



# ESCENAS DE PUDOR Y LIVIANDAD

This exhibition focuses on ten iconic women participating in theater and film around the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th Century in Mexico. Their names, in chronological order, are: Virginia Fábregas, Esperanza Iris, Mimí Derba, María Conesa, Lupe Rivas Cacho, María Tereza Montoya, Celia Montalván, Dolores Río, Lupe Vélez and María Félix.

Carlos Monsiváis collected all of the photographs of these ten divas exhibited here and wrote about them, particularly in his book *Escenas de Pudor y Liviandad*. The ideas contained in the book were a direct inspiration for this exhibition, in particular this phrase:

“By trying to become an object of desire, some actresses transform – dictated by silent films and as a consequence of their sovereign will– all their actions in accomplishments of behavior. Deceitful women, ladies who extinguish themselves in darkened rooms, mothers who agonize in the dark not to disturb the triumphant son, these divas’ characters are a novelty because they claim for themselves all of the male universe’s attention”.

The pieces selected for this exhibition highlight the roles played by these actresses –they sometimes sang, with different degrees of ability–, the postcards they posed for, which promoted during those years certain social roles or moral labels for women and men as well. That is why Monsiváis used the words “pudor” (chastity) and “liviandad” (frivolity). A chaste woman is an ideal woman, who acts almost like a virgin, is sometimes abandoned by a man to lead a more passionate or wasteful life, but ideally, she should be the pillar keeping the home upright. On the contrary, the frivolous woman is the one that has a sex life and is able to take care of herself, but is not happy of not having a traditional family. Men who decide to be with them, they struggle with controlling their jealousy and not being the ones who court them exclusively, and they fight against the stigma of not choosing a partner that resembles the virtuous and upright model.

Aside from these representations, these divas’ biographies reveal their ability to make their way in theater companies and movie production, which had been mainly dominated by male characters, as well as not depending on their appearance to succeed.

Besides photographs, the exhibition includes audios on loan from the Fonoteca Nacional and Fundación Televisa, as well as videos of their TV and movie appearances.



So this is how they were... So it was for them that they dueled and waited for hours in line outside the theaters. So that young man was looking so intently, pretending to read Antonio Caso's *Sociología* course. These postcards! Postcards that were traded in class at the Escuela Preparatoria and the offices of the Secretaría de Fomento. So these eyes, these arms, and these lips made the government shut down theaters for immorality. And then, all their admirers cooperated to pay the fine and help the theaters keep going. Some were famous for their beauty, others for their dramatic arts that moved people to tears, and others for their ability to sing risqué songs. About Mimí Derba, who stood out as a movie director, it was said that she had "three parts Aphrodite, one part Minerva". Luis G. Urbina went to the theater to watch María Conesa and wrote that in her mouth "even the *Our father*... would be an affront to chastity". And Celia Montalván, who left us the most memorable image of her epoch: her, singing *Mi querido capitán* in the Teatro Lírico's catwalk.

Thanks to these postcards we are able to know that the soul of our forefathers was not entirely sepia; it had certain pastel tonalities. Their soul was cheerful and a little bit naïve. By observing them, we know a little bit more of Emiliano Zapata, of Victoriano Huerta, of General Obregón and their followers who, political faction none withstanding, went to the theater and spoke this language of love: "De las flores de mi jardín, / llenas de tristeza y de dolor, / guardo yo para ti un jazmín..."

The ironic eyes of Carlos Monsiváis studied these postcards for a long time. Please excuse this image, but it fits perfectly: like a butterfly from a flower, Monsiváis extracted from them meanings, interpretations, attitudes and the ideology of an era. He saw that these women were the beginning of women's liberation; goddesses of a religion that no one will invent; representatives of a small industry of photographers, make-up artists and decorators; exiles from Catholic homes; faces that move from joy to tragedy; and, above all, a symbol of the benefits of an epoch. When I look at them I think we still understand their ancient frivolous and erotic language.

**Pável Granados**



# VIRGINIA FÁBREGAS

## Virginia Fábregas García

(Morelos, December 17, 1871 – Mexico City, November 17, 1950)

A pillar of Mexican theater. Fabregas began her career as an actress in 1891. Four years later she founded her own theater *company along with María Tereza Montoya and Fernando Soler*. It was called Compañía Nacional de Drama y Comedia Fábregas-Montoya-Soler, and it had a tremendous impact both in Mexico and Latin America. The staged *Quo Vadis* (1904) to great success in Spain, as well as *Don Juan Tenorio* (1935) in Mexico City. *Fruta amarga* (1928), *Abnegación* (1938) and *La casa de la zorra* (1945). are among her film credits. She was awarded the “Palmas Académicas” in 1908 in recognition of her acting and producing career. Her remains are held in the Rotonda de las Personas Ilustres at Chapultepec.





# ESPERANZA IRIS

María Esperanza Bonfil Ferrer, known as **Esperanza Iris**  
(Villahermosa, Tabasco, March 30, 1884 – Mexico City, November 7, 1962)

Known as the Queen of Operetta, and the Emperess of Grace, she personified, with her dresses and feathers, the Belle Époque style. Her theatrical debut was at the Teatro Abreu, and in 1902 toured Europe and Latin America with the Cuarta plana play. She was decorated by King Alfonso XIII of Spain. In 1928 she inaugurated the Gran Teatro Esperanza Iris at Donceles Street in Mexico City's Downtown. Among her most famous plays one can name: *Las campanas de Carrión*, *Mater Noster*, *Noches de gloria* and *La viuda alegre*.

Sra. Esperanza Iris.



L. Camino. México.



# MIMÍ DERBA

María Herminia Pérez de León Avendaño known as **Mimí Derba**  
(Mexico City, July 9, 893 – Mexico City, July 14, 1953)

Writer, entrepreneur, and silent film pioneer, she was the first woman to direct fiction films in Mexico. Her debut as an actress came on December 12, 1912 at the Teatro Lírico. She founded production company Azteca Films, along with Enrique Rosas in 1917. Some of the movies they produced were: *En defensa propia*, (considered the first artistic film in the country), *La soñadora*, *Alma de sacrificio*, *La tigresa* and *En la sombra*. The company lasted only two years, due to the dominance of the United States movie industry, Derba however continued working in film. She worked on more than 25 films. Likewise, she worked in theater and thanks to *El Universal Ilustrado* she published two novels. In 1921, she published her autobiography titled, *Realidades*.







# MARÍA CONESA

Dorotea Conesa Redó known as **María Conesa**  
(Vinaroz, Spain, December 12, 1892 – Mexico City, September 4, 1978)

She began her career in Spain when she was seven years old in the musical theater company *La aurora infantil*, and in 1901 travelled to three cities in America: La Habana, New York, and Mexico City. In 1907 she appeared at the Teatro Albisu of La Habana with the cuplé *La gatita blanca*, play that would identify her for the rest of her life. Another of her interpretations were *La alegre trompetería* and *Las musas latinas*. During the Mexican Revolution, her fame and talent made her very influential on political figures such as Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata and even Porfirio Díaz, Francisco I. Madero and Venustiano Carranza. As “frivolous theater” waned, Conesa participated in movies and television. When she died, part of her estate was destined to creating scholarships at the Universidad Autónoma de México, and was named by the Casino Español, “María de México y España”.





# LUPE RIVAS CACHO

Guadalupe Rivas Cacho known as **Lupe Rivas Cacho**  
(Mexico City, July 18, 1908 - Mexico City, December 14, 1944)

Also known as “Pingüica”, began her career at thirteen in Mexico City in theater revues. Her talent took her on international tours. At the Théâtre de l’Avenue in París she staged *Un soir au Mexique* (An afternoon in Mexico). Also, she had success in Spain, Argentina and other countries of Latin America. When she was 23 she created her own theater company. She participated in movies such as: *¡Qué bravas son las costeñas!* (1955), *Cuando México canta* (1964), *Domingo Salvaje* (1967) and *El charro y la dama* (1949). She was politically active too. From 1922 onward, she participated with the Grupo Solidario del Movimiento Obrero along with José Clemente Orozco, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Diego Rivera.







# CELIA MONTALVÁN

## Celia Montalván

(August 1899 – Mexico City, June 10, 1958)

Her debut was at the Teatro Lírico in 1920. She was part of the musical *El jardín de Obregón*, and also in *¡Ra-Ta-Plan!*, an adaptation of a French show. She was a pioneer of silent films in Mexico, and appeared in the movie *El milagro de la Guadalupana* (1925) and in 1929 premiered *La dama atrevida* where she acted alongside Guty Cárdenas. Later she participated in multiple movies during the Thirties, such as *Don Juan diplomático* (1931), *El proceso de Mary Dugan* (1931) and *Sangre mexicana* (1931) created in Hollywood by the Rodríguez brothers. In France, she had a part in Jean Renoir's *Tony* (1935). Her last participation in film was in the Mexican musical drama *Club Verde* (1945).







# MARÍA FEREZA MONTOYA

María Teresa Montoya Pardavé, known as **María Tereza Montoya** (Mexico City, June 17, 1900- Mexico City, August 1, 1970)

She came from a theater family, at 12 had already toured the country and at 13 had her first leading role. Four years later she created her own theater company, which closed due to lack of success. In 1918 she joined the Prudencia Grifell theater company and participated in plays such as *El reino de Dios* and *Los cachorros*. She was part of Fernando Taboada and Mercedes Navarro's theater company. In films she starred in Enrique Rosas' *El automóvil gris* (1919). In 1922, she created yet another theater company of her own and toured the United States and Latin America where she garnered numerous awards. In 1934 she co-founded the Asociación Nacional de Actores (ANDA), along with other artists like Mario Moreno, Cantinflas; Jorge Negrete and Sara García. President Adolfo López Mateos, in recognition of her prolific and influential career, awarded her a lifetime pension.





# DOLORES DEL RÍO

María de los Dolores Asúnsolo y López Negrete, known as **Dolores del Río** (Durango, August 3, 1904 - Newport Beach, California, April 11, 1983)

Her film career took off in the United States from 1925 to 1942, where she participated in around 28 movies. *Joana* (1925), *What Price Glory* (1926), *Resurrection* (1927) and *Ramona* (1928) are among the most famous of her silent films. Among her movies with sound *The Bad One* (1930) and *Revenge* (1928), directed by Edwin Carewe, opened doors for her to other Hollywood productions as the ideal Latin woman. In her European movies, *Accused* (1939) and *Journey into fear* (1941) are among the most important. In Mexico she played the part of a beautiful, tempestuous and melancholy woman in movies such as *Flor Silvestre* and *María Candelaria*, both from 1943 and *La otra* (1946). In the fifties and sixties, she worked in television and theater in several Latin American countries, as well as the United States.







# LUPE VÉLEZ

María Guadalupe Villalobos Vélez, known as **Lupe Vélez** (San Luis Potosí, July 18, 1908 - Beverly Hills, December 14, 1944)

Her theatrical debut came in the Teatro Principal and worked in Hollywood, and along with Dolores del Río, was one of the first Mexican women to play leading roles in the United States. She participated in silent films, like *El gaucho* (1928) and *El canto de lobo* (1929). In movies with sound, *Oriente y Occidente* (1930), *Resurrección* (1931), *Hombres en mi vida* (1932) and *Pimienta y más pimienta* (1933) are among the most important. She spent a time in Mexico, where she acted in *La Zandunga* (1938). Eventually she returned to Hollywood to participate in comedies like *Mexican Spitfire* (1940).





# MARÍA FÉLIX

María de los Ángeles Félix Güereña, known as **María Félix** (Álamos, Sonora, April 8, 1914 – Mexico City, April 8, 2002)

She earned the nickname “La Doña” for her part in the movie *Doña Bárbara* and “María Bonita” for the song Agustín Lara wrote for her. Her first film appearance was in *El peñón de las ánimas* (1942). For her participation in *Enamorada*, *Río Escondido* and *Doña diablo* she received the Ariel prize for Best Actress. In her lengthy filmography both in Mexico and abroad, of more that 47 movies, several stand out: *La mujer sin alma* (1943), *La diosa arrodillada* (1947), *Maclovía* (1948), *La pasión desnuda* (1952), *French Cancan* (1954) and *La cucaracha* (1958). *La Generala* was her last film. She retired from acting in 1970. The Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas gave her an Ariel de Oro prize in 1986 in honor of her career and in 1993 she wrote an autobiography called *Todas mis guerras*.

