

Remembering María Félix

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Special to The News

It is a typical scene from a María Félix film.

A man, obviously forlorn with unrequited love and lust, is moaning to his companion between swigs of tequila about the fiery, maddening woman who has bewitched him.

This woman, referred to throughout the film as “the devourer of men,” is portrayed in the film by the famously fiery and maddening Mexican actress María Félix.

“Everything that moves upon this prairie is hers by Divine law,” says he to his unsympathetic companion.

“She is the violence, the tremendous woman, the owner and madam of this earth,” he concludes in a miserable explosion of sorrow that appears to grant him no sense of relief whatsoever.

This is an early scene from “Doña Bárbara” (1943), the third film to feature Mexican cinematic superstar María Félix, earning her the nickname that accompanied her the rest of her life: “La Doña.”

Today would have been La Doña’s 95th birthday; it also marks the seventh anniversary of her death in 2002.

The Doña Bárbara character – that of a criminal ranchera who, having soured on men and their attentions after being gang-raped as a teenager, devotes herself to manipulating them and amassing wealth – represents a character formula that can also be found in Félix’s other roles.

Like Doña Bárbara, Félix’s characters were brusque, headstrong, rather wildly gorgeous and unconventionally independent (at least until the end of the film, when they tend to be relaxed by the magic of love).

Portrayed with the special tools of Félix’s husky voice, slick, arched brow and jarring eyes, the characters represented a



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dramatic divergence from the quieter, more subservient manner in which Mexican women had traditionally been depicted through film.

CLIMB TO STARDOM

The girl who would eventually become La Doña was one of 16 children born to a wealthy family in Álamos, Sonora.

Already “the talk of the town” in her adolescence, she was expelled from school for “unladylike behavior.” Nevertheless, Félix went on to study in Guadalajara, where she was named University Carnival Queen.

Félix married her first husband, traveling cosmetics salesman Enrique Álvarez, at the age of 17. The couple had one son and divorced in 1938.

Félix’s rapid climb to superstardom began when she was approached on the street in Mexico City by director Fernando Palacios, who cast her in his film “China Poblana” despite her complete lack of acting experience.

Shortly thereafter, Félix was prominently featured

alongside famous leading man Jorge Negrete, who would eventually become her husband, in “El Peñón de las Ánimas” (1943).

Over the course of her career, La Doña starred in a total of 47 films in Latin America, Spain, France and Italy.

Some of her more renowned roles include Beatriz in “Enamorada” (1946), a brash young aristocrat clinging to tradition in the midst of the Mexican Revolution, partly by means of fighting against the charms of a dashing and smitten revolutionary general, and “La Cucaracha” (1959), in which her character (La Cucaracha) competes fiercely with the comparably demure Chabela, played by fellow Mexican actress Dolores del Río, for the love of yet another gallant revolutionary general.

Unlike Dolores del Río, who achieved Hollywood fame, María Félix refused to learn English and was not offered major roles in U.S. films. She taught herself to speak French fluently, however, and eventually worked under the direction of Jean Renoir.

MEXICO’S MARILYN

Often referred to as Mexico’s Marilyn Monroe, Félix’s personal life – in which she not only imitated, but became a living Doña Barbara – was as newsworthy as her professional one.

She was married four times, and her long list of famous lovers included French painter Antoine Tzapoff and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

She also married, and later divorced, the world-famous Mexican composer Agustín Lara, who wrote the much-loved mariachi ballad “María Bonita” for her.

After many romances, Félix ultimately married the multi-millionaire Swiss banker Alex Berger, who is credited with having helped finance Mexico City’s subway system. He died in 1974.

Once called “the most beautiful face in the history of Mexican cinema,” fans continue to remember Félix as the stunning, elegant, rough-and-tumble diva who served to solidly define the “Golden Age” of Mexican film.