



[19th Viva Hispanic Film Festival](#) , [Cornerhouse](#)

Humour, Crisis and Lost Identity

Reviewed by [John Hutchinson](#) March 2013

The **19th Viva Festival** opened on the 8th March to the themes of guerrilla warfare re-enacted on the car park of an American DIY store and the tragi-comedy of a botched jewel robbery in Madrid in the 1950's. Humour starts the festival but rapidly turns into a much darker side.

Atraco (Hold Up) is a crazy comedy set in Franco's Spain in the 1950s drawing on cine-noir and Hollywood traditions as well as Mario Monicelli's 1958 Italian crime caper "I soliti ignoti" according to the festival programme. The plot revolves round a loyal Peronist who wants to support his leader's life in exile by pawning the jewels of the late Evita of "Don't Cry for Argentina" fame. For the most part this is a light hearted romp which recreates the atmosphere of a forgotten Madrid under the dictatorship of Franco. There is plenty of room for comedy, and whilst the jewels are in the possession of the jewellers in Madrid, the wife of Franco is tipped off

of their exceptional attraction. Franco's wife was notorious for visiting expensive shops and leaving with luxury goods which she never paid for - the jewellers of Madrid actually organised a collective compensation fund amongst themselves to protect their businesses against such an outcome. It becomes imperative to recover Evita's jewels before Franco's wife does, and the plot unfolds with its unlikely comic duo, the henchman/bodyguard of the loyal Peronist and a young man who is befriended by the Peronist who uses his influence to find work in a local vaudeville troupe in Panama. This improbable pairing of the henchman and the would-be young actor are chosen as the two to perform the mission of the fake heist (to rescue Evita's jewels) in which the jeweller is complicit.

These details give a flavour of the confusion – the young man is bumbling, inept, a parody of a serious actor and certainly no professional robber. The bodyguard appears competent but descends into the same kind of farcical antics as his companion. This has a few hints of Laurel and Hardy in its execution. Meanwhile, the Peronist awaits news in Panama as they are sent to undertake the robbery. There is romantic interest in the form of a nurse who helps the Peronist when he has an asthma attack on exiting the jeweller's after depositing Evita's jewels and who then undertakes a dangerous liaison with the young actor when they arrive in Madrid to commit the hold-up. This turns out to be fatal for both robbers as the hold-up is botched. The henchman is shot in the process and wounded.

They manage to escape to the country retreat of the jeweller (who is their silent accomplice) where they have been plotting the heist. The young man (who turns out to be the son of the Peronist trying to impress his long forgotten father) cannot resist seeing the nurse once more which leads to their capture and imprisonment as the police are on to them. An apparently safe escape in a refuge wagon is arranged through a contact of the Peronist in the Madrid government only for them to be deposited in a wood and mown down by machine guns. The dark ending rather undermines the comedy - this is the least substantial of the three films in this review. It entertains at times but fails to make us reflect as we are distanced by this period piece which does not hit us directly.

A Puerta Fria (Cold Call) is set in the Spain of today, fully centred in its profound economic crisis. The **Viva** programme here quotes Jonathan Holland from "Variety" placing it in the tradition of all corrupt salesmen from Arthur Miller's famous play onwards. Holland highlights "one man's swift moral decline over the course of 36 hours". There is a moral decline but this sales conference condenses what has been implicit or explicit in commercial relationships for many decades. The corruption is systemic not just individual as in Miller's play. The rivalry, the male dominated hierarchy, transactional relationships, the consumption of vast quantities of alcohol, failed marriages, human values subordinated to financial targets, human beings treated as commodities - all these are part of the fabric of the annual sales convention. When times are good, the pattern of self-interest and reciprocal deals can sustain itself.



However, that is based on the assumption that a network of commercial relationships will continue. The fate that awaits the unsuccessful rep is that of having to work "a puerta fria", cold calling on a commission only basis, selling inferior products and facing almost certain financial ruin. The collapse of the Spanish economy through the financial crash and the implosion of the property bubble have precipitated this. Almost all the old regulars from the sales forces of the past have disappeared. The corruption and indeed inanity of corporate life are brought into debauched focus - the party has long been over but the hangover is permanent, no matter how much alcohol is drunk to drown the pain of failure.

Antonio Dechent plays the desperate salesman who knows that unless he produces a raft of orders at the conference, he is finished. **Maria Valverde** is cast in the role of a very attractive promotions girl contracted by an agency for the conference. The increasingly

entwined relationship between the two is the central strand which twists and turns through the plot. The salesman speaks little English, the promotions girl is fluent. All the salesman's hopes of avoiding a sacking are based on landing the giant of all orders from an American company whose ageing representative speaks no Spanish. Enter the girl into the drama as she becomes drawn into the plot as a honey trap for the American. To close the deal and secure this enormous order, the American makes it blatantly obvious that a night with the girl is the missing offer. The salesman will not agree to such a condition but the girl out of loyalty to her relationship with the salesman which has formed over 36 hours, is non-sexual and based on the need to survive financially, decides to act. The ending in which the girl is seen knocking on the American's hotel room door to "close" the deal is both shocking and shattering. The corporate world is seen at its most raw and brutal.

Yet there is an implied continuity beyond this moral nadir. One also wants to know whether this conclusion was enough to ensure the salesman's survival and indeed how the girl will develop in this environment of sullied competition. The film is well made and asks serious questions about the relationship between business and society and the vacuity of the moral order this reveals.

Las Buenas Hierbas has a stereotypical South American style and pace, a total contrast to Hollywood movies of action with their continually mounting tension and the happy or optimistic ending. We are presented with all the colours and images of a vibrant Mexico City. To understand this style and develop an affinity with it, one has to become absorbed in the settings and the atmosphere, follow its human life, its comedy and tragedy, and become enveloped in its un-accelerated and unpretentious rhythms.

