

**TRUE**

**TALES**

**FROM**

**ANOTHER**

**MEXICO**

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**Chalino,**

**and the**

**Bronx**

**SAM**

**GUINONES**

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS

ALBUQUERQUE

## TELENOVELLA

In 1992, as ex-Yugoslavia tore at itself in a frenzy of ethnic slaughter, a far sweeter note played on television. A Mexican telenovela—a soap opera—known as *Los Ricos También Lloran* aired in the warring republics. *The Rich Cry Too*, starring Verónica Castro, was the story of poor Mariana, an orphan and maid to a rich family, who falls in love with the family's son, has his child, goes crazy and gives up her child when her lover is unfaithful to her, then spends the rest of the show fighting to recover the baby. And every night while it played in Serbia and Croatia, where at the time happy endings were at a premium, life would stop for an hour.

Amid the chaos Kasia Wyberko worked as Balkan correspondent for Televisa, the Mexican network that produced *Los Ricos*. Wyberko traveled a lot between the two countries. Every night, she remembers, crowds would flock before department-store televisions and hang on the show's every subtitle. "The reaction was the same in Belgrade, Serbia, as it was in Zagreb, Croatia. The streets in both places were totally empty. For a moment this Mexican telenovela united two peoples who were at war." One squad of soldiers in the Croatian section of Herzegovina every night after returning from patrols would hook up a television to a generator and follow the trials of Mariana. "Every day on television you'd see reports from the front. Guns, guns, guns, and propaganda all the time," says Wyberko. "Then suddenly there's *Los Ricos También Lloran*: a beautiful woman falls in love with a rich man, with these beautiful homes. While here they're killing women and children, on the television there's a love story from Mexico, almost another planet for people here. It was so exotic, so refreshing."

And it was the highest-rated show on Croatian television that year.

Since then, Mexican telenovelas have swept the world up in their teary melodramas of romance, passion, good and evil, betrayal, lies, and happy endings. Televisa, Mexico's entertainment conglomerate and the world's largest

telenovela producer, has sold them to all of Latin America and to 125 other countries as well, among them Armenia and Azerbaijan, Belgium and Bophuthatswana, Iran and Iraq, Singapore and South Korea. China has aired twenty-two Mexican telenovelas. *Cuna de Lobos* (*Den of Wolves*) was a huge hit in Australia.

Telenovelas have taken over daytime television in the Balkans. Serbian television producers have even begun filming their own, with plot lines revolving around characters who inherit lots of money, then scheme to get more by cheating their relatives. Three Televisa novelas compete on prime time every night on Indonesia's three main stations. The network's newest sensation, *Thalia*, was mobbed when she visited the Philippines in 1995 and 1996. The press reported Philippine women naming their newborns Thalia or Marimar—one of the heroines the actress plays. In Romania a change in broadcasting law decreed less sex and violence on television. Mexican novelas perfectly filled the void left by more violent programming. One novela, *Esmeralda*, became so popular that women copied the hairstyle of star Leticia Calderón, and Bucharest ambulance crews were said to be getting to their calls late; finally televisions were removed from the station houses.

By 1996 Televisa could claim its novelas were Mexico's largest export product, ahead of car parts and Corona beer.

The telenovela is produced with international success—and, some say, with far more creativity—in Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela as well. But Mexico—which is to say, Televisa—made it the enormous global business it is today. At its studios in southern Mexico City, the company has produced more than 600 telenovelas and maintains a pace of about twenty-five new series a year. Televisa invented the electronic prompter, a tiny speaker placed in each actor's ear allowing a prompter in another room to read them their dialogue—adding some stiffness to their performances but compensating by avoiding the time and expense of script memorization. Alone among world telenovela producers, Televisa can churn out half-hour segments in a day.

Other eras had Grimm's fairy tales or the feuilletons of Dickens and Balzac. The Mexican telenovela is the fable for the post-Cold War, high-tech global village. It offers a romance that in 160 to 240 half-hour episodes begins, falters, blooms, falters again, and finally succeeds—a simple formula that has

captivated the world in the 1990s.

Ironically, as countries everywhere began shedding authoritarian pasts, they began consuming this genre that itself had emerged from an authoritarian state. Now forty years old, the Mexican telenovela grew to maturity with the PRI regime. The telenovela became Mexico's great cultural sponge, dominating entertainment in the same way the regime dominated political life. It supplanted cinema and theater and absorbed actors, writers, and directors, who found the pickings slim elsewhere. The genre ended up taking on characteristics of the country's centralized political system. "The telenovela has become the only show. Telenovelas have become so important that all the other forms of entertainment have become part of telenovelas," says Alvaro Cueva, a telenovela author and newspaper columnist. "If you want to promote a singer, put her in a telenovela. In Mexico everything converges in the telenovela. It has centralized show business in our country."

Apart from soccer, telenovelas are the most watched programming in Mexico. The novela belonged to Mexico's vast poor and working classes, watched mainly by maids and housewives. Hit novelas have created new hairstyles and social trends within those classes. In 1969 *Simplemente María*—the hugely popular novela of a poor seamstress who through hard work becomes a successful fashion designer—caused a run on sewing machines.

The ingenious PRI regime—never one to use the iron fist when other means were available—understood that in a country with enormous poor and working classes, the telenovela was a marvelous propaganda vehicle. The PRI government was rooted in revolution and leftist rhetoric. But when it came to television, the regime took seriously its duty as protector of the people's sensibilities and held to a distinctly prudish and paternalistic line. The government had, as one Interior Ministry agent put it, "the moral responsibility of looking after society." Televisa's founder, Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, had a code of telenovela ethics that stated the programs should promote family unity, national pride, and personal advancement. Later the government and Azcárraga's son, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo—Televisa's late and legendary chief known as El Tigre—elaborated that into a series of strict rules regarding what a telenovela could contain. Novelas came to espouse the moral values the regime liked to believe it represented and wanted inculcated in its charges.

Certainly the lessons for women were clear: suffering was purifying and to be borne privately, life is nothing without a man, marriage was required for happiness, and certain subjects, especially sex, were not to be discussed openly. Large numbers of Mexican women learned how to conduct romantic relationships via the telenovela. Essayist Carlos Monsiváis once said that Azcárraga Milmo was the country's second secretary of education.

Above all, though, Televisa's television was to be fantasy. "The company has a theory that's worked, which is: people want to dream," says Raúl Araiza, a veteran producer and director of Televisa novelas. "They make novelas that are rosy, with princes and Cinderellas. It's a goddamn marijuana-smoker's dream because it's never existed. But people like to dream."

Azcárraga himself outlined his philosophy at a rare press conference in 1992 in what became a classic, if unexpected, piece of truth telling. Explaining the role of Televisa and the telenovela in the country's social life, he said: "Mexico is a country with a large class of people who are [economically] screwed. Television's responsibility is to bring these people entertainment and distract them from their sad reality and difficult future."

As it developed, the telenovela came to be a pillar for the Mexican regime. In a century that refined the use of propaganda, the Mexican telenovela stood out in its subtlety and effectiveness. For years at the filming or rehearsals of telenovelas, men in suits would sit inconspicuously at the back of each soundstage, watching it all. They were agents of the Interior Ministry, there to ensure that what was portrayed in telenovelas was a Mexico that did not exist. They were quiet men, usually, who tried their best to remain inconspicuous. Nor did they have much work to do, since producers and directors understood what was allowed and usually struck to scripts the censors approved. These men made sure, for example, that no barefoot children showed up on film. No character could discuss money, his salary, how much something cost, or ever enter a bank. The gap between rich and poor was a delicate issue for the regime and not to be broached during a telenovela. Main characters, in fact, had to have social mobility, though that usually came through marriage and not through work or individual initiative. No politician could be mentioned, least of all the president. Terrorism, guerrillas, or coups d'état could not come up in the plot line. Nor could drugs or drug use. Water was served in

coffee cups, not clear glasses, lest it be mistaken for alcohol. No cursing was permitted, much less any sex or naked bodies. Illegitimate children had finally to be recognized by their fathers and their parents properly married in a church.

Under these strictures, the classic telenovela plot quickly became the Cinderella story. The plot usually revolved around a woman named María, who was therefore poor and virtuous, often the maid in a rich man's house. María falls in love with him. Society condemns their love. Bad relatives scheme to separate them. She suffers unrelentingly. She cries interminably. Finally a rich and childless old man proves to be María's long-lost uncle. The lovers can now marry and live happily ever after. These kinds of stories were refired dozens of times, in shows popularly known as "Las Marías."

The ending was crucial. For with it came a moral conclusion: love conquers all, the world's complexities are nearly resolved, and above all, the bad guys get what's coming. "Every telenovela is really a reflection on morality," says Miguel Sabido, a telenovela producer and Televisa's director of research. "It's trying to figure out who is good, who is bad, what is good, what is bad."

Understanding that the telenovela could impart a value-laden message, Televisa and the PRI government began, in about the early 1960s, to intentionally exploit melodrama's power.

One important moment as far as that goes, according to Fausto Zerón-Medina, was 1965 and the production of a historical novela called *Páginas de la Vida de Maximiliano y Carlota* (*Pages from the Life of Maximilian and Carlota*). Zerón-Medina is a historian with a self-effacing manner and a thick black beard. He earned a master's degree in history from Cambridge University in England. His thesis was on the history of the Catholic Church in Mexico, specifically focusing on Bishop Clemente Munguía, a staunch conservative of the nineteenth century. Today, as a historian/entrepreneur, he is one of those rare people who makes a living from history. He worked for a long time for Clio, a publisher of popular books and videos on Mexican history and culture. He now publishes *Saber Ver*, an arts bimonthly magazine that he bought from Televisa. Years ago he was adviser to *Senda de Gloria* (*Path of Glory*), one of the most controversial historical novelas. One drizzly morning in a restaurant in Mexico City's Colonia Roma neighborhood, Zerón-Medina sat down to discuss how the regime has put the telenovela to use.

"The regime is paternalistic. The job of forming consciences, the national duty, was, for them, the state's job," he says. "They were very aware that Mexico was in fact many Mexicos. To fight against this they came up with the idea of the participation of the state in the formation of this [national] identity. They figure that since [the telenovela] has been used for other things, why not this job? Plus our history is rich, full of stories."

The story of Maximiliano and Carlota was one of the richest, and strangest, in Mexican history. In the 1860s the country, five decades after independence, was still at war with itself. Royalist conservatives and new-thinking liberals battled for Mexico's future. The national disintegration was such that some conservatives came to believe that Mexico needed a European emperor. About the best that can be said for the whole affair is that they drafted well, or at least that's how it appeared. Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian von Hapsburg was second in line to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire. But his brother Franz Joseph's longevity as emperor meant he spent his time looking for another sinecure. Mexican conservatives made him believe their country both needed and wanted him as its emperor. So in 1864 Maximilian and his wife, Carlota, arrived to rule Mexico. By most accounts they tried hard and had the country's progress at heart. Finally, though, after three years of intrigue and deceit and never quite understanding the country they ruled, Carlota fled for Europe and Maximilian was captured by liberal army forces under Benito Juárez. On June 19, 1867, he was executed by a firing squad. Mexico sheepishly went on, trying to forget that it once was so divided that it had actually imported foreign royalty.

The Maximilian and Carlota interlude became an important cornerstone of PRI legitimacy. "The myths that the regime used were the defeat of the conservatives, the defeat of the empire, the shooting of Maximilian, and the end of that era," says Zerón-Medina. "The revolution throws out [dictator Porfirio] Díaz and takes up the republi myth of Juárez. Everything that the revolutionary movement inherits, the entire twentieth century, is based on negating the past and the exaltation of nationalism. The confrontation of our party with the outsider, with the foreigner, with the United States, and foreign incursions into Mexico. The United States is the biggest example of that, but Maximilian and Carlota are as well. The regime substitutes a kind of secular

religion for the old religion. The secular religion also has fiestas to observe, altars to venerate, saints to exalt."

In the regime's secular religion no one has a more exalted place than Benito Juárez, the stern Oaxacan Indian who became president and tried to install a liberal government in the mid-nineteenth century. In the way the Soviet Union revered a dead Lenin, Mexico came to officially adore Juárez. More than 800 streets and twenty-three neighborhoods are named for Juárez in the Mexico City metropolitan area alone. That doesn't count plazas, parks, or popular organizations. The Juárez Head, a bombastic piece of official art, sits at the center of a traffic circle on the outskirts of the city. Juárez's liberalism would have been at odds with the regime's strict paternalism. But his importance to the PRI regime lay in his opposition to Maximilian and Carlota, his attempts to forge nationhood from a disparate and dissolving Mexico, and his break with Porfirio Díaz, who would become the dictator the revolution was made to oust.

So sometime in the early 1960s, someone at Televisa had the idea of making a telenovela of the lives of Maximilian and Carlota, using it to instruct the Mexican people on the merits of Juárez, the revolution, and, not incidentally, the regime. Unfortunately, the story of Maximiliano and Carlota happened to be great telenovela material. Maximilian was at heart a decent man, a bit lost perhaps in his strange new country, but not devious. He and Carlota were in love. So their story had intrigue and romance, while his death provided the tears every novela needs.

Thus it was that every night on television in 1965, the novela wove their lives against the chaotic tapestry of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico and accomplished quite the opposite of its intent. "Mexicans identify with tragic figures in love. I remember people telling me later that as the figures of Maximiliano and Carlota grew in stature, Juárez became smaller," says Zerón-Medina. "They ended up looking like victims, deceived, with some ambition but not a lot. They began looking like people. People empathized with them." Juárez grew into a cold, impersonal figure—the villain of the tale—beside the warmth the telenovela cast on the unfortunate emperor and his wife.

The novela became a propaganda blunder, but it was important for two reasons. Not only did it foster a fascination within Televisa and the government with the telenovela as a vehicle for reaching history, particularly one view of

history, but after it aired, Televisa spent the next decade trying to repair the damage the series caused. The network produced four more historical telenovelas—*La Tormenta*, *Los Caudillos*, *La Constitución*, and *El Carruaje*—that took the country up to the end of the Mexican Revolution. All of them, this time, made the important points about Juárez and other of the regime's historical heroes.

Then in 1985, during the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid, the company decided to make *Senda de Gloria*. This was to be the historical telenovela to beat them all. Televisa and the government cooperated like never before. The series used seven hundred actors, five thousand extras, including members of Mexico City's police force, and cost 5 billion pesos. Costumes were imported from Europe, and the crew filmed for weeks at a time at the National Palace. Military historians were brought in to discuss uniforms, how soldiers saluted, and how trumpets sounded. The novela was coproduced by the Mexican Social Security Institute—the IMSS, which forgave Televisa a portion of its workers' social-security contributions in exchange for a producer credit.

The preceding fifteen years or so had seen an expansion in the history department at the National Autonomous University (UNAM) and the national archives. A boom in Mexican historical knowledge had taken place. *Senda de Gloria* employed a team of historians, led by Fausto Zerón-Medina, who combed the new sources, sometimes taking dialogue directly from the minutes of important meetings.

The novela was to cover the twenty-one years from 1917 up to 1938, when President Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated Mexico's oil fields from foreign companies. They were, moreover, years in which the PRI and the Mexican regime was forming and took control of the country that it has not relinquished yet. "They wanted to glorify Lázaro Cárdenas as one of the secular saints of the revolution, like Juárez," remembers Zerón-Medina. "In 1917 the Constitution is written. In 1938 there's the expropriation of the oil. There was an epic to tell. In the middle of it, there was a river of blood. But there was this idea finally that at the end of the story the institutions are safe, the country, the regime, everyone is united. There's problems with the church, but even the church finally says Cárdenas was right to expropriate the oil. The country

goes into the era in bad shape and comes out looking good. Everything ends beautifully. They must have seen it as this unique story."

*Senda de Gloria* first showed in mid-1987 and achieved fabulous ratings, in part due to the blunt treatment of once untouchable historical figures and events. This was during De la Madrid's Moral Renovation, which ultimately failed to do much regarding corruption in politics but for a time allowed some measure of dissent and criticism. *Senda de Gloria* was the first uncensored historical telenovela. Zerón-Medina remembers people stopping him on the street to comment on the latest episode. His boss where he was then working frantically urged him to hide one day, certain that he would be imprisoned after an episode that showed one of the regime's leaders in the 1920s ordering a massacre. *Senda de Gloria* was a true media event in a day when the Mexican media were still controlled.

So pleased were the folks at Televisa that the next spring they repackaged the novela into two-hour segments and began running it every Saturday. Once again it gripped the country.

But a strange thing happened between the two showings. Mexico abruptly changed. That change would give an entirely different historical tint to *Senda de Gloria*. Art and current events began to intermingle, and apparently Televisa and the censors realized it only too late. What happened was that Lázaro Cárdenas's son, Cuauhtémoc, who had been governor of the state of Michoacán, broke with the PRI in December 1987, angry that he had not been selected as the party's presidential candidate. He and other prominent renegade *Pristas* formed the Democratic Front, which launched Cárdenas as its presidential candidate. The division in the once monolithic PRI electrified the nation. For the first time Mexico had competition in the race for president. Of course, the only coverage the Democratic Front was going to get from Televisa was witheringly negative. So Cárdenas took his campaign to the people. He led a wrenching, messianic tour through hundreds of small towns and large cities, concentrating especially on areas where his father had attained near sainthood for giving peasants land and nationalizing oil.

Then on July 6, 1988, Mexico went to the polls. That night, as Mexico City voting returns were the first to come cascading in, Cárdenas took an early lead, and somehow the impossible seemed to be happening. Then suddenly,

as if on cue, the government's election computer system crashed. When it was revived, the PRI's candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, was leading in the polls and, finally, declared the victor. The month of July was spent in furious confrontation as the outraged Democratic Front brought hundreds of thousands of people to the streets. For a moment Mexico was at the brink of its worst civic unrest and the PRI regime faced its most severe crisis in twenty years.

Meanwhile *Senda de Gloria* had been plodding every Saturday through the early years of the construction of the modern Mexican state and by July, as the streets teemed with discontent, was moving into the apogee of Lázaro Cárdenas. Suddenly the political environment from a propaganda coup that legitimized the regime into something that did quite the opposite: it glorified the father of the regime's foremost apostate. It was almost like cheering Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas himself, who was now in the streets accusing the government of stealing the election.

Up to that point, Televisa had been running ads each week urging people to follow the show: "Don't miss the succession of Obregón," or, "Don't miss the betrayal of Zapata." Then in late July, as the streets roiled with people and the election was still in dispute, the ads urged viewers: "Don't miss the conclusion of *Senda de Gloria*." At home, Fausto Zerón-Medina remembers reading the ads and wondering, "How's that? Unless I'm wrong, there's a whole era missing."

Indeed, the conclusion of the novela that ran on Saturday, July 30, was a famously incomprehensible mishmash that bewildered the public. The final thirty half-hour episodes were cut and crammed together into two hours. Historical events were left out. Important characters just disappeared. One actress went from black hair to fully gray, almost from one scene to the next, for no reason the show made clear. Lázaro Cárdenas, and his presidency, barely figured in the ending.

No explanation was ever given, by Televisa or the government, for the mind-bending re-edit. But no one who was paying attention was really fooled. "Those episodes were [Lázaro] Cárdenas's great moment. He's supported by workers and popular organizations. Then it leads to the expropriation of oil," says Zerón-Medina, whose credit as the novela's historian was also cut. "I

interpret [the cuts] to mean they were afraid of helping Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas."

To the newsweekly *Proceso*, Zerón-Medina noted at the time that between the ending of the telenovela's first run in November 1987 and the end of its second showing, "Cárdenas, the hero, became uncomfortable [for the regime], and the system that contributed to building his monument now hides it."

Since then, Televisa has attempted only two historical telenovelas—one dealing with the dictator Porfirio Díaz, a figure everyone can agree to dislike, and the other with the forty years leading up to Mexican independence in 1821.

*Senda de Gloria* ends with an image of the main character, a General Eduardo Alvaréz, walking past the murals of Diego Rivera. As he walks by the murals, the general flashes back to moments in Mexican history. "We belong to a culture of images," says Zerón-Medina. "The Catholicism we received venerates the image, the icon, instead of the abstract word. This mixed well with the pre-Hispanic beliefs, which gave human bodies to gods. The evangelization of the country is done through images. Later, then, you politicize the country through images. Why, after all, have we had the murals of Rivera and [José Clemente] Orozco? Moreover, this is an illiterate people. People don't read; they listen. The telenovela creates the image that's so strong, it makes you feel as if you were a witness. They say much more than written words. [The telenovela] had an impact because it deals in images, in emotions, and because melodrama is the genre closest to simple people from the pueblos."

This goes a long way to explain why the telenovela has been such a potent cultural and entertainment element in Mexico. It also explains why, at the postliterate end of the twentieth century, Mexican telenovelas spread like wildfire around the world and found a reception in places as different as Indonesia and Romania.



The story of how that happened has to do with the demise of worldwide ideological conflicts in the twentieth century's last decade.

For many years Televisa had sold its telenovelas to Latin America with great success. When the 1990s brought an end to authoritarian and totalitarian governments around the world, company executives began toying with

the idea of selling their telenovelas elsewhere. Perhaps, the thinking went, telenovelas would provide a safe first step for formerly hard-line governments experimenting with relaxed censorship. Maybe telenovelas would find a market where people least imagined there was one. Out of New York, the company formed Protele, a subsidiary that now sells the company's product in the non-Latin world. At its head they put Pedro Font, a longtime company executive. "The telenovela is a family show. It's romantic, nonpornographic, with a lot of intrigue," says Font. "Plus the message of our shows is very different from those of American programs. In American programs, some guy takes a machine gun and kills 300 people."

So in May 1992 the network decided, on a whim, to send *Los Ricos Tambien* Lloran to Russia. "It was a product we had around. The drama was nice. So we used it," Font says.

It paralyzed Russia. People there, with an economy in shambles and a political future to decide, stopped for an hour three days a week to follow Mariana's quest for her child. *Variety* estimated viewership at 100 million people, a record for Russia. In one town the director of a collective farm turned off the town's electricity after noticing workers were coming to work late when *Los Ricos* was on. *Pravda* reported that in the Caucasus, warring Georgian and Abkhazian soldiers arranged a tacit truce at the hours the show aired so they could all watch it, mesmerized by the woman with billowy brown hair.

*Los Ricos* made its heroine the first star of the global economy, just as the world was realizing that a global economy existed. It may be an exaggeration to say that Verónica Castro is as famous as Michael Jackson or Michael Jordan. But neither man has been invited to both Russia and China at the behest of the governments there.

No woman is more associated with the Mexican telenovela—at home or abroad—than Verónica Castro. She is the quintessential María, the good, sweet, hardworking heroine whose perseverance is eventually rewarded by marriage and love and living happily ever after. Her large eyes have shed countless tears, and her wide smile blessed many a baby and captured a good many husbands.

Now forty-six, she lives in an enormous mansion at the bottom of a canyon in the Bosques de las Lomas neighborhood of Mexico City—a house that was payment from Televisa in 1995 for hosting nine months of a nightly

variety show. Her living room is jammed with chests from India, ceramics from Czechoslovakia, an enormous stuffed tiger, a stuffed leopard, a bearskin rug, sofas with rowing backrests shaped like seashells, and bronze statues of Neptune and Arabs with sabers and upturned shoes, like something out of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. She lives here with her mother, sister, and youngest son, Michel.

Yet amid all this, Verónica is alone. This is not how a novela heroine is supposed to end up. Born in 1952, Castro grew up poor, the oldest of four children, in downtown Mexico City. Her mother worked as a secretary in government offices. Her father left the family when she was young. By age fifteen, Castro was working in theater and television. By age twenty she was making records. "My life is a kind of telenovela. I lived in a service room. I worked hard, studied hard. No one's given me anything. In the telenovela, the poor girl finds her Prince Charming and becomes rich by marrying him. My life was kind of like that; just I had to work hard to get ahead because my Prince Charming never arrived."

Her public image is perhaps that of a shallow, pampered woman—a diva used to the pretension of show business. And in fact, she resembles Joan Collins, from the *Dynasty* serial. Yet far from the superficiality of her public image, Verónica Castro has a seriousness and an awesome capacity for work that allowed her to succeed in a business and culture dominated by men. She was the first female producer of a Mexican telenovela, was once a member of a dissident actors union, holds a degree in political science, and was the first woman to breast-feed on television. She is the world's best-known Latin television actress.

Due to several all-night talk shows that ran from 11 p.m. to about 5 a.m. in the late 1980s and 1990s, Castro also holds a spot in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the person who has been on television the most. During those years, she had to check herself into a hospital for a couple of days every six months to receive vitamin injections so she could continue.

"At times I'm not sure if it was worth it. Sometimes I think of all the times I was sick, the fatigue, or of having missed so many beautiful moments with my children or time for myself. I wasn't able to enjoy my childhood or adolescence. I spent it all on a television soundstage. People recognize me in the



street; they love me. But finally I'm alone, the same as any woman anywhere.

"It would have been nice to have some time to fall in love, to go out to eat once a week like normal people, or to leave town for a weekend every couple of months. Just disconnect yourself totally from your work. I never knew what that was like. I was only able to escape for a moment or two."

In 1974, while she was still a single college student and working in theater and Televisa part-time, Castro got pregnant. She was becoming well known by then. Her pregnancy scandalized Mexico. "I was one of the few women who were famous who said, 'I'm single, I'm not getting married and I'm going to have this child,'" she says. "This was really taboo." Soon photographers were hiding outside her house. Jacobo Zabludovsky, then host of Televisa's morning show, called several times, asking her to appear or to bring her child on when he was born. "Everyone wanted to know who the father was," she says. "Maybe [Zabludovsky] wanted to put on some kind of scandalous program: 'Verónica, the poor mother, suffering and rejected.' I said, 'I'm neither suffering nor rejected. I did this because I wanted to.'" That son is Cristian Castro, a Latin pop star.

She spent the next four years supporting her son, working in theater and in bit parts on Televisa novelas. Yet her star was clearly rising. In one supporting role, she became more popular than the heroine. Producers finally had to kill her off by having her character run down by a Volkswagen.

She had been out of work for several months when, in 1979, Valentín Pimstein, Televisa's most important telenovela producer, called her to his office. He was going to give her the starring role of Mariana in his next production, *Los Ricos También Lloran*, he told her. "He put a blank contract in front of me. It had nothing regarding the amount of money they were going to pay me. I said, 'How's this possible? I'm dying of hunger, but I can't work for nothing.' He said, 'Don't you trust me?' I said, 'I trust you, but the last time I worked, you all had me hit by a Volkswagen to kill me off.' Still, I signed it."

In the years since it was made, Televisa has made millions of dollars selling *Los Ricos* first in Mexico, then Latin America, Spain, Italy, and finally the ex-communist world. It is probably the most watched show Mexican television ever produced. Yet for the show's 240 episodes, Televisa paid Castro 500,000 pesos—roughly \$20,000 at the time, or about \$83

per episode—the minimum a supporting actor would make. Every time it runs somewhere in the world, Castro receives a royalty check for 17 pesos, the equivalent of about \$2.

Nor did that blank contract include an assistant or a wardrobe. So for the year she filmed *Los Ricos*, Castro sang in theaters and cabarets on weekends. One weekend a month, she'd fly to Los Angeles and buy brand-name clothes with minor defects from the sewing factories, return to Mexico, and use them as costumes in filming.

Still, *Los Ricos* made Verónica Castro a star. It was a huge hit in Mexico. Mexicans still use the title occasionally in conversation to mean "Everybody has problems." Castro went on to make another twenty telenovelas in Mexico. She became the only Televisa actress who found much work outside her country. *Los Ricos* made her a star in Argentina, Brazil, and Italy as well. Televisa actually banned her from 1981 to 1986, when she left Mexico to make novelas in Argentina, then Italy. The company was known to go to some lengths to humiliate stars who left its stable. Verónica Castro was one of the very few stars Televisa had to entice back when it saw punishment wasn't working, finally offering her an exclusive contract to get her to stay home.

Over the next few years she grew into one of the two or three most recognizable faces on television. Then in September 1992, as she was filming a talk show in Spain, Televisa called. *Los Ricos* was doing very well in Russia, of all places. Castro hadn't even known it had been sold to Russia. But now Televisa was telling her the show was bringing the country to a halt. A visit had been hastily arranged. A few days later she was on a plane heading for Moscow. With that visit, the telenovela became international.

"I got there and they got me off the airplane and put me in a room at the airport. I thought there was some problem," Castro says. "They told me I couldn't leave because the airport was closed. Then they got me these huge guards. I walked in among them. Finally there was an opening, and I could see that the entire airport was filled with people. You couldn't see the end of them. I said, 'What's happening?' They said, 'Mariana is here.'"

Later she attended a showing of the Bolshoi Ballet's presentation of *Swan Lake*. Her presence caused a stampede of autograph hounds, and the ballet had to delay the starting of the next act; meanwhile the attendance of United

Nations General Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali caused barely a murmur.

"Flowers cost a lot in Russia, especially then," Castro says. "But there were times when you could not have put another flower in my hotel room, it was so full. It really bothered me, to be honest. I didn't like it that people might not be able to eat for two weeks in order to give me flowers."

She toured the Kremlin and met top Russian officials, including Boris Yeltsin. But the reaction of common Russians startled her most. "Wherever I'd go, they wouldn't clap or cheer. They'd cry," she says. "They'd cry and cry and cry. There were women and these enormous Cossacks crying. I said, 'Please don't cry. Let's be happy. I love you.' But they'd keep crying. I didn't understand it. But this was a country where women had it very rough and they knew what it was like to lose a child."

Russians are now fully addicted to telenovelas. In 1996 Boris Yeltsin arranged for a special showing of the Brazilian telenovela *Tropacaliente* on election day to keep people from leaving town. They stayed, watched the show, and voted. Press reports credit it as a key tactic in his victory.

In the lore surrounding the telenovela as an international phenomenon, *Los Ricos* has earned a hallowed spot. It is that rare thing, a durable product in a throwaway genre. *Los Ricos* has been shown in more than fifty countries, including Greece, Lebanon, Israel, and Zambia. It has done particularly well in countries at war. It was huge in Argentina during the Falkland Islands war with England in 1982. In Italy the telenovela has been shown twenty-seven times, and there are Italians who have memorized its dialogue and perform the action as it unfolds on the screen. Castro has been chosen best foreign actress in Italy. The telenovela was shown at 8:30 a.m. in Spain and disrupted work routines. Castro was invited to mainland China after the show became a major hit there as well.

Fernanda Villeli, a telenovela author, remembers her daughter, a Mexican diplomat, went to Vietnam at about this time. But instead of discussing trade between the two nations, Vietnamese government officials spoke of only one thing: How could they get photographs of Verónica Castro? Her daughter frantically called with the request. Villeli sent the photographs but thought this strange since *Los Ricos* had not yet aired in Vietnam. "Apparently what had happened is that they had obtained a pirate tape of the novela that was

subtitled in Chinese," Villeli says. "They had a narrator, off camera, simply narrate the story in Vietnamese: 'Now this is what will happen. And she says this.' They didn't understand the language, but they knew what was going to happen."

Nineteen Mexican telenovelas have aired in Russia. But it was *Los Ricos* that showed Televisa that its most scorned product was a gold mine in disguise. Protele then got serious. It held focus groups of housewives in every country it sold to, and salesmen began trotting the globe. Televisa's telenovela sales outside Latin America have gone from 5,000 hours in 1994 to what they estimate will be 22,000 hours this year. "Now our goal is not just to sell a telenovela to a country but to move into more air hours in each country," says Font.

International sales meant Televisa very quickly began shooting chunks of its novelas on location. The public abroad wanted to see exotic Mexico. "Before, the entire telenovela took place in the living room, dining room, kitchen, maybe in the car," says Font. "Now we produce in parks, streets, office buildings. This has a lot of appeal. Besides following the drama, people like to see the beach, waterfalls, people walking in the street. There's a lot of interest in other countries about who we are in Mexico."

Ironically, it's at precisely this moment when who Mexicans are, as shown in their telenovelas, is itself changing.



"Before, you know, no one in a telenovela smoked," says Fernanda Villeli, sitting in her small office at Televisa's San Angel studios, and as if on cue she fires up a Marlboro Light. "No one drank, either. We never had bedroom scenes. You never saw anyone actually sleep with anyone in a telenovela."

A short woman with short gray hair, Villeli has spent almost forty years putting safe but torrid words of passion and betrayal in the mouths of statuesque and sculptured actors. With sixty telenovelas to her credit, Villeli is at least as important a literary figure in world pop culture as Jackie Collins or Neil Simon. Still, she could easily walk down a Mexico City street unmolested. Call it a reflection of the low esteem in which telenovelas are held at home. Televisa stars, whose careers have taken flight on her words, can pass her by with barely a glimpse of recognition. Thalia has an office next to hers, "but I

know her only from television," Villeli says.

Villeli is a telenovela pioneer. In 1958 she wrote the first Mexican telenovela, *Senda Prohibida* (*Forbidden Path*) was the story of a scheming poor country girl who, to survive in the big city, uses her beauty to seduce a rich married lawyer. It was sponsored by Colgate-Palmolive. The production staff brought props from home and a number of actors declined the job, fearing overexposure. No tape of the program exists. "It was an experiment," says Villeli. "We didn't know what we were going to unleash."

Today, at seventy-six, Villeli is writing for the first time a script with language the way Mexicans speak it on the street. "Previous governments said, 'You can't use any word that begins with *Ch*, not even *Chihuahua*. Now we use the words we think are necessary," she says.

Curiously, the liberating changes around the world that meant so much to Televisa's international success came late to Mexico and the network. Through the early 1990s Mexico was selling telenovelas to newly open countries, while at home it remained governed by one of the world's now scarce one-party states that still thought it necessary to control what its people could see.

It wasn't so much that the country wasn't changing. On the contrary, the breach created by the Democratic Front in 1988 became a gaping divide, and by the mid-1990s Mexico was inching away from its one-party system. By 1996 opposition parties were making unprecedented electoral advances. The PRI was stunned with internal division and discredited after twenty years of economic crisis. Mexicans, housewives even, were talking politics as if it meant something. Still Televisa held stubbornly to its proven novela formula. There was no reason to change. "A person once said it seemed that televisions in Mexico came programmed with [Televisa's] Channel 2," says Bernardo Romero, a Colombian telenovela author, who has written for Mexican television as well. "Televisa spent many years getting audiences used to not changing the channel."

Yet flabby from years as a monopoly, Televisa had also been taking shortcuts. Its telenovela scripts were too often "refried" of previous successes. Inexperienced or unimaginative directors were using unknown actors. Characters, especially the women, seemed Victorian. Most important, a modern, more robust Mexico wasn't showing up in the network's novelas. Ratings began to

slide. In desperation, and instead of taking novelas off the air, Televisa put more on and at all hours. It didn't work.

What did work, finally, was competition.

Toward the end of 1993 the government had sold two of its stations to a recently formed network known as Televisión Azteca. That ended Televisa's monopoly. In early 1995 newly elected president Ernesto Zedillo bowed to reality and announced that the government would no longer control the media.

It took a while for Azteca to get on its feet and longer still for the new network to actually challenge the Televisa behemoth. But in 1996, casting about for a way to break the Televisa headlock on the nation's viewers, Azteca took a risk and aired *Nada Personal* (*Nothing Personal*). Mexicans, by this time, had seen two top politicians assassinated in 1994 and were regularly hearing of foreign bank accounts worth many millions of dollars that Carlos Salinas's brother, Raúl, allegedly owned under aliases. *Nada Personal* reflected all that. It was the first telenovela dealing with political corruption and assassination—topics once very much banned from telenovelas by Azcárraga and the government. Plus it was more cinematic, using better lighting, longer scenes, and more complex characters. How well it rated is debatable. But the government let it run—it likely by now couldn't have done otherwise. And suddenly, to the fantasy factory known as the Mexican telenovela industry, reality began to matter.

Azteca, seeing Mexico changing before its eyes, began exploiting Televisa's dinosaur image. It took risks with telenovela subject matter. *Al Norte del Conzón* (*North of the Heart*) was a love story about undocumented immigrants and shows them beaten by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Last year Azteca aired *Demasiado Conzón* (*Too Much Heart*). The show was about drug trafficking, a once prohibited theme. It included occasional nudity and cursing and involved the Juárez Drug Cartel. The drug lord was named Armando Castillo, a thinly disguised Amado Carrillo, the cartel's leader, who had died in a plastic surgery operation a few months before the series aired. In the show Castillo faked his own death and lived on. *Demasiado Conzón* also included two nefarious gringos: one a Washington lobbyist fronting for money launderers, the other a corrupt DEA agent named Don Johnson. Alberto Barrera, the show's writer, explained the plot and characters this way: "We've

always gotten the theme of drug trafficking from the U.S. point of view. The dealers are always named Martínez or Pérez. Even though the United States is the country that consumes more drugs than any other . . . and no one's talking about the Smiths, the Robinsons, the Williamses. So this was a way of presenting a version different from that of *Miami Vice* or Hollywood films. I named the character Don Johnson after the actor in *Miami Vice*. I did it as a joke, to kind of say, 'Hey, that's your version. Here's ours.'

The energy Azteca threw into its productions was a kick in the pants to ossified Televisa. The network began improving production, hiring known actors and movie directors and finally allowing writers like Villeli more liberty. When they did that, Televisa recovered a large part of its audience.

Televisa, too, began taking some thematic risks. *Los Hijos de Nadie* (*No One's Children*), for example, was a thin and maudlin series, even for a telenovela, but had the temerity to deal with the issue of homeless street kids, some of whom were, at long last, barefoot.

Verónica Castro saw the changes as a way to finally play a new kind of heroine. In *Pueblo Chico, Inferno Grande* (*Small Town, Big Hell*), she played Leonarda, a turn-of-the-century landowner in a small town who falls in love with a younger man, the first novela in which that happens. Powerful men in town hope to marry her and thereby ensure their fortune. They stand in the way of the couple's love. Castro did several steamy sex scenes, and the show had to be moved to a late-night time slot. Nor did *Pueblo Chico* have a happy ending. The men murder Leonarda's lover. She is left alone, pregnant with the young man's baby—the first time a Castro character doesn't end up with the man and rapturously happy.

Perhaps the most extreme examples of the new telenovela realism was to be *Tijuana*. *Tijuana* was to be a love story, around which swirled a cesspool of drugs, guns, and immigrant smuggling; discrimination against Indians; and life in *maquiladora* assembly plants and was even to include xenophobic U.S. politicians wanting to build walls between the two countries. The script outraged Tijuana officials, who, in what was likely a first, actually tried to prevent the novela from filming in their town, going so far as to try to copyright the city's name.

Raúl Araiza, the show's producer, said he didn't want to hurt Tijuana. "But

they want a film about a city that doesn't exist. When I show Tijuana with no prostitutes, no crime . . . people will die of laughter. Mexico will have important television and cinema when we can make, as in the United States, films like *Hoffa* and *JFK*. What people in a democracy want is the truth. What's important is that people know what's going on."

In fact, the script eventually proved too much for folks at Televisa, and they never did make *Tijuana*. Nor has the network gone in as much for the "social telenovela" that Azteca is known for. Still, the new realism has surfaced in subtle ways at the network. Characters in almost every telenovela have become more believable. People are shown occasionally smoking, drinking; rich people are actually shown working. Above all, women's roles have changed substantially. No longer is the novela heroine always a poor, dim-witted maid who suffers until fate brings her Prince Charming. More heroines now are educated and middle-class. "The typical female lead in telenovelas is really fiction," says Pary Manterola, who started as a chemist, the heroine of *Genie Bien* (*The Privileged*), a Televisa product that aired in 1996 and included a serious portrayal of a homosexual. "She's always good. She cries, she suffers. The man always mistreats her. My character breaks that mold. She's strong and in this case the man is weak. She makes decisions."

The role that likely changed for good how Mexican women are portrayed arrived on the screen in late 1997, played by an actress telenovela audiences knew, ironically, for playing the typically virginal, weepy heroines desperately seeking happiness through a husband.

Angélica Aragón had been in seventeen novelas by the time the role of María Inés Domínguez came her way in the novela *Minada de Mujer* (*The Look of a Woman* or *A Woman's View*, depending on who you ask).

In her forties, Angélica Aragón is a strongly beautiful woman with high cheekbones. Like Verónica Castro, Aragón is a single mother. "Through books you become educated emotionally. You learn how people fall in love, why, what they do in certain situations," she says. "But people in this country don't read, even newspapers are read very little. So soaps, especially for women, have become that substitute, that sentimental education that is very necessary. Women have been taught that if they marry the right guy, they'll be happy and secure."

*Minada de Mujer* had a different message. And it became Azteca's first real ratings coup in the telenovela wars. The series ended as one of the highest-rated shows on television and has gone into foreign syndication. In a sense the show took up the traditional Las Marías fable years later, with María now in middle age. María Inés Domínguez is a fifty-year-old woman whose perfect upper-class life is shattered when her attorney husband leaves her for his younger mistress. The story dealt with how a woman remade her life and found happiness away from her husband. The show touched on youth drug abuse, condoms, bulimia, and a variety of other formerly off-limits subjects.

But *Minada de Mujer* stirred the most debate because María Inés, too, took a younger lover. Mexico takes on faith that men have a right to extramarital affairs and believes just as strongly that wives should suffer in silence and remain faithful. *Minada de Mujer* posited that jilted wives can have lovers, too, and that went down hard. A Monterrey family-values group petitioned Azteca to cancel the show—though they'd never complained at the numerous portrayals of male infidelity. Mexico City archbishop Norberto Rivera suddenly preached a sermon deploring television artists who depict adultery and free-union relationships in their programs.

Meanwhile the set of *Minada de Mujer* saw its own controversy. Only half jokingly, male stagehands formed FUSA—in English, the United Front of Offended Sanmillanistas—Ignacio San Millán being María Inés's cheating husband. They, too, were outraged that María Inés took a lover and invited him to the home she had shared with her now departed husband. They openly gloated over the prospect, once part of the script, that Ignacio take everything from María Inés in the divorce settlement. "Most of these guys will have a mistress," says Aragón. "They didn't want to be put on the spot by the story line. To accept that María Inés has the right to establish her own happiness, they're allowing for their own wives to do the same."

Azteca later aired a talk show in which guests and psychologists discuss the issues raised by *Minada de Mujer*. Aragón, meanwhile, is planning a telenovela based on the life of Antonieta Rivas Mercado, a tragic figure from the revolutionary era. Rivas Mercado was a great patron of the arts as well as a strong-willed woman who, in 1919, divorced her husband, attempted an affair with a homosexual, was the longtime lover of 1924 presidential candidate José

Vasconcelos, and finally committed suicide. "It's a show that'll try to make parallels between the end of the last century and the end of this century; there's the same vacuum of leadership in the government," Aragón says.



As all this was going on, and as if it sensed what was happening in its country, monolithic Televisa was immersed in dramatic structural changes.

In April 1997 Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, El Tigre, the legendary "soldier of the PRI," died of cancer at the age of sixty-six. He was a man with little formal education but a steel-hard business sense, who loved racos, tequila, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. He was a patron of the arts, had founded two museums, and possessed an art collection that reportedly contained works by Picasso. Physically notable with a pronounced dimple and a shock of white hair, he was one of the most influential men in Mexican life during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

At the time of his death, the Televisa empire included four national television stations, 280 Mexican affiliates, sixteen radio stations, forty magazines, as well as newspapers, record companies, movie production and distribution firms, and singing and acting schools—all of which allowed it to function as an entertainment factory that created and promoted television, film, and recording stars. The company also owned two soccer teams, Mexico's largest soccer stadium, nineteen bullfighting rings, and a cable television firm.

It was said that in his last years, particularly after the murder of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donald Colosio, Azcárraga came to regret his company's role as pillar of the ruling party; a newspaper quoted an associate who said Azcárraga had come to find politics a "dirty business."

"We can't even come to understand his importance today," Laura Castellot, an author of a book on Mexican television and a friend of Azcárraga's, said after his death. "He was transcendental."

Others cast his contribution differently. "Emilio Azcárraga repressed the creativity of many people, forcing them to work under ideological limitations and exclusive contracts," said Alvaro Cueva, the telenovela author and columnist. "His death can be compared to the end of a dictatorship."

Indeed, Azcárraga's departure was another chink in the armor of the once

invincible PRI. He left this \$3-billion enterprise in the hands of his twenty-nine-year-old son, Emilio Azcárraga Jean, who quickly set about modernizing the company. Azcárraga Jean distanced himself from the PRI; Televisa news and talk shows soon featured guests from the opposition who were once banned. He cut five thousand jobs, eliminated exclusive contracts with many Televisa actors, and began contracting out services that the company once paid salaried staff to do.

The company's traditional personalities, too, were being cut loose. Jacobo Zabludovsky, Televisa's longtime news anchorman who many Mexicans viewed as the PRI's propagandist, retired at the end of 1997. Raúl Velasco, the host of the weekly variety show *Siempre en Domingo* and another symbol of old Televisa, stepped down a few months later.

It was probably only a matter of time before Verónica Castro felt the changes. Within eighteen months of the elder Azcárraga's death, Televisa told her bluntly that it had no work for her. Mexico's greatest telenovela diva and the world's most important Latina television actress was out in the cold.

Perhaps her image meshed too completely with the Televisa that was Mexico's television monopoly, a company that was politically compromised, the propaganda arm of the PRI. "I don't understand anything about it," she says, sitting in the darkened study of her mansion one afternoon. "You feel part of a company. I've been working for them for thirty years. I've always been careful to identify myself as part of the team so that people identified me with Televisa. Everywhere I'd go in the whole world, I'd always talk about Televisa. I felt like an important part of the company. Then I realized that I wasn't.

"They're trying to reinvent Televisa," she says. "I don't think it's going to be possible."

But it was happening, just as Mexico and the telenovela were changing. Both the company and the genre it invented were adapting to a domestic market where constant innovation and creativity were necessary to keep an audience that not long before had accepted anything it was shown. Increasingly novelas were striving for a middle-class public that advertisers were trying to reach. Productions were requiring a credibility they'd never needed before. A few novelas—*Minada de Mujer* being one—opted not to use the electronic prompter to make the acting more at ease. "It's a little

like Christianity," says Alfredo Troncoso, a communications professor at the Universidad del Nuevo Mundo. "It was a religion of the lower classes. It only became a powerful and lasting religion when it began appealing to, and adapting to, the middle and upper classes. If [the telenovela] is going to be destined for higher classes, then it has to get a little more refined."

So once again the telenovela was showing itself to be Mexico's most important cultural product, this time by reflecting Mexicans' recent civic effervescence and with it the slow crumbling of a tired regime. Neither the PRI nor Televisa controls Mexico as it once did. And so a genre that began as a foundation of authoritarian rule was subtly undermining the system that built it.

"Mexico is oxygenating," says Alberto Barrera, who wrote *Nada Personal* and *Demasiado Corazón*. "Five years ago we couldn't have done [these shows]. I think right now in Mexico there's a kind of anxiousness for democracy. Before, it was a society unaccustomed to competing, in politics, television, anything. Now it's beginning to get used to it."