

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

THE GHOST TRAIN (EL TREN FANTASMA)

Sunday, January 30, 2:00 p.m.

1927, 73 mins.

Live music by Donald Sosin

Restored 35mm print from Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico City

Written and directed by Gabriel Garcia Moreno. Photographed by Manuel Carriedo.

Principal cast: Manuel de los Ríos (as Paco Mendoza, alias el Rubi), Carlos Villatoro (Engineer Adolfo Mariel), Clarita Ibáñez (Elena).

From article by William M. Drew and Esperanza Vázquez Bernal:

El tren fantasma (*The Ghost Train*), filmed from September to December, 1926, is an action-filled story of Adolfo Mariel, a railroad engineer (played by Carlos Villatoro) sent by his superintendent to Orizaba to investigate a series of robberies and acts of sabotage on the railway's El Ferrocarril Mexicano line. The narrative places him in a romantic rivalry with Paco Mendoza (Manuel de los Rios) for the love of the stationmaster's pretty daughter, Elena del Bosque (Clarita Ibáñez). Unbeknownst to Elena, Paco is secretly the Ruby, the chief of the bandit gang attacking the railroad, and is involved with another woman, the jealous Carmela (Angelita Ibáñez).

The emphasis on adventure melodrama resulted in a succession of fights, robberies, pursuits, and railroad action sequences, including a scene in which the heroine finds

herself on a runaway train before being saved by the hero. The actors did their own stunts. For example, Carlos Villatoro himself made the jump from the horse he was riding to the runaway train. For all the film's stress on suspense-filled action, García Moreno's direction enabled the actors to give convincing performances. Carlos Villatoro is a dashing, charismatic Mexican counterpart to contemporary American screen idols like Richard Dix, while the Ibáñez sisters memorably enact strongly contrasting feminine roles. Particularly striking is the portrayal by Manuel de los Rios of a man leading a double life. His constant wish to prove himself in deeds of bravery, a need that plunges him into a life of crime, leads him at one point to substitute for an ailing bullfighter in the ring. In the end, Paco's character is transformed from a scheming bandit to a self-sacrificing hero. Learning of a plot to blow up the train, on which the newlywed Adolfo and

Elena are passengers, Paco seizes the bomb just as it is about to explode and is killed.

In the 1920s, the Hollywood cinema, with its universal appeal, dominated the world market. After a surge of activity and creative inspiration in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Mexico's silent film production by the mid-20s was starting to suffer from North American competition. Influenced by contemporary Hollywood productions, García Moreno sought to respond to the cinematic invasion from the north with an action adventure film, a genre he had mastered. Yet, while reflecting North American influences, *El tren fantasma* is solidly in the tradition of the Mexican silent cinema, the heir to Enrique Rosas's 1919 classic, *El automóvil gris*, in which Manuel de los Rios had a key role as a bandit. Often ranked as Mexico's greatest silent film, *El automóvil gris*, originally released as a 12-part serial and later shortened and reedited as a 10-reel feature, relates the exploits of a gang of bandits who terrorized Mexico City in the 1910s. Like *El automóvil gris*, *El tren fantasma* combines elements of the documentary with breathtaking adventure to create a film with a genuine Mexican flavor shot on actual locations. The scenes depicting the railroad, the bandits' lives, the bullfight sequence, filmed in the ring at Orizaba with shots of the toreador, Juan Silveti, the faces of the local people taking part in the film--all these have a unique, unpretentious vitality that captures the time and place with an authenticity beyond later studio reconstructions.

In the production of the film, García Moreno received full cooperation from the National Railroad to use their track and train. In order to climb the high hills between Esperanza, Puebla, and Orizaba, Veracruz, the electric train of the film's title had been installed on the Ferrocarril Mexicano as recently as 1922. Indeed, the film has broader national implications since its images of the modern wonder of electric railways unmistakably suggested the triumph of 20th century progress in an emerging Mexico. Much like the Mexican government in the 1920s restoring order to the country after the years of chaotic violence in the revolutionary 1910s, the state-owned railroad in the film triumphs over the lawless bandits attempting to thwart its spread into the countryside. The patriotic motif is implied in the very name of the train, *El Mexicano*, and the film's final image of the Mexican flag flapping in the breeze.

Following its February 1927 premiere in Orizaba, *El tren fantasma* was presented with considerable success in Mexico City. It even played for one day in a theatre in the city of Corona, California, in August 1927. Intending his films to be released in the United States, García Moreno captioned the intertitles in both Spanish and English. However, in a time before international film festivals, he failed in his efforts to reach a foreign market--an all-too-common problem for silent era filmmakers in Latin America, the Orient, and Australia when Hollywood and the larger European cinema industries monopolized world distribution.

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