



## **She Packs a Punch: Unmasking a Feminist History of Luchadora Movies**

A second round for the overlooked women of Mexican action cinema

### **Programme notes by feminist archive activist collective Invisible Women**

With our new touring programme *She Packs a Punch*, we embark on a wild journey through the camp and curious world of Mexican 1960's pulp cinema, spotlighting its unsung action heroines. This series features two recently restored films — *Las mujeres panteras* (*The Panther Women*, 1967) and *La mujer murciélago* (*The Bat Woman*, 1968), both directed by René Cardona — that are as entertaining as they are culturally significant.

Cardona's films blend action, spectacle and *lucha libre*, while also showcasing captivating female stars of the era. These films have historically been dismissed as kitsch b-pictures, lumped together with the often maligned genres - action, horror, fantasy — from which these movies liberally borrow. But while it's true that Cardona has no qualms about leaning into the seedy conventions of the exploitation genre, his work also serves as fascinating reflections on the socio-political climate in which they were made. Once snootily dismissed as lowbrow by Mexico's elitist cinema establishment, these films are now being rightly revisited and re-evaluated as an integral part of Mexican popular cinema's rich history.

### **A Super Heroine of the Mexican Film Archive**

At the forefront of this revival is Viviana García Besné, a film-maker, self-described “popular film activist”, and founder of the archive *Permanencia Voluntaria*. Her 2009 documentary *Perdida*, pays homage to both her family history and the early days of Mexican cinema. As a descendant of the Calderón dynasty — a family that played a crucial role in shaping Mexican cinema and became synonymous with lowbrow genres like the *lucha libre*, monster/ horror films, as well as the wildly popular bawdy sex comedies known as *ficheras* — García Besné has spent years reviving her family's cinematic legacy. Over the course of seven decades, the Calderóns operated 36 cinemas, both in the US and Mexico, and produced over 250 films through their production company, *Cinematográfica Calderón*. When the studio closed in 2014, García Besné found herself in her great-uncle's vast house in Mexico City, contemplating the fate of the thousands of film reels, documents, and

photographs that made up its half-forgotten legacy. These included the original negatives of films featuring iconic characters like El Santo, the most famous of the popular luchador heroes, but also less well remembered figures, such as la Mujer Murciélago.

García Besné's work is not just about preservation; it's about reclaiming history. Her efforts to revive Mexican popular cinema challenge the classist preconceptions which have led to these films being historically undervalued. She underscores their relevance as social, cultural, and economic barometers for a changing Mexico, countering the historical amnesia that surrounds this vibrant cinematic heritage. In restoring these films, she seeks to shine a light on the narratives that shaped the cultural fabric of the nation.

### **She's a Knockout! Luchador(a)s hit the Big Screen**

By the 1960s the golden age of Mexican cinema had begun to wane and in its place the country was witnessing the emergence of a major new cultural phenomenon: lucha libre. Although professional wrestling had already gained a foothold in Mexico as early as the 1930s, it wasn't until the rise of television in the 1950s that it exploded in popularity. Stars like El Santo and Blue Demon became household names, and filmmakers capitalised on this, bringing lucha libre to the big screen and co-opting some of the hallmarks of the rising global superhero craze along the way.

To truly appreciate these films, it's crucial to understand the historical context. Monster cinema was booming, and Mexican filmmakers were producing many horror films alongside a growing number of films starring lucha libre wrestlers. Lucha libre itself was already deeply embedded in the Mexican collective consciousness, reflected not only in cinema but also in literature, music, and other forms of popular culture. Canny filmmakers sought to take advantage of this growing popularity, which led to the birth of a new subgenre:

Luchador films were highly entertaining, often ridiculous films in which wrestlers would be inserted into the popular horror and action movies of the day and positioned as a kind of superhero figure, fighting against forces of evil. El Santo for instance was cast in a series of films where he was pitted variously against the martians, zombies, Dracula and the Mummy — you name it, if it was evil then Santo was very likely fighting it.

A small but significant subset of these popular B movies were the luchadora films, which featured female wrestlers. Between 1954-1986, women were forbidden to wrestle in Mexico City, and systematically barred from the sport. Films like *The Panther Women* and *The Bat Woman* therefore became one of the few ways audiences could witness female wrestlers in action, reflecting a larger conversation around women's struggle for agency and representation in a male-dominated arena.

Luchadora roles offered an opportunity for economic empowerment; these women became not just performers, but key contributors to the film industry. García Besné has emphasised the significance of reviewing production

records, where the sheer volume of female wrestlers submitting their resumes and photos stands out. In her examination of the financial ledgers, she has noted that these women were paid well — not on an hourly or daily basis, but hired for the duration of the shoot. This arrangement encompassed their roles in fight scenes and extended to their contributions as consultants, early stunt performers, and choreography coordinators. Some were also involved in designing the costumes worn by the wrestlers on screen. The luchadora's multifaceted contribution and active participation underscores how these films served to offer empowering possibilities for these women, both on and off screen.

For all the spandex, eyeliner and screwball plotting, the luchadora movies offered a challenge to traditional gender norms and an exploration of female sexual agency within a cinematic framework that previously had often exploited marginalised women's stories and labour.

### ***The Panther Women: Clawing at the Canon***

In *The Panther Women*, director René Cardona intertwines gothic horror and lucha libre, to create a wonderfully campy and weird genre mashup. This is a film which is more about vibe than conventional storytelling, and canny viewers would be advised to not get too hung up on the story. The plot, as far as it can be understood, centres on a satanic witch cult of were-panther women who wage a war against the descendents of the druid who once killed their ancient leader. As they embark on their murderous mission, the panther women are taken on by fearless luchadoras, Loreta Venus (Ariadne Welter) and the Golden Rubí (Elizabeth Campbell).

When *The Panther Women* was made, Ariadne Welter had already earned a bit of a reputation for her final girl roles in films like *El Vampiro* (1956), a Mexican horror classic, and its sequel *El ataúd del vampiro* (1958), where she starred alongside actor-producer Abel Salazar. The two reunited in camp-horror gem *El barón del terror* (1962), where Welter's scream-queen moment was cemented in a scene in which her character falls victim to Salazar's brain-sucking monster in a late night cantina.

Campbell meanwhile, was a relative newbie who brought a unique flair to the role. Coming from the United States, she embraced the opportunity to work on the film, and was soon charming audiences with her delightfully accented Spanish. She was trained by the women wrestlers on set during the making of *The Panther Women*, and clearly enjoyed the experience — after the shoot she continued to work as a luchadora in other films and TV shows, often reprising the role of Golden Rubi.

Another notable star originally from the US is Yolanda Montes (a.k.a. stage Tongolele), who portrays one of the glamorous panther women tasked with seducing a victim of the coven. A celebrated exotic dancer, Tongolele moved to Mexico and successfully transitioned into the realms of B movies and telenovelas. One particularly fun example from her filmography is *Isle of the Snake People* (1971), in which she starred alongside Boris Karloff as a sinister snake dancer leading a cult of beautiful, voodoo-crazed zombie women — all in a day's

work for the ever game Tongolele apparently.

### ***The Bat Woman: A Feminist Icon in Disguise***

*The Bat Woman* also offers an intriguing lens through which to examine the intersection of gender and genre in Mexican cinema. Here the luchadora tradition collides with the emerging archetype of the super hero. The central heroine is, in an act of cynical copyright infringement, taken from the DC Comics, although it's worth noting that Mayan culture has its own mythical Bat Goddess character; which raises the question, who is appropriating who here exactly?

However you see her, the Bat Woman is a brilliant fantasy character. She is a glamorous, independent single woman, who uses her immense wealth to teach herself extraordinary skills and to fight crime, all while outsmarting her two male cop sidekicks. Her wardrobe is spectacular, dripping with mink stoles and dazzling evening gowns, when she's not in disguise training with the luchadoras at the gym or cruising in her T-Bird along Acapulco's scenic cliffside roads. The Bat Woman shows no interest in romance, has no traumatic back story, and generally just seems to be having a great time, even if her exploits do sometimes see her getting into fights with mad scientists and fishmen.

The actor behind the Bat Woman, Maura Monti, has just as intriguing a backstory as her on screen persona. Born in Italy and raised in Venezuela, Monti moved to Mexico City to pursue modelling before breaking into the film industry. In fact, fortune smiled on her when she won a prize from the National Lottery, turning her overnight into a true icon of the Mexican jet set. After appearing in a few other luchador films, including co-starring with El Santo, she ultimately rose to fame portraying the Bat Woman, marking the first female version of Batman in Mexican Cinema. Notably, with the cancellation of Warner's *Bat Girl* movie in 2022, Monti's portrayal remains the only big-screen representation of a Bat Woman to date.

Monti insisted on performing her action scenes herself without using a stunt double, which got her into some dangerous situations. While filming a diving sequence, she had a run in with a manta ray and almost ran out of oxygen. During another shooting day, she parachuted and nearly crashed into some rocks, and had to be rescued by speedboat; like a true pro, she immediately picked herself up and went for a retake.

Eventually, after becoming disillusioned by the hypersexualisation of women in film (and perhaps her own role in this), Maura Monti departed from the industry to embrace a career as an artist and art educator. In the mid-1990s, she founded her own school in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, coinciding with the rise of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. There she dedicated herself to teaching while also establishing herself as a passionate activist for indigenous rights.

Maura Monti continues to work as a sculptor today. As a passionate advocate for the film's restoration, she expressed her excitement to García Besné when approached about the project, delighted at the opportunity to see herself back on screen and featured on the re-release posters. During a restoration screening, Monti reflected on the film, stating, "At the time, I never considered it transcendent cinema, but now, fifty years later, I recognize its significance. I can see it evolving into a classic, cult film."

Now, thanks largely to the tireless work of García Besné, that evolution is well underway. By advocating for the recognition of these overlooked films, and arguing for a revisionist feminist reinterpretation of Mexico's popular cinema, García Besné has ensured the continuing survival of these crucial artefacts of cinema history. By screening these films to new audiences in the UK, we hope to highlight their value not only as pieces of brilliant escapist entertainment, but also to celebrate the role that the luchadoras played in Mexico's collective memory and cultural narratives. Behind the mask, she really does pack a punch.

---

**She Packs a Punch is presented by Invisible Women and T A P E collective.**

**Screening as part of Art of Action, a UK-wide film season supported by National Lottery and BFI Film Audience Network.**

**Special thanks to Viviana García Besné from Permanencia Voluntaria**