

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

DANZÓN (1991)

María Novaro

OVERVIEW

Danzón, directed by award-winning María Novaro, is a ground-breaking yet gently slow-paced film that traces the journey of a long-distance operator. Julia, whose long-time dance partner, of whom she knows very little, fails to appear at the dance club where, every Wednesday evening for years, they have danced the stately “danzón,” a Cuban dance which originated from Spanish courtly dances. When Carmelo disappears, Julia’s danzon-patterned life, where men lead and women follow, and gender rules regarding dress and comportment are very rigid, is turned on its head. Julia cautiously takes the lead in the dance that is her own life. In her journey, which takes her to the tropical coastal city of Veracruz, Julia stays in a rather seedy hotel which was once a magnificent colonial-era stately home. There, in her encounters with people she never expected to meet, she learns about herself and the freedom and joy that comes with self-acceptance. Released in 1991, *Danzón* was one of the first films to humanize the socially stigmatized.

CHARACTERS

Julia Solórzano	A long distance telephone operator, devoted to danzón
Doña Ti	Manager of an old hotel in the old part of town in Veracruz
Susy	An entertainer who cross-dresses and lives in Doña Ti’s hotel
Silvia	Julia’s adult daughter who lives with her
Rubén	Young tugboat captain in Veracruz
Carmelo	Julia’s dance partner for the danzón

THE STORY

Wednesday Evening Danzón: Julia dances with Carmelo, her dance partner with whom she has won a number of competitions in danzón, a highly-mannered and elegant dance developed in Cuba and based on Spanish courtly dances. She wears a white dress, high heels, and a white flower in her hair. Carmelo wears a Panama hat, a white suit and white patent dress shoes. They do not speak, but are in perfect harmony with each other. The other dancers are mainly middle-aged or elderly and it takes place in a working class neighborhood in Mexico City in a dance club.

Life as a Long-Distance Operator: The next morning, Julia goes to work as usual to a Mexico City government telecom facility where she is a long-distance operator. She works with a hundred or so other women. Her daughter, Silvia, works with her. The atmosphere is warm and the relationships between the women are close.

Life at Home: Julia lives with her daughter and two other women in housing provided at a low cost for government employees of the national telecommunications company. The apartments are very basic, and in the shared environment, it is difficult to have individual dreams.

Carmelo Is Missing: Julia goes to the social club as usual, but Carmelo is not there. She is quite worried, and comes to realize that she knows very little about him. She does not even know if he is married. She knows he has a brother in Veracruz, and decides to take time off work to travel by train to Veracruz and to search for him.

Arrival in Veracruz: As opposed to the polluted air and crowded streets of the high-elevation Mexico City, Veracruz is at sea level, and the tropical atmosphere is dramatic change. As she

steps off the train and walks toward her hotel, suitcase in hand, her khaki pencil skirt and her white button-down blouse contrast dramatically with the people in the streets of Veracruz, who are wearing shorts, short skirts, and sandals.

The Hotel: Julia is booked in a grand, old hotel, built during colonial times. It is near the port, and has become quite seedy, which creates a rather jarring juxtaposition with its wrought iron balustrades, sweeping stairs, gorgeous hand-painted tiles, and large, tropical wood-framed windows. She speaks with the manager, Doña Ti, who lets her know that many of the residents are prostitutes and entertainers in the red light district. One of the entertainers is Susy, a cross-dresser (“travesty”).

Meeting Susy: Julia gets to know Susy, who wants to know exactly why Julia has come to Veracruz, but more deeply, about the condition of her heart. She is surprised that Julia knows so little about a man who has had such an important place in her life for so many years, and she attributes it to the soul-harming anonymity of a big city life. Susy encourages Julia to relax, open up, and stop running from her own feelings and dreams.

Transformation: Susy is appalled by Julia’s severe “uniform” type of wardrobe and lends her a lovely, flirty red dress. Susy also gives Julia a makeover, completing the transformation with bold, red hoop earrings, bold red lipstick, more dramatic makeup and eye treatment. Finally, she places a red flower in Julia’s hair.

A Walk along the Pier: In her red dress and bright new look, Julia decides to walk along the boardwalk (the malecón), and then along the pier. As she does so, she notices the romantic names of the ships: “Puras Ilusiones / Pure Illusions (or “pure fantasy”), “Amor Perdido” (Lost Love) and “Lágrimas Negras / Black Tears.” It is clear that under the bright blue sky and the strong sun, Julia is gaining confidence in her ability to handle emotions. She is unshackling herself.

Meeting Rubén: In a small park, Julia happens to meet a young man with long, flowing hair and a confident attitude. They sit down to have a fruit juice smoothie (liquado) together. He is a tugboat captain, and is intrigued by her. The chemistry is palpable, and we can see that Julia is awakening.

A Journey on the Tugboat: Rubén invites Julia to visit the tugboat. They have a physical encounter, which leaves Julia with mixed feelings, partially because he is much younger than she is, and partially because she knows her responsibilities wait for her in Mexico City.

An Answer regarding Carmelo: Doña Ti has a large circle of acquaintances. After a few false starts, she was able to find Carmelo’s brother, and also what happened to Carmelo. Apparently, he has been falsely accused of stealing from the restaurant where he worked, and he has been embarrassed to go back to the social club for danzón.

Planning to Return: In a heart-to-heart conversation with Susy, Julia comes to recognize that some of her confusing feelings are happening because she is not used to feeling vulnerable. Her life in Mexico City is designed to provide barriers – locked gates – to her heart, and the fact that she knew so little about her long-time dance partner, Carmelo, was just one example of that. She must return to Mexico City, but now she has more self-knowledge, and with that new awareness, her life can be open to more possibilities.

Preparations: Julia packs her suitcase and lovingly places in it the things that are emblematic of her journey of self-discovery. As she packs the bag, the light shines in through the windows of her spacious, colonial-era room, and one has a sense of groundedness and completeness.

Full Circle: The film closes with Julia at the social club where she dances the danzón with a participant in the event. She is wearing a red flower in her hair, and she has a sense of

confidence. Suddenly, a person asks for the dance, and it is Carmelo. She smiles, and they dance the danzón together, in harmony.

THEMES

Awakenings: For Julia, the journey to find out what happened to her dance partner, Carmelo, is one filled with awakenings. First, she becomes aware of long-suppressed feelings. Second, she becomes aware that she has repressed her artistic or expressive self, and has also been uncomfortable with her full identity as a woman. Her awakening involves a gradual sense of herself as a woman with a mature sense of self, where a love of beauty and physical self-expression have not completely died.

Journeys: Julia embarks on a journey to find Carmelo, but in doing so, she finds herself. She does this through encounters with people and new places which give her a chance to look at life in a new way.

Dance in Society: The film explores the role of social clubs where people meet to dance a certain kind of formal ballroom dance, and where long-term friendships are forged. Further, the film explores the way that dances, particularly formal ballroom dances, with very clearly defined and constrained roles, mirror those of society. In the case of the danzón, men and women have very different roles, as well as guidelines for their dancewear. The men wear formal light-weight suits, with dress shoes and often with a Panama hat. The women wear formal dresses, jewelry, high heels, and a flower in their hair. The degree to which this is reflected in society, either by following the pattern or subverting it, is a key issue in the movie.

Social Stigma: Julia finds herself in the middle of people who have been subjected to social stigma. First, is the hotel which is an elegant, but very old colonial mansion located in a seedy old district near the port of Veracruz. The manager is aware that her rooms are being used by prostitutes, but instead of trying to chase them out, she tries to provide support for them. Susy, a transvestite entertainer, is also the subject of tremendous social stigma. Julia encounters these individuals and comes to learn more about herself and her own feelings about love and life through conversations with them.

Acceptance: The film rehumanizes people in society who are often dehumanized through social stigma. The conversations with them, and the fact that they are so kind to Julia, endears them to the audience.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Julia Solórzano: The protagonist of the film, Julia is an attractive 40-something long distance telephone operator who works for the national telecommunications company in a large office in Mexico City. The highlight of her week is to dance the danzón with Carmelo, a reliable and talented partner, but about whom she knows very little. The protective emotional carapace she has developed is shattered when Carmelo does not appear. Julia looks for him, and becomes aware that she lacks any meaningful awareness or self-knowledge.

Sensitive: Julia does not think of herself as particularly sensitive; in fact, her daughter thinks of her mother as rather distant and impenetrable. However, the true Julia is deeply sensitive, and has been protecting herself emotionally after the loss of her husband, and the fear of disappointment in love. Her Wednesday evenings dancing danzón with Carmelo have provided an outlet, although it has been garbed in protective armor.

Compassionate: Julia is very compassionate when she learns of Susy's treatment, disappointments, and pain. Far from rejecting her for being a "travesti" (transvestite), Julia engages in deep, heart-to-heart talks.

Journey of Self-Discovery: In the tropical warmth, the echoes of centuries of loves and losses in the magical colonial-era hotel, Julia gently awakens and learns the landscape of her heart and the shapes of the patterns of her beliefs, attitudes, and dreams, many of which were lying beneath the surface, undiscovered.

Responsible: Although she finds a deep sense of satisfaction in Veracruz and her heart is awakened, Julia never loses sight of her core responsibilities, and she is eager to return home to her daughter and her job in Mexico City as soon as she could.

Acceptance: As Julia talks to people and offers complete acceptance, she begins to find a way to accept herself; in fact, she starts to realize that she has not always accepted herself, and needs to do so.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Director María Novaro has remarked that the world of the “danzón” is a very rigid, very conventional world. In it, men and women follow different structures. Women have to dress in a particular way, and men have to dress in another. Men are in charge, and women must follow. For many dancers of the danzón believe that real life is like this and they live their lives accordingly. In the movie, *Danzón*, Julia follows Carmelo, but she also learns to follow her own heart. Please describe scenes in which Julia shows that she is open, generous, accepting, and takes the lead in her own life.

2. When Julia meets Rubén, the young sailor, she feels the need to invent a rather ridiculous series of prevarications in order to seem younger. Later, she gets trapped in her own inventions, which is humorous. Describe the scenes, what happens, why they are humorous, and how they create a sense of warmth with the audience.

3. One thing about Julia’s personality is that is willing to take a journey and to be open to experiences. Describe the scenes in which she shows that she is willing to learn from others’ perspectives. What kind of film-making techniques are used to show Julia’s openness, and her growing connectedness to others? Describe the lighting, the costumes, the location, and the camera shot sequences (close-ups, establishing shots, etc.).

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES

Please note that the following illustrative scenes follow the sequence of the film, and they illustrate not only aspects of the characters, but also the film techniques and mise-en-scene.

Each screen shot has a time stamp to help locate the scene within the film.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

In the opening scenes of *Danzón*, María Novaro uses medium close-ups to frame the relationship of Carmelo and Julia. The highly restrained and formal dance reflects the formality of the relationship which is shaped by mutual respect, and reflects an idealized world.



Play (k)
Danzon - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

An establishing shot of the Mexico City national telecommunications center with the telephone operators with their backs to the camera. This effectively demonstrates the factory type of environment. This shot is followed by medium shots and medium close-ups and two-shots where the individual workers working together are suddenly rehumanized, and you get a sense of the warmth and trust between the women who work for the telecom company.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

Julia arrives in Veracruz. She is walking from the train station toward a park that has a locomotive from the first Mexican Veracruz railroad, a shot that immediately suggests a journey into another world, into the past, and into a tropical coastal climate, which affects the way people dress, live, and relate to each other.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

In her first night in Veracruz, Julia runs from the Malecon (boardwalk) to the Veracruz beach (Gulf of Mexico). She takes off her shoes and feels the wet sand beneath her feet. This long shot, with the subject having her back to the camera, is a technique that emphasizes the individual's relationship to the world around her, and also the sense of relative anonymity



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

Julia has a heart-to-heart talk with Susy, a drag queen and cross-dresser who identifies as a woman. Very generous and compassionate, Susy encourages Julia in her quest to find out what happened to her dance partner, Carmelo. They are sitting in Susy's dressing room. This medium close-up two-shot is also a partial over-the-shoulder shot which provides a sense of intimacy and also gives the audience the sense of participating in an intimate moment.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

In this stunning point of view shot, Julia looks up at a ship docked in the harbor in Veracruz, where she has embarked on her journey to find Carmelo, her long-time dance partner who has been falsely accused of stealing money from the restaurant where he has been employed. She looks up in response to the attention of the ship's crew. This ship, like the others in the film, has a name that refers to love. "Lagrimas Negras" means "black tears." The point-of-view over-the-shoulder shot allows the audience to share the feelings of awakening that Julia is feeling.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

In this extreme close-up, which follows the long-shot of Julia looking up at the ship, Lagrimas Negras, the audience sees a transformation. When she arrived in Veracruz, Julia wore a conservative skirt and blouse combination, and wore subdued makeup and unadorned hair. Now, with a pretty red dress borrowed from Susy and bold, bright red earrings and lipstick, and a bright red flower in her hair, Julia is blossoming as she learns more about herself and her own feelings.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

In this medium longshot two-shot, Veracruz tugboat captain Ruben guesses that Julia's daughter (who has remained behind in Mexico City) is six years old. In reality, she is twenty. Julia demurs to correct him, and then pauses, blurting out that she is five years old. Flustered and flattered by Ruben's comments, Julia responds, hiding her face a bit with her fan. In this angled two-shot, shot low, the scene traces Julia's growing awakening about herself and the world.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

Susy and Dona Ti discuss the fact that Julia will return to Mexico City after finding the answers she was looking for. The mise-en-scene emphasizes the sense of place – a colonial-era building near the port converted into a low-cost hotel. The tiles on the walls, the painted stucco and the wrought-iron balustrade frame the two and place them in a context of faded glory, but with dreams still possible. Susy is wearing her day dress with a conservative wig. Dona Ti is dressed in a way fitting her role as the owner and manager of the hotel.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

Julia packs her suitcase in anticipation of returning by train to Mexico City after her stay in Veracruz. Her hotel room is in an old colonial building near the port of Veracruz, and it places Julia in a setting rich with tradition and history. The tile floor, the wooden armoire, the blue-painted bathroom, the large windows that open to let in both sunlight and the evening breeze imbue the scene with warmth, and give the audience the sense that Julia's journey of self-discovery was facilitated by having contact with the echoes of the past.



Danzón - María Novaro (1991) HD 1080p

Having returned to Mexico City, Julia revisits the dance club where she and Carmelo danced the danzon. Because he had not yet returned, Julia danced with another partner. In this scene, Carmelo has just returned, and has cut in, asking Julia for the dance. The film ends as it began, with Julia dancing with Carmelo, her partner about whom she knows very little. This time, though, she knows much more about herself, which is visually represented by her joyous red flowers in her hair, and her more colorful dress.