

The Forgotten Story of 'Me Llamo Martina Sola'

Written by Melixa Abad Izquierdo

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MELIXA ABAD IZQUIERDO, APR 15 2015

The audience outside Latin America often perceives telenovelas as a generic product with broad Latin American appeal. This perception is not entirely erroneous given the fact that telenovelas have been exported within the region since the introduction of videotape in the early 1960s. Moreover, in practice the cast of telenovelas in both Mexico and Argentina attracts talent from all over the Spanish-speaking world. However, for the most part, telenovelas are most typically associated either Mexico or Argentina. That being stated, any Latin American nation that is large enough to produce and export such series generally possesses a unique form of telenovela, identifiable both by the accent spoken in the series as well as certain stylistic attributes: Mexican productions tend towards the lachrymose, while Colombian telenovelas have a hint of comedy (although lately they have heavily explored themes of drug trafficking), and Brazilian productions are realist. Thus, considering these productions as generic Latin American is itself a flawed understanding of the diversity of the region. The origins of this generalization can be traced to Napoleon III (1808-1873), who coined the term Latin America as part of his effort to extend French power into the Americas in the 1860s. The term created the idea of an undifferentiated whole out of regions that in reality are very ethnically and racially diverse. During the 20th century, the rise of media the representations of Latin America, particularly in Hollywood movies and later U.S. television series, perpetuated this concept. Interestingly, Latin America-based media companies seem are placed in contradictory positions; on the one hand, they tend to exploit the economic opportunities of a geolinguistic common market, while on the other hand are focused on developing a distinctive national style.

In 1972, Telesistema Mexicano and Venevisión from Venezuela collaborated on a production titled *Me llamo Martina Sola* (the film industry web site IMDB identifies it as *Me llaman Martina Sola*), that they intended as a Latin American soap opera. According to a contemporary press release, the telenovela starred of actors and employed technicians from ten countries. Shooting took place in Argentina, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Panama, El Salvador, Venezuela, Guatemala, Costa Rica and the United States. Unlike most telenovelas where most of the action occurred in a soundstage, this series embarked in a global expedition to shoot and show Latin America. The premise of the story was that a woman from a wealthy Mexican family travels all over Latin America looking for her husband. This was an extremely ambitious production that tried to capture a Latin America-wide audience. Producers sought to emulate the success of *Simplemente María*, the Peruvian telenovela from 1970 is considered one of the first productions to capture high ratings in several Latin American nations. However, *Martina Sola* did not achieve such ratings or engender the lasting popularity of *Simplemente María*. For the most part it is obscure with a bare presence on the internet and a bit more available from contemporary newspapers.

Martina Sola flopped due to a number of variables. The plot was not easily relatable to the intended audience, i.e. mostly urban middle- and working-class viewers. Moreover, the Pan-American peregrinations of the main character were quite strange to the typical telenovela viewer. Paradoxically, such 'globetrotting' was soon to become a reality as politics changed across the region with the advent of neoliberalism and the waning of authoritarianism. Traditionally, migration for these groups occurred for economic reasons. Also during this period Mexico – one of the biggest markets, was going through a moment when telenovelas ratings diminished. This was an interesting break from the Cinderella story for which the genre is best known.

It is not until the U.S.-based Spanish speaking networks started producing telenovelas in the 1990s that intentional multinational casts and filming achieved economic success. In these dramas, cities like Miami, Los Angeles and New

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York have come to serve as cosmopolitan settings where Latinos from all over the region love, work and hate. These stories often reference or even situate the action in the nationally-diverse characters' various countries of origin. However, this affirmation of *panlatinidad*, is almost absent from most telenovelas filmed in Latin America. Probably because of the experience of migration and the actual interaction with Spanish-speakers from all over the region makes the U.S. productions more plausible than *Martina Sola* was in 1972.

About the author:

Melixa Abad Izquierdo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Political Science at Farmingdale State College. Her most recent essay is 'A Lachrymose Heroine for the Masses: The Origins of the Cinderella Plotline in Mexican Telenovelas, 1968-1973', in *Modernization, Nation-Building, and Television History*, edited by Stewart Anderson and Melissa Chakars.