary rhetorical goal is to fight the common conception that women who perform on the stage are of low morals and character. The film also comes to the defense of those who fall in love with people of different social classes.

SYNOPSIS

Carlos de Gracia, the son of the very wealthy Don Juan de Gracia who has political ambitions, must marry in order to obtain his inheritance. At the same time, Don Juan de Gracia has expressed his frustration with his son’s unwillingness to marry. Don Juan wants grandchildren. In the meantime, a traveling theatrical show has come to town. It features the stunningly beautiful comedienne and dancer, Lucero Reyes. Carlos de Gracia sees her and falls in love at first sight. When he finds out that she is a comedienne in a traveling show, he realizes he cannot marry her because his father would disinherit him. He does, however, ask her if she’ll be his mistress and “kept” woman as soon as he marries. She is outraged and refuses. Don Juan announces he will marry the first young woman he encounters who meets his criteria. After being so humiliated, she and Don Juan’s friend, confidante, and personal doctor, Serafín, cook up a scheme to make Don Juan approve of a marriage between Carlos and Lucero. She pretends to have fallen on her head in an accident. Serafín declares she cannot be moved. Moved by her situation (and her beauty), Don Juan offers to let her stay until she recovers. As planned, he falls in love with her and proposes marriage. She tells him her real identity, and the situation with his son. Knowing that this could be a shortcut to having grandchildren, and impressed with her beauty, grace, and wit, Don Juan hatches their own plan. Don Juan tells Carlos he plans to marry Lucero. Wracked with jealousy, Carlos crashes the ceremony, just to find that Don Juan has just married Lucero – on behalf of Carlos, by means of a proxy and power of attorney. After machinations with the documents, Carlos signs a legally viable power of attorney, after declaring his love for Lucero, and the fact that he does not want to face life without her. They kiss, and begin their life together. Serafín remarks to Don Juan that he’ll now get the grandchildren he so desperately desires.

STORY

Carlos de Gracia The traveling show has come to town. The film starts as Dr. Serafin and his good friend Carlos de Gracia take a stroll in Chapultepec Park, and they come across the tents and then the theaters for traveling vaudeville and other theatrical acts. Don Carlos, the son of an influential elite, is discussing his desire to go into politics and be the successor to Porfirio Díaz, the president of the Mexican republics. He is discussing his ambitious plans with Don Serafín, a friend who is also a doctor. Carlos de Gracia sees the beautiful Lucero and falls in love at first sight.



Lucero on the Stage: Gorgeous, talented, and adept at all the French nouvelle vague – can-can, Moulin Rouge dances, and more. She also performs sambas from Argentina and perhaps a tango. Her songs and dances are witty and high-energy. Lucero is a brilliant performer whose specialty is comedy. She is adept at all the traditional elements, but her quick wit and deep identification with the audience make it possible to watch her with understanding and compassion.





The Indecent Proposal: Carlos proposes that Lucero be his mistress. She smacks him in the face (good for her). Carlos explains to Lucero that he could never marry her, due to her position in society, his political aspirations and the fact that his father would disinherit him. However, he will marry the first woman he meets. Once he has his inheritance restored, he will set her up in an apartment and they can be a couple. Lucero is outraged.



The father Don Juan: snobbish, privileged, and creepily obsessed with having grandchildren and at the same time finding a teen-age bride. He is not a sympathetic character. Don Juan de Gracia discusses his desire for grandchildren and that his son should marry; if Carlos does not marry, he will not inherit anything. The doctor Serafín, the butler Sotero, and his son, Carlos listen.



Father wants his son to get married to Lucero. The best way to get Carlos to act like a decent human being and to propose marriage to Lucero is to stir up feelings of desire and competition. Thus, Don Juan blows kisses to Lucero during her performance. Then a civil ceremony is set up for Lucero to get married to Carlos. Lucero and Don Juan participate in a wedding ceremony. However, they do not marry each other. Don Juan uses a power of attorney document to have Lucero marry Carlos by proxy. Carlos bursts in. He's too late. He examines the POA. Fraud! Forgery! So, they sign a new one. Then another due to more theatrics. Finally he and Lucero are married.



THEMES

Social class. When Serafín visits the traveling theatrical show with his friend, Carlos de Gracia, they are “slumming” – indulging in what they consider to be rather low-life or low-class entertainment. Both Carlos de Gracia and his father Don Juan de Gracia express disdain and mild revulsion at the idea of being seriously connected to a woman in such traveling vaudeville shows, although Carlos did not hesitate a second in proffering Lucero an indecent proposal – that she be his “kept” woman.

Marriage. Marriage with a person of the proper rank in the social hierarchy is considered important to maintain one’s own standing and to achieve goals (politics, etc). Carlos de Gracia recognizes that in order to achieve his political goals, he must be married, and it needs to be with someone with the right pedigree. At the same time, Don Juan de Gracia is eager to have grandchildren, but he wants them to be produced through marriage and not through illicit affairs.

Love. When Carlos de Gracia sees Lucero, it is love at first sight. He is smitten by her grace, beauty, poise, and ability to handle herself in an impertinent conversation. Lucero is equally taken, but is more pragmatic and knows that she must always be aware of society’s rigid social strictures that would preclude a member of the elites marrying a member of the “louche” classes.

Patriarchy. The dynamic of the entire story revolves around patriarchy and its consequences. As the paterfamilias, Don Juan can dictate to his son who to marry, when to marry, and how and when to have children. If the son does not comply, he will be disinherited. At the same time, in a patriarchal society, Don Juan, who appears to be in his late 60s or 70s, can announce that he will only marry a person who has the following criteria: a 17-year-old who is uneducated, naïve, and pretty. The proposition is sordid at best, criminal at worst.

Women’s virtue. The double standard is in full force in this film. Carlos proposes to the very intelligent and talented Lucero that she lower herself to be a “kept” woman, completely dependent on him. He can be as promiscuous as he wishes, and no one thinks worse of him. She, however, must demonstrate her absolute chastity. It’s hard to believe she was the least bit interested in a lout like Carlos, even if he did seem passionately in love.

CHARACTERS

Don Juan de Gracia	Influential member of the elite
Lucero Reyes	Comedienne in a traveling theatrical show
Carlos de Gracia	Don Juan’s son and aspiring politician
Serafín	Doctor and personal friend
Martina	Lucero’s assistant
Sotero	Butler
Lupe	Sotero’s daughter
Nicolasa	Maid

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lucero Reyes: A beautiful and talented performer in a traveling comedy / vaudeville-type traveling theatrical spectacle, she is a comedienne who sings, dances, and performs a wide range of musical styles, all of which were popular in the late 19th century.

Proud: Lucero maintains herself with pride and holds herself with dignity. She refuses to lower herself and sully her reputation. She is proud (but not prideful).

Talented: Lucero’s musical abilities are impressive – she can perform a wide repertoire of songs and musical pieces; in addition, she can dance, both solo and with her troupe. When she sings the Argentine sambas, her delivery is very moving.

Determined: Lucero is determined to avenge the affronts to her dignity, and to let Carlos de Gracia know that not only does she love him, she is worthy of his love. She does this by making him compete with his own father for her love. After she wins over Don Juan de Gracia, he comes to accept her as a worthy candidate for a spouse, even though she was associated with an often disreputable profession (vaudeville).

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Who is Carlos de la Gracia? What is the impression that the film makes? Is he strong, weak, vulnerable, rigid, etc. Express your opinion and then find supporting examples and include them.
2. Describe Lucero Reyes. What does she look like? What is her profession? How does she dress? Describe specific elements of her dress. Why does this matter? As you develop your response, consider the way in which Serafín hints that she may have low morals, and how her appearance and behavior militate against that notion.
3. Describe the theatrical pieces that are performed by Lucero Reyes. What do they have in common? What are the things that indicate tradition? For example, show how she engages the audience in singing with her in the first song, and then how she dances with other dancers in the Moulin Rouge-inspired can-can, and the Argentine “gaucho” songs.
4. How does this film subvert patriarchy by showing how it corrodes happiness both in males and females? Describe the process in the following cases: Don Juan de Gracia, Carlos de Gracia, Lucero, and Serafín.
5. Discuss the ways in which women are encouraged to marry for money, and how their male protectors or managers attempt to influence the process. You may include the butler, Sotero, and his daughter, and Lucero Reyes, and her “papacito” (the manager).