



"Dangerous Loves": Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *The Summer of Miss Forbes*

## Magnificent Obsessions

BY COCO FUSCO

**FESTIVAL LATINO FILM.** At the Biograph (feature) and the Public Theater (shorts and documentaries), August 4 through 13.

Spain is not waiting until 1992 to rediscover its lost empire. As part of its renewed interest in Latin America in the post-Franco '80s, several coproductions have taken place under the auspices of Spanish television. Unlike the Germans and the English, who are still using political chic as their Latino programming angle, the Spaniards focus on the region's highbrow literature—the kind that explores private worlds as excessive as the authoritarian legacies these countries share.

The release of the six-film "Dangerous Loves" series, scripted by Gabriel García Márquez, marks a watershed moment in these collaborative efforts and highlights the 13th annual Festival Latino's film program. An array of eminent directors from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela have brought an encyclopedia of obsessions to the screen. In what amounts to a major shift in interest for some, they delve deeply, if not always intentionally, into the libidos of those brooding (largely male) intellectual figures who so often serve as the narrators and protagonists of Latin American literary masterworks.

The most accomplished and poignant of the series is Colombian director Lisandro Duque's *Miracle in Rome*. Presenting the flip side of Oedipal desire, Duque explores a father's attachment to his daughter with exceptional restraint. Veteran actor Frank Ramirez gives a strong

performance as Margarito, the unassuming court official whose young daughter dies unexpectedly one day in his arms. Twelve years later, he is called upon to exhume her remains and discovers that the girl has remained intact. The townspeople are instantly convinced she is a saint. A startled bishop declares it pure coincidence and orders her buried. Government officials would like to see her canonized to give Colombia unprecedented prominence. But Dad just wants to keep her at home.

Nonetheless, the bereaved father is prompted by his compatriots to travel to Rome to try to have her canonized. Upon arrival, he finds himself in a political hornet's nest of shifty Vatican officials and smooth-talking ambassadors. Margarito shuns them all, with the help of his jovial opera-singer friend, and remains fixated on the child, whom he carries around in a portable coffin. If this sounds outlandish, or even slightly comic, just see the film—its magic lies in making everything happen with an air of absolute normalcy. Duque never breaks the story's emotional intensity with unneeded didacticism. He balances a view of religion as a vital source of psychic strength with an

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image of the church as embroiled in ultimately petty power games. His tempered approach allows you to accept the intermittent odd occurrences, which grow less and less strange as mournful love resists, and finally overturns, death.

Mexican director Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, master of the sexual farce, takes obsession in another direction with *The Summer of Miss Forbes*. Revolving around a handful of characters in only one historical period, this story, relatively simple by García Márquez standards, is rendered with consummate skill. Hanna Schygulla is hilarious as the exquisitely Prussian governess dispatched to a seaside resort to tend to two rambunctious

boys while their parents are on holiday. By day, she imposes a painfully strict regimen that includes counting how many times they chew their food. The mischievous boys soon discover that by night she drowns her humorless propriety with tequila, erotic art, and poetry. Angered by her cruelty, the youngsters plot her demise, but it is her attraction to their awfully sexy scuba instructor, Achilles, that clinches her fate.

More contrived, less engaging, but equally if not more picturesque are the period pieces of the "Dangerous Loves" series. Among them is Brazilian Roy Guerra's *Fable of the Beautiful Pigeon-Fancier*, a turn-of-the-century tale of doomed passion. This film's obsessive protagonist is the aging dandy Orestes, who draws wealth from his rum refinery, shares stylized family rituals with his overbearing mother, and lives only to cater to his oh-so-terribly-refined appetites. His encounter with the beautiful but married pigeon-fancier turns his pristinely ordered world upside down, sending him into paroxysms of hitherto unknown longing. What is perhaps harder to fathom is why the pigeon-fancier might reciprocate. Beautifully photographed and laced with comic moments, the film's undertones of sexual violence counter its tendency to lapse into total frivolity.

Even more over the top is Paul Leduc's foray into solipsistic reverie, *Barroco*. Separate from the "Dangerous Loves" series but also backed by Spanish television, the film was "inspired by" a novel by one of Cuba's most recherché rhetorical stylists, Alejo Carpentier. Carrying over the stately camera technique he used in his last film, *Frida*, Leduc here traces the hallucinatory meditations of a mestizo gentleman and his black manservant as they wander through Spain, Mexico, and Cuba from the Conquest to the colonial period to the present.

*Barroco* is devoid of dialogue, instead bound together by references to the opera *Moctezuma—Storia per Musica* and a refrain from a well-worn Cuban tune. I'm as keen on the florid antinaturalist cinematic gesture as anyone can be, but cannot help thinking that something must be wrong when I end up finding a story of a seven-year-old saint who is dead from the start far more imaginative, not to mention believable. ■