

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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TIT FOR TAT / Donde Las Dan Las Toman (1957)

Juan Bustillo Oro (Mexico)

Genre : *Comedy*

<https://www.facebook.com/lolabeltran/videos/2049682465257404>

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OVERVIEW

With *Donde Las Dan, Las Toman (Tit for Tat)*, director Juan Bustillo Oro utilizes some of the physical comedy he used with Cantinflas in *Ahi Está el Detalle (You're Missing the Point)* and *Por Ellas Aunque Mal Paguen* to create a “battle of the sexes” comedic farce, that also embraces Mexican culture. As a showcase for traditional “ranchera” music and two of the most popular Mariachi singers of the time, *Donde Las Dan, Las Toman* is deeply populist in its sensibilities, and yet subversive in its nostalgic look at the vestigial colonial artifacts: the hacienda, the notion of the patron (and trading places), and strong, independent women who are in some ways better off without men. Punctuated by impassioned singing by both Antonio and Isabel, the film contains both elements of screwball comedy and that of Mexican Expressionism as Bustillo Oro incorporates chiaroscuro and extreme camera angles in the crumbling Hacienda Las Animas.

SYNOPSIS

Isabel Morán, a famous singer of Mexican ranchera music, is devastated to find out that her fiancé, Carlitos, has left for Europe with another woman. Outraged, she swears off men, although she must marry quickly to inherit her father's estate. Disgusted, she decides to hide from the world by going with her assistant, Anita, to her ranch, Hacienda Las Animas. Little does she know that Carlitos also tricked her into selling her ranch to the wealthy Antonio del Valle, who, coincidentally, has just sworn off women after an expensive divorce. Accompanied by his assistant, Pompín, Antonio retreats to the same ranch. Antonio, who is tired of gold-digging women, pretends to be a deadbeat with a drinking problem. Although she finds him repugnant, she thinks Antonio will be a convenient patsy for the paper marriage she needs. In the meantime, they clash as they struggle to find food, cook, clean, bathe, and co-exist in the dilapidated ranch. When not fighting, they find they sing together beautifully. Agreeing to the temporary marriage for 5,000 pesos, Antonio marries Isabel. Antonio completely wins her over with a song, and once back at the hacienda, they find they have learned to love each other through their singing. Isabel realizes he is not really a deadbeat, and later, after they declare their true love, she discovers he is wealthy. The film ends with a beautiful duet.

STORY

Fiancee Carlos visit Isabel. Isabel is tearfully dramatic as she asks Carlos where he has been. He explains he has been out on business travel, and he has invested the money she gave him wisely. He also asks for power of attorney to be able to sell the ranch she will inherit. He then gives her a cheap bauble before disappearing as Isabel returns to the stage to complete her performance.



Conniving "Carlitos": Carlos pays a visit to Antonio del Valle, a wealthy businessman, to interest him in buying Isabel's ranch. Antonio is out, having gone on a bender in response to a painful and expensive divorce. Antonio eagerly agrees to buy the ranch so he can escape from a world populated by women, all of whom target him because of his wealth. He can't believe that Carlos would enjoy going to Europe with a new lady friend, Rory. Carlos scoffs at him: "Instead of letting them exploit me, I exploit them, and in the meantime, I have a good time."



Isabel is angry Upon learning that Carlos is leaving for Europe on a trip with a new lady friend, Rory, Isabel explode with rage. Isabel dramatically announces that she is swearing off men and plans to pick up and move to Hacienda Las Animas to get away from the world. Isabel responds by telling Anita to be sure to pack all her beauty creams and lotions. She swears off men, and decides to go to the ranch. Isabel extols the virtues of isolation – it's remote, and the only way to get to it is on foot after the paved road ends.



Travel to Hacienda Las Animas: After packing 4 or 5 enormous suitcases filled with clothes and a many-months supply of lotions, creams, makeup and other beauty products, Anita and Isabela are off to the ranch. Hacienda Las Animas, which means “Ranch of the Spirits (or soul)” is reputed to be haunted, and no one will help them bring their bags. So they have to lug them on their backs as they make their way and the sun sets, and the screeching of owls, and the howling of wolves and coyotes.



Hacienda Las Animas – ghosts or worse? Isabel and Anita finally arrive at the dark, dank, falling-down hacienda that was built in colonial style, but which is clearly in a state of collapse due to disuse and abandonment. Both are convinced that they hear ghosts, and see the flickering spirit lamps, along with movement and shadows. Both Isabel and Antonio are disgusted to find they are not alone, and worse, the things they were trying to escape are right there. Pompín, who immediately fancies Anita, explains very loudly and clearly that he is all for women. In the meantime, when out of earshot from Isabel and Anita, Antonio tells Pompín that they should trade places and let everyone think that Pompín is the owner and the boss. *Daily challenges – food, water, life:* Life in a crumbling, possibly haunted Hacienda is no picnic. The only food has to be hauled in from far away, and the only water for bathing is in the river. There is also the issue of ownership. Antonio explained that he purchased the Hacienda from Carlos. Isabel explains that she did not actually have title, given she would inherit it from her father's estate, but only under the condition that she was married, and it had to take place by the 30th.



One bedroom for everyone: The hacienda is in bad shape. In fact, there's only one usable bedroom, and even worse, only one bed. Isabel promptly claims it for her own and settles in. Antonio sees her tucked in for the night and demands that she vacate "his" bed immediately. She does not, so they arrange a truce and each occupies one half.



Business proposition: Isabel speaks to Antonio about marrying her for a short period of time, just so she can inherit her father's estate. "I'll pay \$5,000 pesos," she offers. He demurs and asks for 10,000, to which it appears she agrees. Antonio and Pompín make arrangements for the wedding, which will take place in town. Antonio insists that Pompín find witnesses who do not know who he is so that he can keep up the pretense that he is a flat broke deadbeat.

The wedding: The wedding takes place in the small colonial town in front of a justice of the peace ("notario"), with just a few witnesses. They leave to go to the plaza where there is a small reception. After a brief wait, Isabel hears the music from a group of mariachis.

Songs Leading the musicians is Antonio, dressed in full "charro" regalia. He sings, and astonishes her with his breath control, and a falsetto combined with his natural baritone, as he sings the famous "ranchera," "La Noche y Tú" (You and the Night). It is a beautiful, passionate song with lyrics that tell a story and communicate feelings very directly. She is clearly moved by it. Antonio and Isabel do not communicate them in conversation; in that case, they simply bicker and jockey for control in rather comical exchanges. Instead, they communicate their feelings through their songs. Mariachis are featured in *Donde las dan, las toman*, and, as in other films by Bustillo Oro, such as *In the Times of Porfirio Díaz*, the enamoured, love-sick person who commissions the mariachis is often portrayed as inebriate and annoying. Part of the Mexican cultural tradition is to enact a dramatic rendition of the suffering the lover experiences, and also the privileging of an altered state that intensifies emotions – usually drunkenness with tequila. As a result, the lovestruck mariachi is often portrayed as emotionally immature.



Love grows While the marriage between Antonio and Isabel has been one of convenience (“It’s just for “la lana” (the wool / a slang term for cash)”), it is clear that there are true sparks between Antonio and Isabel, which become very clear in the way they sing to each other. Nevertheless, on their wedding night, Antonio disappears, and Isabel grumbles about men. *Qué bonito!* Antonio walks away from Pompín to stand outside the door and to break into song. He sings “qué bonito!” (How lovely!) to which Isabel responds. He walks in, and she is sitting up in bed, responding to his song, and then they sing a duet, their voices blending perfectly. At the end of the song, they kiss, and the film comes to a close: It is the perfect happy ending.



THEMES

Duplicity: Antonio and Isabel have been exploited and betrayed by their love interests to the point that they are ready to swear off romantic love, which they conveniently codify as the other gendered person in the couple. The problem for them has been duplicity, but perhaps more specifically, gold-digging. They are fed up with being targeted for their wealth, and also for having nothing but the most vacuous of relationships with the individuals who, while initially seductive, have nothing in common with them. As a case in point, Carlos is a smooth womanizer, whose sleek, suave exterior masks a cold, sociopathic attitude toward women (“I exploit them, then discard them when I’m done with them.”). When Isabel is rightly outraged by his lies (“I’ve been on a three-day business trip”), he mocks her feelings or simply patronizes her in cooing, soothing tones. When Isabel and Antonio meet, although they bicker and fight over control, they are able to communicate on a deep level, and they can express not only their feelings, but also their ideas about the meaning of life by means of their songs.

Battle of the sexes: When Antonio and Isabel find they’re in the same Hacienda, and more to the point, they both think they own it, they have a point of contention. More than that, however, is the fact that they have painful feelings about being betrayed in love. What is interesting about this film is that it is ostensibly a “man vs woman” kind of screwball comedy, following on the heels of many such Hollywood films. However, the distrust between the genders really has more to do with manipulating the opposite sex with feigned romantic love in order to have access to their wealth. In *Donde las dan, las toman*, the long-lasting relationships of trust are between members of the same gender, and are not about romantic love, but a deeper dedication, respect, and love that is built on service and duty. One can give the film a closeted reading, and suggest that it is a coded movie about same-sex long-term relationships, particularly with Pompín’s constant use of first-person plural, and the trust and emotional intimacy, along with long-term virtual housekeeping on the part of Pompín (for Antonio) and Anita (for Isabel).

Mexican Identity: This film, along with others directed by Juan Bustillo Oro, is a celebration of Mexican identity, and as such, it includes many of the aspects of Mexican culture and tradition that are considered integral to Mexican culture and identity. *El Ultimo Mexicano*, *Acá las tortas!*, and *Por ellas, aunque mal paguen*, and *Las aventuras de Pito Pérez* are just a few. In *Donde las dan, las toman*, the culture of the ranch and the “ranchera” are at the heart of it. The fact that Hacienda Las Animas is in ruins and Isabel and Antonio sing while wearing elaborate and highly stylized costumes (rather than the working attire of the ranch), signifies that the ranch that is at the heart of Mexican identity, is already at least a half a century out of working order, and that the actual Hacienda is more of a romantic or nostalgic dream than the experience of most Mexicans. To romanticize the Mariachi musical tradition, the “ranchera” song form, and the hacienda “great ranch” with its basis on great holdings of land and a patriarchal power structure, contains a political statement as well, because such holdings were broken up in the Mexican Revolution, and then the ensuing land reform gave ownership to *ejidos* or communal blocks in 1917, and later in the 1930s and 40s, there were further land redistributions. The idea that one person might own a Hacienda outright is a nostalgic tip of the hat to the grand “latifundios” established by the Spanish Viceroy, and a colonial grip on not just ownership, but also the racial structure of ownership. It is very telling that both Antonio and Isabel are of European descent, while Anita, the assistant (or servant) seems to potentially be mestiza. The inherent contradiction embodied in the idea of embracing symbols of the colonial era (the music, the charro, the hacienda culture) while instituting dramatic economic and political change (land reform, voting rights), seems to make the love for the tradition all the more intense, perhaps because anyone can sing rancheras or wear the highly decorative outfits, and thus assume the identity and lay claim to the attributes of nobility, intense passion, fearlessness, and expressiveness.

Mariachi / “ranchera” musical structure and tradition: The narrative of the film and the “ranchera” musical structure, along with the way that it is performed, are intriguingly parallel. Isabel sings with a technique that is characteristically, “ranchera” - somewhere between operatic and a fiery speech declaimed on the eve of a battle. Antonio also uses the techniques that are

purely Mexican – laughter that sounds something between a demonic spirit laughing and loud, harsh weeping. The pace of the film is equally elevated and adrenaline charged, with dramatic flourishes. For example, when Isabel completes her performance of “Cu-cu-ru-cu-cu, Paloma,” she returns to her dressing room, where her performance as she interacts with Carlos perfectly matches the emotive patterns of the song. Similarly, as Antonio finishes his intensely charged performance of “Tu y la Noche,” there is the kind of emotional rapprochement that the song itself embodies, along with a theme of unity, transcendence, and idealized love. As opposed to Hollywood musicals, *Donde las Dan, las Toman*, takes a more operatic approach, where the libretto provides time to enact on the stage and in dialogue what the songs accomplish with music and lyrics.

CHARACTERS

Isabel Morán	Famous singer of Mexican “rancheras”
Antonio del Valle Pompín	Mariachi singer who purchased the Hacienda las Animas Antonio’s sidekick and assistant
Anita	Isabel’s assistant
Carlos	Isabel’s duplicitous former fiancé

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Isabel Morán: Isabel Morán is an adored, famous singer of traditional Mexican “rancheras,” whose mastery of the genre is unsurpassed, but is not very knowledgeable about investments, or other financial matters, and worse than that, is easily duped by scheming gold-diggers and con artists.

Proud: As a famous performing artist, Isabel is proud of her craft, her reputation, and her own sense of human dignity. When Carlos, whom she affectionately called “Carlitos,” deceived her, was unfaithful, and financially exploitive, her sense of pride was wounded. Not only had he shamelessly used her, he also jeopardized her inheritance because she had to marry within a certain time period to be able to inherit the property.

Romantic: Isabel is intensely romantic, despite the fact that she has renounced men (and by extension, vulnerability felt when falling in love). Her romanticism is tied not only to mental images of a perfect world, but also to the intense feelings generated by expressions of art. She displays her profound romanticism in her vocal performances, and the rancheras that she sings embody a full range of emotive possibilities, from tearful despair to sublime joy.

Impulsive: Instead of coldly and calculatingly plotting her revenge after Carlos fleeced her and then left for Europe with another woman, Isabel impulsively announced she was renouncing all men and leaving civilization to live at her family’s old, long-abandoned ranch, Hacienda Las Animas. Aptly named, Hacienda “Las Animas” could mean Ranch of the Spirits or Ranch of Souls, the ranch offered a chance to regroup and recover. She committed to the plan, and when she found out just how collapsed it was, and that it was rumored to be haunted, it was too late to change plans,

Psychologically healthy: As opposed to many other heroines in films by Bustillo Oro, Isabel is psychologically healthy (albeit temporarily angry with men), and she does not fall into the trap of female masochism. In *La Loca de la Casa (Resident Madwoman)*, for example, the heroine sacrifices herself to marry a man she does not like in order to extricate her father from terrible debt. In other films, such as *La Mujer Ajena (The Wife of Another)*, the married woman who has an affair with another man, leaves the husband she as relegates herself to a life of poverty, to be a social outcast. In contrast, Isabel announces she is looking out for her own mental health by going to the ranch.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. *Donde las dan, las toman (Tit for Tat)* features songs that are very important in telling the story of the relationship between Isabel and Antonio. Select three songs from the film and describe the emotions represented, and how they advance the story, given the trajectory of the plot, and the staged revelations of the characters' inner life
2. Isabel is a strong, capable woman, and she advances not only her own career but also the culture and heritage of Mexico. Select three scenes in which Isabel demonstrates the possibility of female empowerment in Mexico.
3. Hacienda las Animas is presented in a rather comical way, thanks to the shrieks, howls, and the shadowy gothic lighting and presentation. Describe how introducing aspects of horror films and the horror genre become comical in the film, and how it helps develop the romantic comedy aspects of the film.
4. Much to Antonio's annoyance, Pompín continually refers to actions taken by Antonio as an individual as "us." Find two examples of this in the film and explain why its use is comical. Then, take a look at potential for coded commentary on the nature of relationships and marriage. What are possible interpretations, and how might they subvert conventional notions of friendship and marriage?