

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE GIRLS' AUNT / La Tia de las Muchachas (1938)**

Juan Bustillo Oro

Link to video: [https://youtu.be/rDUeYN\\_I1So](https://youtu.be/rDUeYN_I1So)

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### OVERVIEW

*La Tia de las Muchachas (The Girls' Aunt)* is a comedic tour de force that savages older, gold-digging men who target vulnerable young women and find a way to force a sanctioned, arranged marriage for their money. What made this film so popular and established Bustillo Oro as a skilled director not only of Expressionistic films, but also highly popular comedic farces was the premise of a young man trying to block the marriage of two beautiful, young heiresses to gold-digging scoundrels by masquerading as the wealthy dowager aunt and benefactress of the young women. Mixed with the notion of science gone wrong or shamelessly mismanaged (powerful hormones that instantly masculinize or feminize), the film's foundation of traditional Mexican cultural values becomes a platform for a comedy that was so popular that it was remade just a few years later in *Fijate, Que Suave* also directed by Bustillo Oro.

### SYNOPSIS

Doctor Fernando Rubio and attorney Lic. Florentino Carrasco are best friends who are just starting their professional practices. They have their offices in the same building, where they often play games with the security guard, and also play pranks on each other. When Fernando discovers a new, powerful elixir, based on concentrates of male or female hormones, he decides to use it to bring men and women an exaggerated masculinity or femininity. Of course, such a powerful drug with such potential for mischief is irresistible to Lic. Florentino, who plays a prank. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Fernando believes he must play a prank on Florentino – for the greater good. Florentino must take the female hormones so he can impersonate Tia Florentina, and block the impending marriage of two sisters, who are being compelled to marry gold-digging rascals, Don Goyo and Don Chema, more than twice their age. Florentino, who is at first outraged to be impersonating Aunt Florentina, quickly sees it has its advantages, as he is able to embrace and kiss the “nieces” in a very familiar way, much to the chagrin of Fernando. The ruse works, and Florentino as Aunt Florentina, successfully gets rid of Don Goyo and Don Chema, who, in fact, end up being committed to an insane asylum. There is a happy ending, as the sisters fall in love with Fernando and Florentino, who cheerfully reciprocate.

## STORY

**GENDER-CHANGING ELIXIR** Fernando, the medical doctor, has found that an elixir created from a highly concentrated formula containing bull hormones, which he claims will work beautifully to enhance the virility of men, and restore women's voices to their sweet, dulcet tones. Unfortunately, the hormone elixir can be put to malign purposes by tricksters, and can have the effect of temporarily switching human genders. Men will have high-pitched soprano voices and will behave in soft, feminine ways, and women will have deep baritone voices, and will brashly swagger about.



**THE GOLD DIGGERS** Aunt Florentina, who lives in Cuba, and has left her millions to her nieces, has been convinced to endorse the proposals of marriage by Don Goyo and Don Chema, two scoundrel gold-diggers at least 20 years older. She expresses the opinion that Tía has no idea how opportunistic their middle-aged suitors are. Don Chema and Don Goyo gloat that they have convinced Tía Florentina's nieces (who will inherit her millions) to accept their proposals of marriage.



**IMPOSTER TIA FLORENTINA** Fernando has a plan to break up their sordid scheme. He sedates Florentino, but not until after he has administered a dose of female hormones. While Florentino is passed out, Fernando calls in a team of beauty experts to apply makeup, painted fingernails, jewelry, and a lovely wig to accompany the ladylike dress and sensible shoes. Florentino regains consciousness and learns, to his horror, that he is dressed as a woman and has a high voice. He also has a swishy walk and effeminate gestures. Florentino/a shrieks and her voice is shrill.



**THE GOLD DIGGERS TRICKED** When Goyo and Chema realize that Tia Florentina is very wealthy and would be happy to give her fortune to her husband, they totally lose interest in the heiresses and instead target the source of their fortunes, the wealthy Tia Florentina. Each suitor meets privately with Tia Florentina (the faux), and to each, Florentina states that she just wants to be loved and if she could be loved, she would give all her millions to the love of her life. To that, each (Goyo and Chema) assures her that they are the only true love. There is a showdown between mariachis serenade her with mariachis and sing traditional mariachi songs, but with comical lyrics.

The marriage must proceed. Goyo and Tia Florentina stand at the altar and exchange vows. The next scene involves the wedding night – Goyo proceeds to the matrimonial bed for some good old connubial bliss when he discovers that Florentina is Florentina. He is horrified and runs screaming. As Goyo runs out, he runs into the sheriff and law officers who are looking for a lunatic, escaped from the local asylum. As he screams that his bride is a dinosaur, the sheriff grabs him. Right on his heels comes Chema, who also shrieks that the bride is an ogre. The sheriff turns to Fernando and Tia Florentina and states with satisfaction that instead of knabbing to escaped mental patients, he has two. The real Tia Florentina gives her permission to Fernando and Florentino to marry Lola and Lupita.



## THEMES

**Masculinity:** When Lic. Florentino wakes up after having been dressed in women's clothing, with full make-up, manicure, and wig, he is outraged and fearful. What happened to my masculinity? He asks Doctor Fernando, outraged. Fernando, his best friend and medical doctor, is not concerned. He assures Florentino that it is purely temporary and there will not be any permanent effects. Nevertheless, even as Florentino masquerades as Tia Florentina, with high voice and campy gestures, his behavior becomes even more culturally masculine, and he shamelessly embraces and caresses Fernando's fiancée strictly to torment and assail Fernando's own masculinity.

**Marriage:** When Goyo masterminded the scheme to convince the absent benefactress of Lolita and Lupita to marry him and the wastrel drunkard, Don Chema, she approved because she thought they were honest and transparent. The film exposes the fact that in Mexico of that time, marriage was one of the most secure ways to advance one's fortunes and future, which resulted in a great deal of chicanery and duplicity. The situation is compounded by the fact that unless women inherited wealth, it was unlikely that they would be able to earn great fortunes on their own in a highly patriarchal society.

**Gender roles:** The comedy derives a great deal of its humor from the fact that gender roles are very well defined and strict in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. Women are expected to have smooth, high-pitched voices, and men are expected to possess deep baritones. In the city, women wear dresses, men wear suits, while in the country, and on the ranch, men may wear wide sombreros and typical vaquero (Mexican cowboy) outfits. Women who work on the ranch wear skirts and blouses, with brightly colored sashes and wide multi-purpose scarves (rebozos). Any deviation from that is a cause for humor, or in the case of the Don Goyo and Don Chema, horror. The others who are in on the joke (and more in control), are able to play with the gender fluidity. There is one scene that acknowledges a frustration with the rigidity gender roles in Mexican society. While still asleep, the makeup, nails, and hair team work on Florentino's transformation to Tia Florentina. Pancho is the hairdresser, and he speaks and behaves in an effeminate manner. As he leaves, he tells Fernando (who first refers to him in the feminine as Panchita rather than Panchito) how gratifying and uplifting it is to see that there are men who want to costume themselves as women. In that moment, there is an allusion to a subterranean world of transvestites, but that they are not only marginalized, their presence is hidden and largely denied.

**Identity:** The film begins with a number of identity mix-ups, starting with the building security guard / receptionists who persistently confuses Fernando (the doctor) with Florentino (the attorney). Throughout the film, the idea of identity confusion repeats itself, with subversive impact. When the security guard confuses the attorney and the doctor, he subverts the idea of hierarchy and social class, making them really indistinguishable. Later, when Florentino masquerades as Tia Florentina, not only is there identity confusion, notions of masculinity and femininity are subverted, and create a great contrast with gendered ideas of courtship and seduction, which are deeply influenced by mercenary ambitions. Lupita falls in love with Florentino (disguised as Tia Florentina), not for appearance or money, but because of the way she is treated (caresses, true affection, attention).

## CHARACTERS

Licenciado Florentino Carrasco	Attorney, offices with Fernando
Doctor Fernando Rubio	Doctor, friends with Florentino
Goyo Becerra	Wants to marry one of the heiresses
Chema	Drunkard, wants to marry an heiress
Lupita	Lolita's sister
Lolita	In love with Doctor Fernando
Tía Florentina	Wealthy aunt, lives in Cuba

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1--- Describe the way that traditional courtship and marriage are subverted in *La Tia de las Muchachas*. As you do so, think of how Fernando and Lolita communicate with each other, with frequent phone calls and secret assignments. Then, contrast that with Goyo and Chema's exaggerated courtship rituals, the bombast and hyperbole which serve to accentuate the fact that their suits are utterly devoid of true affection or sincere emotion.

2--- Explain how Florentino, when dressed as Tia Florentina, blends both male and female gender roles in her behavior toward Lola and Lupita. As a traditional aunt, she would naturally be protective, attentive, and affectionate. However, Florentino is both interested in being a prospective suitor for Lupita, and tormenting Fernando, who is rendered incapable of properly defending his position as Lolita due to the situation. How do these roles converge?

3--- Discuss the form and function of the hormone preparation that Dr. Fernando acquires. What does each formulation do? How does it reflect a tradition of transformative medicines? Please list a few examples of films that explore how science transforms humans in ways they cannot control. Examples could include *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Frankenstein*, *The Invisible Man*, and more. What are some of the ethical issues that are evoked?

4--- Describe the way in which Goyo and Chema are parodies of Mexican masculine ideals: first, with Don Goyo as greedy, fat, ambitious, but also confident in his status as a Mexican man of upper classes, and second, Don Chema as a drunk whose entire purpose in life is to find the next drink. How do the young women, Lolita and Lupita, respond to them?