



DOWN THERE

Arturo Ripstein's
Bleak Street is
the latest from
the provocative
Mexican *auteur*

Kelly Vance



Adela and Dora, a pair of aging, worn-out Mexico City streetwalkers at the center of Ripstein's *Bleak Street*, are the type of characters who usually inhabit the fringes of contemporary crime stories. The type normally reserved for either comic relief or ironic dissonance. The sort of hard-luck girls who would either be the butt of jokes, or else the ones who emerge from the shadows to pick the pockets of a murder victim before the police arrive. Marginal characters, condemned to the fringe. Yet director Arturo Ripstein's pitiless gaze stays on them for the entire 99-minute running time.

Maybe he sees things in them that we don't. We first meet Adela (played by Patricia Reyes Spíndola) as she's walking away from a blowjob in the back seat of a car in an auto repair shop. After paying off the god-mother (Emoé de la Parra, in a predatory performance), Adela makes her way to the little room she shares with her mother, a mute, semi-conscious mummy of a woman whom Adela sends out on the street in a wheelchair to beg money. When it's bedtime, Adela wraps her mother's head in a rag, like covering up a birdcage.



Patricia Reyes Spindola (as Adela) with her tiny *luchadores* in *Bleak Street*

The life of Dora (Nora Velázquez) is just as unglamorous. Her husband Maximo (Alejandro Suárez), an unfaithful gay crossdresser, cruises the neighborhood in his wife's outfits and meets his dates in public restrooms. Dora's teenage daughter Jezebel (Greta Cervantes) only cares about the mobile phone money her mother has promised—and every day Dora reminds the girl where the money comes from. Prosperity is never just around the corner for these folks. Nevertheless, the wrought iron railings in the slum courtyard remind us of the Bradbury Building. We're in familiar territory.

Not far away lives a pair of diminutive twin-brother wrestlers who spend their screen time wearing *lucha libre* masks that would no doubt be colorful if the director weren't shooting in crisp, digital black-and-white. Their professional names—their only names as far as we know—are Little Death and Little AK, given to them for their roles as tag-team sidekicks to Death and AK-47. Of course. One of the little guys is in the habit of beating his wife, but they both revere their mother (Silvia Pasquel), who takes care to bless her sons before they leave for work. The brothers like to practice in a deserted stadium ring and blow off steam scuffling with fellow *luchadores* in a bar.

The two old whores and the two little-folk grapplers might have lived their separate parallel lives relatively peaceably if it weren't for the

rumor that Little Death and Little AK have some valuables. This piques Adela and Dora's interest. Business has been slow lately and the world operates on a cash basis. The girls spot the boys, stalk them, book a double date at the hourly hotel, and then what seems inevitable happens.



The spaces the characters pass through are too clean, stripped down like a stage set, noticeably stylized—perhaps for the Brechtian effect of stressing the artificiality of the story and scrubbing away realism. Oddly, the settings are particularly devoid of people other than the protagonists, as if the lonely soullessness of the women's predicament directly translates to physical emptiness. The Steadicam floating camera by Ripstein and his cinematographer, Alejandro Cantú, lend an otherworldliness to the beautifully dressed and lit barrio streets. Adela, Dora, Little Death, and Little AK might well be acting out a cautionary fairy tale. For all their inherent comical potential, the brothers come across as grim, unimaginative, short-sighted working stiffs. We can't see what's going on beneath their masks but we're sure it's not laughter. The prostitutes are equally businesslike, but with a schpritz of absurdity in every move they make. It's the absurdity of cruel fate, because the girls are living the classic film noir life of hopelessness brushed with bad luck. *Bleak*



Some of the unidentified onlookers who populate *Bleak Street*

Street was reportedly inspired by a 2009 real-life murder case involving, yes indeed, two little-people wrestlers and two prostitutes.

The screenplay is by the director's wife and frequent collaborator, writer Paz Alicia Garciadiego, who worked with her husband on *Deep Crimson* (1996), their version of the "lonely hearts killers" scenario. In fact *Bleak Street's* scenario shares a similar sick-joke flavor with Leonard Kastle's *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969)—slapstick mayhem, beat-out milieu, comic-book perfs, deliberately inappropriate silliness in the depths of despair. We can't help getting the feeling that the only love story in *Bleak Street* is between Adela and Dora. Their relationship is a result of professional bonding, the shared plight of bottomfeeding sex workers. Shirley Stoler and Tony Lo Bianco have nothing on Reyes and Velázquez' downwardly mobile working girls. Flirtatious compliments fly ("You look just like Dolores del Río"), the Sanborns lotion flows, and plans get hatched. Another odd couple dabbling in mayhem for profit.

The 72-year-old Ripstein has been trolling these desperate depths for fifty years, ever since 1966, when he made *Time to Die*, a western with a screenplay co-written by Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. For a major stylist of singular vision with some 57 directorial credits and an international following bolstered by film festival recognition—he received the San Francisco International Film Festival's Akira Kurosawa Award in 1999 for his body of work—Ripstein's *oeuvre* is largely unknown

in the US outside museums, those same film fests, and the very occasional art-house engagement. But the more we see of his work, the more we appreciate his excursions into the underbelly of the human condition.

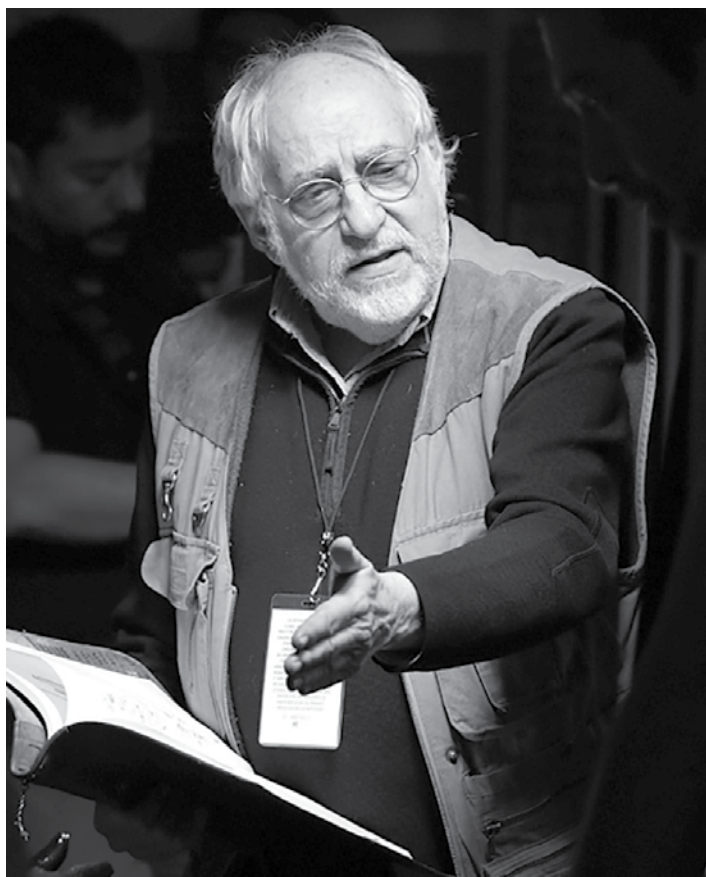
Arturo Ripstein Rosen was born in 1943 in Mexico City to

Alfredo Ripstein Jr., a noted Mexican film producer. The young Ripstein formed a relationship with Luis Buñuel during the Spanish master's Mexican period, and although the legend that Ripstein had a hand in the production of *El ángel exterminador* (1962) is apparently unfounded, Buñuel's basic skepticism and sardonic sense of humor seem to have rubbed off on Ripstein.

His filmography is littered with sad stories: A rejected woman seeking revenge (*Such Is Life*, an adaptation of the Greek tragedy *Medea*, which screened at the 2001 SF International), the struggles of a middle-class family reduced to poverty (1993's *Principio y fin*, adapted from a novel by Naguib Mahfouz), and *Hell Without Limits* (1978), about a family feud involving a transgender prostitute, a brothel for sale, and rampant homophobia in the guise of rampant capitalism. Melodramas all, and Ripstein seemed to

be growing more outrageous with each passing year. The 1974 historical indictment *El santo oficio* (The Holy Inquisition) follows the ordeal of a Jewish family forced to convert to Roman Catholicism during the Mexican component of the Spanish Inquisition in the 16th century—a subject that resonates in the context of the filmmaker's

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Arturo Ripstein

own Jewish heritage. And then there's the colorfully titled *El carnaval de Sodoma* (2006), another tale of bordello inmates, this time scrambling to take part in a local pageant.

So just how "noir" is Ripstein? Anyone so strongly influenced by Buñuel carries the basic germ of the film noir worldview, with its implied indictment of corrupt authority and its fatalistic plot mechanisms, as a matter of course. But *Bleak Street*'s cool, hard-as-steel diagram of crime also reeks of the "no way out" attitude that noir purists demand. Adela and Dora might have stepped into Mexico directly from the proletarian saturnalias of Shôhei Imamura, Joseph H. Lewis, or *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Same class-struggle point of view, same incipient air of panic in a fight for survival. Ripstein's hardscrabble vision also includes a strong preoccupation with sex, notably in the hectic lives of prostitutes. If Kenji Mizoguchi, that champion of soiled ex-debutantes, had somehow been nurtured in Mexico, he might have found common cause—alongside author B. Traven, perhaps—with Ripstein's socially minded assault on that country's injustices toward its poorest.

When Ripstein is stacked up against a stylistic powerhouse such as Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, Mexico's most prolific filmmaker, it's clear that both men are working the same side of the street. Time and again, in such lyrical calls to arms as 1943's *Flor silvestre* (aka *Wildflower*, with Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz as class-defying lovers during the Mexican Revolution), *A Woman in Love* (1946, starring Armendáriz and María Félix as a revolutionary general and a peasant, respectively), and 1951's *Víctimas del pecado* (a hysterical Ninón Sevilla starrer that screened at NOIR CITY 12 in San Francisco in 2014), Fernández sides with the downtrodden. His people and Ripstein's are basically the same, even though the

emotional tone and dramatic style may differ.

If Ripstein tends to shy away from some of the more expressly lurid aspects of the *rumberas* and *cabareteras* of Fernández (*Salón México*, 1949), Alberto Gout (*Aventurera*, 1950), or Arcady Boytler (*The Woman of the Port*, 1934), it's only to channel his outrage with fewer frills and distractions. Those particular vintage films, in common with much of Mexican cinema in years past, tend to take a residually traditional Hispanic view of romantic love. No such hang-up for Ripstein. His protests against the status quo borrow Buñuel's dry irony in place of over-the-top emotional outbursts. Ripstein may indeed be the missing link between "El Indio" Fernández and today's fast-lane Mexican international filmmakers—Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, et al.—but from the evidence of *Bleak Street* and the films that came before it, his vision matches up better with the old school.

A cloud of doomed lower-class carnality hangs over the saga of the hookers and their unfortunate little wrestlers, over and above the mercantile mechanics of tricking for a living. Upstairs at the cheap hotel, after the suckers lie sprawled on the bed (their masks have stayed on, even during sex) and the girls have split up the guys' money, Adela and Dora exchange meaningful glances, the sign of the survivor, a barely acknowledged solidarity that sees them safely out the door until the next run-in, which comes soon. As Adela explains, "We care about each other because of the holy sweat of labor fulfilled." The cinema of Arturo Ripstein lives and breathes for people like these. The skies are beautiful over Mexico, but so are, in their way, the wide-open gutters of Mexican noir. Let's agree to catch up with the films of Arturo Ripstein at every opportunity. ■

