

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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TWO FROM THE CRIMINAL LIFE / Dos De La Vida Airada (1948) Juan Bustillo Oro

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/AHPQlguU554>

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OVERVIEW

With *Dos de la Vida Airada (Two from the Criminal Life)* director Juan Bustillo Oro showcases the talents of the comic duo Manolín and Shilinsky in a **picaresque comedy** that follows their misadventures. Remarkable for its incorporation of the “**carpas**” – the Mexican tent shows that provided inexpensive entertainment to the working class – the film turns the world into a kind of “carpa” where Manolin and Shilinsky can perform their funny and often absurd routines. Manolín plays a “dummy” figure, while Shilinsky is the long-suffering “brains” of the operation, who grabs opportunities that almost always result in disaster. The duo explore identities as they impersonate different types in society, such as trade unions and union members, Mexican mariachis, and the elite class, and in doing so, they also make a pointed satirical cultural commentary. In their “Ship of Fools” adventure, they lampoon lazy and inept furniture movers who trade union members; itinerant Mariachi musicians who refuse to play the songs people want; and finally, would-be jewel thieves, who actually foil the efforts of a real thief. Along the way, they mock the elites of society: an upper-class patriarch who is nothing more than a useless drunk, a spoiled heiress and her gold-digging husband who is nothing more than a well-dressed sneak thief. The film is entertaining, and artistically quite intelligent as Bustillo Oro maintains a snappy pace in his direction and intensifies the humor by introducing cross-generic elements from film noir, expressionism, and surrealism.

SYNOPSIS

Dos de la Vida Airada (Two from the Criminal Life) is a buddy film comedy involving two best friends, Manolín and Shilinsky, who work together as musicians. The story follows the catastrophes they create for themselves as they attempt to scam their way into paying gigs and relationships, beginning at a Mexico City tent show where, costumed as Russian folk dancers, they suddenly appear to mock the locally revered mariachi music. On the run, they try their hands at being furniture movers, mariachi musicians for hire, and burglars. Caught in the house they intended to burgle, the owner, a young woman, forces Manolin to pretend to be the despised gold-digger husband she married against her father’s wishes and insists Shilinsky be a waiter. When her father arrives, the gold-digger husband sneaks in to steal the father’s wedding gift, an expensive diamond necklace. Shilinsky and Manolin foil the thief (after being accused of the theft themselves) and are off to more misadventures.

STORY

The “carpa” / tent show: The film begins in a Mexican “carpa,” or tent show, many of which were owned by Russians fleeing war and revolution in their own country, where they had made a living running traveling circuses, many of which had tent shows featuring variety acts. Shilinsky, of Russian origin, is part of that group, and he uses his Russian background to create entertaining caricatures of Russian folk songs, dances, and costumes. Accompanying Shilinsky is the quick-witted foil or “dummy.” As in Shakespeare’s plays, the “fool” is often the truth-teller and the quick-witted shape-shifter, who can change identities, revealing a kind of reality about the world.

Shilinsky asks Manolin, who responds, “The other part of the guitar!” Shilinsky, who is Russian, sighs, “It’s not a guitar! It’s a balalaika!” And thus Manolin and Shilinsky perform their song and dance and do traditional Russian folk dancing. Toward the end of the performance, Manolin emits a loud shriek, in a bloodcurdling rendition of the Mexican “grito” – an almost sacred cry that ties to Mexican identity. They are thrown out of the “carpa” theatre. A scene from outside the “carpa” or tent show. The tent shows were highly popular because they were inexpensive sources of entertainment for the working class. Inside the tent show, Manolin and Shilinsky are dressed in Russian peasant outfits, and they are playing traditional Russian musical instruments. Later, they will sing and dance in traditional Russian folk dance style. Breaking into what Mexicans would consider an almost blasphemous attempt at a Mexican mariachi “grito,” Manolin and Shilinsky are forcibly booted from the tent.



Piano moving Manolin has gotten themselves into problems and can't pay for the furniture. It is repossessed. But, they are able to find a job moving furniture. A drunken man (Don Laureano Palamar) stumbling from a bar offers them a job moving a piano. They decide to represent themselves as a part of a furniture movers' union, a satirical view of unions. In their guise as members of a labor union for movers, Manolin and Shilinsky explain that they need time to rest and also to thoroughly plan the job (and be paid for the planning stage). Don Laureano's girlfriend is appalled. In a comical parody of labor union members moving a piano (and making loud noises as they do so), Needless to say, Manolín and Shilinsky are absolute disasters at moving furniture. They drop the piano many times, and go up and down stair, using a great deal of physical humor. Manolin and Shilinsky move the grand piano up the stairs. It is not long before they have dropped the piano several times, reducing it to scraps of wood the size of kindling. After reducing the piano to the equivalent of kindling, they decide to move on to a different profession.



Mariachi Singers Manolin and Shilinsky rent mariachi costumes with the intention of getting paid for playing for weddings, parties, restaurant guests, and cantinas. They happen upon a store emblazoned “We rent suits,” and with that, Manolín and Shilinsky rent flashy “charro” (Mexican cowboy) suits that are typically worn by musicians in mariachi groups. Shilinsky plays violin quite competently, and Manolín the guitar. However, their songs are goofy novelty songs.



The car They leave the restaurant. The valet parking attendant makes a mistake and delivers the drunkard Don Laureano’s car to them. Shilinsky proceeds to rifle the contents of the car. He finds a wallet in which there is money. In the wallet is a letter. It has a description of jewelry – an inventory of sorts – in the house of Doña Lolita. They head to the address in the letter. Lolita herself inside, along with her very belligerent maid, Socorro, who is having no luck with two strangers in mariachi suits.



Impersonation Shilinsky and Manolin find themselves at the house of a young woman named Lolita, whose name and address were in the glove box. The letter mentions an extremely expensive diamond necklace. Lolita asks Manolin to impersonate her fiancé, Jacinto: Socorro, who is first impressed with the fact that they have mariachis as visitors, is less impressed with Manolin and his habit of ineptly waving a pistol. Socorro wrests the pistol from Manolin and tells the two of them that they will now do something useful. They decide to ask Manolin to impersonate Jacinto, the fiancé, who is not in the good graces of Don Laureano Lolita introduces Manolin, absurdly costumed in golf pants (knickerbockers) and a silly argyle & reindeer sweater. In the meantime, the father continues to drink. He gives Lolita a wedding gift – a diamond bracelet.



The Thief Lolita's husband is a sneak thief who his planning to rob his wife. He crouches behind a sofa as his father in law guzzles alcohol. The real Jacinto has been lurking in the shadows. He observes that Don Laureano has given Lolita diamonds, and he observes her putting it in a safe located behind an oil painting. After they leave the room, Don Laureano pours himself more alcohol, and the real Jacinto (sneak thief) opens up the safe and steals the diamonds. They find that the diamond bracelet is gone. Don Laureano staggers out, drunk and shooting his pistol irresponsibly – attracting the attention of the police.

At the Police station Don Laureano, arrested: Stumbling around drunk and shooting pistol – he is arrested. He promptly describes how he was robbed. His description sounds as though he had delirium tremens, as he shouts about mariachis, a son in law dressed in a reindeer sweater, and then a waiter and a man in satin, running out. Jacinto (the real one) who is a sneak thief, had an accident as he tried to escape. Manolin and Shilinsky are caught up with him and promptly arrested. Accused of the theft of the jewelry and standing in the police station, Manolin and Shilinsky look angrily upon the real thief, Lolita’s husband, Jacinto. The real thief says he caught them in the act – but of course, that is not true. They arrive just in time to clear up the mystery. Jacinto (respectable looking, but a thief) is duly charged with theft, and also served with divorce papers.



THEMES

Friendship: Manolin and Shilinsky have a friendship forged by a “partners in crime” and “two against the world” kind of shared intensity, of both survival and a gleeful disrespect for polite society’s norms and customs. They operate on the margins of society, with their friendship acting as the centering force in a microcosm that they themselves create. The microcosm is an ever-changing one, with reality constantly in flux, and a constructivist philosophical underpinning which is undermined at ever turn because the “center does not hold” (in Yeatsian terms). The center that does hold is the friendship that adversity and absurd misadventures only serve to further solidify.

Cross-Dressing: Manolin and Shilinsky constantly change identities and self-fashion their identities through costuming which often is an absurd parody of the original. They start in the “carpa” tent show dressed as Russian peasant, although not even Shilinsky would be considered a Russian peasant with folk dances and music. They use the act to make money and establish a place in the world, but the lack of authenticity keeps it as an obvious act, and thus dependent on the graces of a capricious paying audience. Their next act is to be union furniture movers, to which Shilinsky self-costumes, wearing the outfit usually worn by furniture movers. Manolin does not bother, and continues wearing his satin Russian peasant shirt, as they proceed to destroy a grand piano in its staggering trajectory up stairs. After fleeing the scene, the duo rents Mariachi

costumes and they join the flocks of Mariachis who prowl the streets, bars, and restaurants, looking to play for tips, or to contract for a wedding, birthday or celebration. Again, the duo misses the mark, and Manolin wears the outfit, but without the defining adorned sombrero. Finally, Manolin is induced to play the role of husband of Lolita, and asked to wear a ridiculous outfit, a parody of the golfing outfits favored by the elites, with argyle-cum-reindeer design sweater, baggy knickers, and silly shoes and socks.

Mexican Identity: Like many of the films directed by Juan Bustillo Oro, *Dos de la vida airada* deals with issues of Mexican identity, particularly with authenticity vs. opportunistic simulacra. After performing a Russian song and dance routine, Manolin suddenly erupts in a “grito” with which mariachis begin and end their songs. His rendering is considered blasphemous and they are run out of the carpa. The most comical example of this in the film occurs when Manolin and Shilinsky rent charro outfits to pose as mariachis so they can play on the street and in restaurants for tips, or contract to play a wedding, birthday or other special occasion. There is a comical scene in which Bustillo Oro lampoons the mariachi-for-hire culture when a large number of independent mariachis for hire swarm an elegant limousine as it approaches, and they compete for potential mariachi work. When one rather jaded man complains that none of the mariachis for hire are doing anything unique, his daughters point to Manolin and Shilinsky, who, dressed in their rented charro suits and with one proper sombrero between them, are singing a silly novelty song. The daughters are enchanted (“Oh, Daddy, buy them!”), but the father is less so, presumably seeing them for what they are. With their repertoire lacking of even the most classic standards (“Guadalajara,” for example), and Shilinsky’s at times very thick Russian accent, their performance as mariachis is subversive. For those who consider mariachi music as an important part of Mexican cultural identity, Manolin and Shilinsky should be chased down and severely chastised (which is precisely what happens).

CHARACTERS

Manolín	The “dummy” who is actually quite intelligent, despite first impressions
Shilinsky	Smooth operator “brains” of the duo, but who devises madcap schemes
Lolita	Daughter who married a man who turns out to be a sneak thief
Don Laureano Palomar	Wealthy member of the elite, a chronic drunk
Socorro	Lolita’s maid
Jacinto	Lolita’s husband whom she married against her father’s will

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Shilinsky: A Russian-speaking emigrant from Russia, where he was involved in the tent shows accompanying a traveling circus, Shilinsky is a quick-witted smooth operator always on the lookout for away to make money. His ideas sound good at first blush, but almost always hit some serious speed bumps in the execution. His partner and foil is the “fool” character (as in Shakespeare’s clowns, fools, and other truth-telling sidekicks), Manolín, who blurts out the truth and exposes Shilinsky’s designs in the most awkward moment. Shilinsky dresses in natty suits and nicely tailored shirts. Manolin will wear pretty much any costume, and always looks a bit silly, which again creates a wonderful foil for Shilinsky.

Entertainer: Shilinsky is proud of his Russian heritage, which he exploits at every turn in order to differentiate himself from the other acts in the “carpa” tent show. One notable one involves Shilinsky singing a classic Russian folk song in Russian as he accompanies himself with the balalaika. Manolin, who does not understand Russian, creates a Spanish counterpart, which is quite amusing and a crowd-pleaser. They make great use of physical comedy; for example, when performing Russian folk songs, they break into a caricature of Russian folk dancing, which, in the context of Mexico City, is quite exotic.

Scheming: Shilinsky is quick-witted and willing to fashion himself and Manolin for any business proposition that comes their way, with just a few exceptions – when he feels his honor has been

sullied. For example, when Manolin finds a letter from Don Laureano to his daughter, Lolita, in which he gives an extremely expensive diamond necklace, he is eager to jump in and steal it from them. However, when Jacinto, Lolita's gold-digging thief husband steals the necklace from the safe, he realizes that he and Manolin will be blamed and he abandons his plans in favor of catching and bringing Jacinto to justice.

Optimistic: Like any good performer or street hustler, Shilinsky is the eternal optimist. Part of his optimism derives from the fact that he truly believes in reinvention, and that with every new costume, there is the chance for fresh start with a new identity. For example, just the mere act of donning workmen's clothing that would be used by a furniture mover in a trade union gave Shilinsky the confidence to secure a job. Perhaps one of the more comical moments occurred when Manolin also began to believe in the identity transformation. Manolín may not have been the originator of the idea, but once the plan was in motion, Manolín could be counted on to embrace it and even take it to the extremes. While moving furniture, Manolín suddenly "became" a union member – to the extreme. Other identity transformations occurred when Shilinsky rented mariachi outfits, and then, when he donned a white jacket to work as a server / waiter in Lolita's house.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Describe entertainment in the tent show, including the songs, dance, and interaction. What does the performance suggest about the friendship that Manolin and Shilinsky have. Even though they seem to be opposites (Shilinsky quick-witted, Manolín rather silly), they have a great deal in common. Describe their behavior toward each other and how it demonstrates respect.
2. The costumes that Manolin and Shilinsky wear allow them to assume roles and attempt to earn a living. The act of selecting and donning a costume represents, in this case, an intentional construction of identity. Describe their constructions of identity and explain what transpired in each identity: Russians, unionized furniture movers, mariachis for hire, sneak thieves, and husband-of-convenience.
3. Don Laureano is a part of the elite. He is also a confirmed drunk who staggers around in an alcoholic haze while going about the activities of his day. What does his behavior suggest about the value of the elite in society? In which scenes, how might Bustillo Oro be suggesting that the elite are truly good for nothing? When Don Laureano insults Manolin (when he is pretending to be Jacinto, the husband), describe how Manolin snaps back and openly mentions Don Laureano's drunkenness.
4. Manolin and Shilinsky have created a kind of ideal bubble world where their friendship persists as they engage in different antics and adventures together. They are a comedy duo for their work, but have developed the same kind of communication in their personal life. Please describe three aspects of their friendship. How is their friendship superior to the average marriage or girlfriend / boyfriend relationship? How does their relationship defy the norms and conventions of the day? What might post-feminist or "queer" theory have to say about the power dynamics and roles?