The Golden Age Of Mexican Cinema

By Herbert W. Piekow

In March 2010 I went to *Museo de Arte de Zapopan*, with my friend Juan Carlos, to see an exposition featuring films by *cinefotògrafo* Gabriel Figueroa.

The exhibition featured Gabriel Figueroa films but frequently mentioned the *Epoca de oro del cine mexicano,* (The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema). Sunday, February 27th the world watched the Academy Awards and I thought it time to research and write about the impressive time in Mexican film

making.

The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema is the name given to Mexican films created between 1935 and 1959. The release of ¡ *Vamonos con Pancho Villa*! in 1935 is considered the beginning of the best of the cinema of Mexico. However, it was a box-office failure.
Alla en el Rancho Grande,
also by director Fernando de Fuentes, was a financial and artistic success and launched a long and impressive career. While Europe and the United States battled WWII, most of their film industries were restricted to propaganda. Cellulose, used to produce films, was rationed.

When German submarines destroyed PEMEX oil tankers, Mexico joined the Allies in the war against Germany. Mexico gained most favored nation status and also garnered a scarcity of goods including film, which for political reasons was restricted in the US. The excess was sent to Mexico, making it possible for the Mexican movie industry to produce films for the Mexican and Latin American markets.

Important Mexican icons of this period included Mario Moreno, a comic actor who won the hearts of Mexican and international audiences. All the world knows the dramatic countenances and acting abilities of Dolores del Rio and Pedro Armendariz, both of whom were directed by Emilio *"el Indio"* Fernandez, in *Flor Silvestre* and *Maria Candelaria* winner of the *Palme d'Or* at the 1946 Cannes Film Festival. These are two of the most wonderful movies I have ever seen and even if you don't understand Spanish you will comprehend these powerful films by watching the expressive faces and feeling the emotions of these fine actors.

The movie stars of Mexican cinema ruled the world when Mexico reigned supreme at the box-office. Dolores del Rio was the biggest diva, who after a successful career in Hollywood returned to Mexico and represented the face of Mexican women around the world in Emilio Fernandez's film *Maria Candelaria. "La Doña"* of Mexican films was Maria Felix who portrayed the roles of rural or peasant women.

Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete were the male idols of the Mexican Cinema. Negrete besides being a film idol was also the leader of the Actors Union, at its inception. Infante was *El Idolo del Pueblo*
or The Idol of the People.

The motion picture that made hearts throb was *Dos Tipos de Cuidado,* which starred both men. “Two Guys to be Careful With,” was the biggest box-office hit of its day. Even today, when the film shows on Mexican TV, the women forget their cooking, cleaning and child care to watch these two men. Negrete died in Hollywood of infections at age 42, a year after the film was released. Pedro Infante died in a plane crash April 15, 1957 at the age of 40; his body was identified by his signature gold bracelet, which he always wore. Infante, who made 59 movies, was described as, “Perhaps the most famous actor and singer of the Golden Age.” Both men were honored with state funerals, their motorcades and weeping women stopped traffic.

Mexico also had an incredible array of directors, sound technicians and writers, many of whom immigrated from the Soviet Union or from Franco’s Spain. The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema centered on topics like poverty, the struggles of urban life, social injustices and the idealization of moral values like love and happiness. From about 1946 to 1950, city life was the theme movie producers portrayed and movies with “easy” women in poor neighborhoods, the loss of moral values, the changes of society and industry.

The 1950 melodrama “*Los Olvidados,”* “The Young and the Damned,” was a memorable, heart-wrenching portrayal about impoverished children in Mexico City. The emblematic changes of the Mexican way of life were presented in the 1960s. However, at this time Mexican films faced censorship that those of the US and Europe did not. The strong unions of the Mexican movie industry created another obstacle for continued growth; and by the mid 1940s, an American, William O. Jenkins, owned two of Mexico’s theater chains and controlled all the films showing in 12 Mexican states.

Later his chains limited the showing of Mexican films and began to show more Hollywood films. He also used his power to dictate regulations that limited film production to low-budget, low quality films known as “*churros.”*

With its great scope of location possibilities from aired deserts, tropical jungles, pristine beaches and snow capped mountains, Mexico is the setting for many of today’s films, even though moviegoers would never know. Mexico has an experienced group of movie production technicians and services, and the lower cost of production has helped to revitalize a once dominant international industry.

The Mexican film industry is once more growing and gaining both international respect and a strong following amongst Mexicans and world audiences. In 2001, Alfonso Cuarons’s film *“Y tu*

Mama Tambien"
was nominated for an Oscar for both Best Writing and Original Screenplay and in 2006, the Academy nominated Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu for Best Director for his film
Babel.
During the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, Mexico received plenty of recognition when
Año Bisiesto
(Leap Year), was awarded the
Camera d'Or
, the festival's first prize for the best first film. There were 63 nominations. Films produced and directed by Mexicans left a good impression at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival as several Mexican films received standing ovations.

International recognition of Mexican films coincides with a boom in the country's film industry, led by a vigorous animation industry and unprecedented investments in technology and infrastructure. This past December (2010), Mexico was the guest nation at the Dubai International Film Festival where the movie *Presumed Guilty* directed by Roberto Hernandez garnered top prize. He worked his magic on over 200 films. Several of the film shorts featured Maria Felix, who starred in 50 productions and whose famous beauty and expressive face can be seen in photos in many public places.