

## Guantanamera

“Guantanamera” is not only the Cuban ballad made most popular in this country by folk singer Pete Seeger and others; it also literally means a female or girl from Guantanamo (the province or the city) on the southeastern corner of Cuba. Veteran Cuban film director Tomas Gutierrez Alea uses both of these elements in his new picture. Its modest, almost homespun flavor is in the spirit of Mr. Alea’s previous film, the art house favorite *Strawberries and Chocolate*. *Guantanamera* was, in fact, Alea’s last film; he died at 69 of cancer while making it with colleague Juan Carlos Tabio.

This *Guantanamera* is--simply put--a “road picture.” The familiar song appears periodically on the sound track, but with new verses commenting on the movie’s action. The principal “guantanamera” of the film is Gina (Mirtha Ibarra, Alea’s wife), who has returned to her native Guantanamo with her aunt Yoyita (Conchita Brando), a renowned singer. When Yoyita dies unexpectedly, Gina joins her husband, Adolfo, a state funeral director, to bring the body back to Havana for burial. Adolfo (Carlos Cruz) is a self-important bureaucrat with an elaborate scheme for saving money on the shipment of remains across the island which involves the constant switching of hearses. As their funeral party traverses Cuba--with Candido (Raul Eguren), Yoyita’s old flame, along--they keep encountering, among others, two truckers, the raffish lothario Ramon (Pedro Fernandez) and his partner Mariano (Jorge Perrugoria), once a student who was enamored of Gina (when she was an economics professor) but who is now a footloose Romeo.

The constant starts and stops and on the road provide the backdrop for character development: Adolfo’s petulant self-importance sours all he meets, driving sweet Candido away and forcing Gina to become more and more intrigued with the pining Mariano. The roadshow leads, perhaps inevitably, to a comically grotesque climax with Yoyita’s burial.

This is not Cuban filmmaking with a blatant political agenda, but rather a savory slice of contemporary Cuban life, full of chronic hardships but redeemed by the spirit of *la gente*--“the people.” The acting is uneven; for example, Carlos Cruz’s Adolfo seems too obvious and crudely conceived. It makes one legitimately wonder why Gina hitched up with such an obnoxious husband, though Ibarra plays her character intelligently, with a smile as bracing as Cuba Libre. Effective, too, is Perrugoria (the gay Diego in *Strawberry and Chocolate*) as a muddled--yet *simpatico*--young fellow who wins you over.

Such commentary as there is on Cuban life in *Guatanamera* is sidelong but clear: Fidel’s island is in disrepair, a place where things break down, officials are officious, drinks run out, and the despised dollar is still the best exchange. Such a context gives some backbone to a film that might otherwise appear too sentimental.

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