

# The Three Magicians Of Mexican Cinema (Part 1)

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From left to right: Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro.

The names Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro González Iñárritu are already part of film history, even if that was the last thing expected at the beginning of their careers. Escapes from desolation, these three Mexican filmmakers, born in the 1960s, decided to experiment with innovative styles and themes. Their first films, though well received in Mexico, became their passports for international movie-making. In a series of three articles, I will sketch their profiles and talk about what in their movies kick-started their careers, with the idea of exploring the secret of their global success a little. In this issue, I will center on Alfonso Cuarón, born in Mexico City in 1961, and one of his biggest hits.

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SÓLO CON TU PAREJA  
(ONLY WITH YOUR PARTNER):  
LOVE + HYSTERIA = A CULT CLASSIC

Even though it might not seem like it, 16 years have gone by since this movie premiered, changing many suppositions about what it means to write, make and watch films in this country. Condemned to the limbo of forgotten films for more than a decade, *Sólo con tu pareja* (Only with Your Partner) (1991), which in the meantime has become a cult classic, has been revived by the advent of DVD, which now brings it to new generations of viewers.

This movie, with strong strains of black comedy, marked Alfonso Cuarón's debut as a director of feature-length films, although by that time he already had an extensive career under his belt as a director of television. It was also his brother Carlos's debut as a scriptwriter. Ten years later they would repeat the partnership in *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother, Too) (2001), taking a look at a culture that had been bypassed in the Mexican cinema of the time: the upwardly mobile middle class, Mexico's yuppies, portrayed on celluloid with healthy doses of humor, slapstick, sarcasm and tenderness.

The plot of *Sólo con tu pareja* centers on the adventures and misadventures of Tomás Tomás (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a brilliant ad executive who at the start of the story is trying to come up with an obviously sex-laden slogan ("Gómez homemade jalapeño chili peppers let you blow as you eat..."). Tomás is a compulsive womanizer as well as a confirmed hypochondriac, who lives amidst the decadent nineteenth-century splendor of a building in the Roma Neighborhood, and like Mike, the hero of e.e. cummings's poem, he likes all kinds of girls: blonds, brunettes, thin ones, fat ones...all kinds except green ones. His friends and neighbors, patient practically to the point of sainthood, are Dr. Mateo Mateos (the late Luis de Icaza) and his wife, Teresa de Teresa (Astrid Hadad), who act as a kind of Greek chorus for our antihero's romantic and hormonal mishaps. Things get complicated when two women come into his life almost at the same time: seductive Silvia Silva (the irresistible Dobrina Luibomirova) and the celestial Clarisa Negrete (a radiant Claudia Ramírez in a role that fits her like a glove since at the time she was the director's girlfriend and muse). The two of them will turn things



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around for this neurotic Don Juan when the very real specter of AIDS appears on the scene.

If *Sólo con tu pareja* had been shot in the 1960s, obviously AIDS would not have been an issue and possibly another sexual problem would have been used, maybe a funnier one (venereal disease? unstoppable parasites?). The main character would have been played by Mauricio Garcés, with some curvaceous beauty like Amadée Chabot or Jacqueline Voltaire in the role of the ardent nurse, while Irma Lozano —nobody could play virgins like she could— would have created the role of the flight attendant who lived next door.

Fortunately, the sensibilities of the 1990s and the many references the Cuarón brothers use —clearly these are two young men who watched Robert Altman films and devotedly read José Agustín, Carlos Fuentes as well as J.D. Salinger— make the material transcend its light tone and speak to an entire generation in its own language. They use very emblematic images that go from the wrestler El Santo to Ultramán and create their own iconic takes, like the sequence in which Clarisa, a serene beauty, stands in front of a mirror practicing the movements all flight attendants have to use to show where the airplane's emergency exists as a besotted Tomás spies on her from the balcony with something like adoration as captured by the lens of Emmanuel "El Chivo" Lubezki. This scene will be preserved for posterity, having become a small classic.

With its freshness, rhythm and audacity, *Sólo con tu pareja* was a watershed for bored audiences, tired of Mexican commercial cinema being flooded with cheap, vulgar comedies, and who finally returned to the theaters ready to pay the price of admission to see a movie Made-in-Mexico. While this film was a resounding success locally, it did not transcend our borders; but that did not stop Cuarón, who finally took the risk of making the great leap without a net and, armed only with encouragement from director Sydney Pollack (who confessed to being a fan of the film), he went to Los Angeles. There, he directed an episode of the TV series *Fallen Angels* and later, he had the chance to shoot his second feature, *The Little Princess* (1995). Once again in partnership with Lubezki, here he could



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explore his concerns as the eye behind the camera to tell a tender, classic tale based on the 1905 novel of the same name by English writer Frances Hodgson-Burnett (1849-1924).

Alfonso Cuarón has made a name for himself as a very special director and has been fortunate in his choice of themes and projects. He was both very successful at the box office with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), the third piece of the saga and a splendid result for a commissioned piece, and sparked enormous affection in some circles with his version of *Great Expectations* (1998), mainly because of the exception performances he elicited from Anne Bancroft and Gwyneth Paltrow, his choice of soundtrack and the extraordinary art direction. His most recent work, the sublime, disquieting dystopia *Children of Men* (2006), with first-rate performances by Clive Owen, Julianne Moore and Michael Caine, places him further away from Hollywood's commercial complacencies, which his predecessor, Luis Mandoki could not avoid, and closer to what is termed "author's cinema." Currently living in London, Cuarón is much more than the promise of his first film. However, this work exists to remind us, now thanks to the Criterion Collection, that his very special narrative voice was heard for the first time in the convulsive megalopolis that is Mexico City, where he left a continuing, indelible mark. **MM**