

The Politics Behind the Latino's Legacy

By RUBÉN BLADES

DURING THE 1980's, MUCH WAS anticipated on behalf of Spanish-speaking communities. A phrase was coined, "La década de los Hispanos," and numerous publications eagerly speculated that Latinos would influence the political, economic, artistic, cultural and social front in the United States.

Other than having a distinguished Mexican-American actor, Edward James Olmos, on the cover of Time magazine, the 80's came and went without much sign of a Hispanic cultural explosion in this country. In fact, in the wake of that decade's social dislocations, the Latin community provided a substantial percentage of the economically drowned and artistically ignored.

Over the years, attitudes and perceptions in the United States toward those south of its border have oscillated from outright ridicule and contempt to appeasement and courtship to rejection and indifference. Today a precarious impasse exists between the two cultures.

Since the silent era of films, Latin culture and its character have been grotesquely distorted and misrepresented. Consider the Anglo screenwriter's creation of the Latin lover and the greaser, an amoral character of unspeakable violence who came to personify

The image of Latinos veered wildly from the silent film era to World War II to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

the Mexican national and, by extension, any person of Spanish-speaking ancestry.

The negative portrayal of Latinos continued in films like "Tony the Greaser" (1911), "Rio Grande" (1919) and "Ne'er Do Well," a film from the early 20's in which a rich Anglo hops a freighter bound for Panama and, inevitably, wins the hand of the lovely Chiquita from her Panamanian boyfriend. Those kind of portrayals only lessened due to the combined action of the Mexican and Panamanian governments, which threatened in 1922 to boycott Hollywood movies that depicted Latin Americans in a demeaning manner.

The actual demise of the infamous greaser character was brought on by a fortuitous combination of political events. In the 1930's, a larger coalition of Latin American countries, headed by President Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico, decided to ban films that depicted their nationals in a negative way. The boycott coincided with the rise of Hitler in Europe; as it turned out, the war was the most important political factor in explaining the sudden change in attitudes toward Latinos.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy was partly responsible. The United States wanted to counter German influence in Latin America, which could result in Nazi beachheads in the Western Hemisphere. For political expediency, Hollywood, following Washington's agenda, produced sympathetic Latin characters and musical comedies that prominently featured Latin roles: "South of the Border" (1939), "Down Argentine Way" (1940), "That Night in Rio," "Down Mexico Way" (both 1941) and "The Three Caballeros," a 1945 Disney film starring Donald Duck. But whenever a Latin character demonstrated honorable traits, the portrayal invariably turned out to be Anglo:

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Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy was good news for Latinos in the arts.



In the 50's Rosa Parks kept her bus seat, and blacks gained attention.



Castro brought Communism to Cuba in 1959, and Latin images suffered.

Paul Muni was Benito Pablo Juárez, the President of Mexico, in the 1939 movie "Juárez." Tyrone Power played Latinos in "The Mark of Zorro" (1940), "Blood and Sand" (1941) and "Captain From Castille" (1947). And in 1952 it fell to Marlon Brando to portray the Mexican rebel leader Emiliano Zapata in "Viva Zapata!"

President Roosevelt's desire in the 40's to



Tyrone Power and Basil Rathbone in "The Mark of Zorro" (1940)—Honorable Latin characters played by non-Latinos.

create a better relationship with Latin American republics also had economic considerations. The war had closed European and Asian markets, leaving the Americas the only guaranteed place to sell movies and phonographic records. As George Hadley-Garcia said in his 1991 book "Hispanic Hollywood": "After the war the Pan-American market output was considerable; by 1949, 20 Latin Western Hemisphere nations accounted for nearly one-fifth of the foreign market for American films. In other words, less than 10 percent of the world's population supplied about 20 percent of foreign film royalties."

But politics giveth, and politics taketh away. The danger of Nazism over, the United States assumed its new and indisputable position as leader of the free world by enforcing American values at home and abroad. The early 1950's saw the political agenda defined in the United States by the commitment of the new enemy, Communism. With the closing of the American mind, and the emergence of the Communist blacklist that devastated Hollywood leftists, multidimensional Latin characters disappeared and blond, Caucasian features reappeared at the center of action and story development. Paradoxically, it is precisely during this racist, "all-white" decade that there came the biggest triumph of Latinos in the United States.

Music from the tropics became the national rage, with Perez Prado, the original Mambo King, occupying the No. 1 spot in the hit parade with "Cherry Pink and Apple-Blossom White" in 1955. And then there was "I Love Lucy," which portrayed the adventures of an interracial couple formed by a Cuban-born bandleader, Ricky Ricardo, and a goofy but adorable redheaded Anglo, Lucy. Originally, ABC turned down Desiderio Armas as the counterpart to Lucille Ball's antics. But Ball refused to do the show without her real-life husband. "I Love Lucy" became the most popular program in the United States and

proved that, given the opportunity, a Latino could become the subject of national adoration and artistic acceptance.

But just when a favorable change toward Latin culture seemed at hand, politics intervened, influenced by two unlikely individuals: Fidel Castro and Rosa Parks. When Castro created in Cuba the first Communist regime on the American continent, only 90-odd miles from Eisenhower's shores, any warming toward Latinos was suddenly deemed suspect.

The mutually expressed hostility by the two governments resulted in United States action against Cuba, including a failed military invasion, a blockade and an economic embargo. It also reinforced a negative perception toward Latin America, which persists to this day. The Latin paradise of the Busby Berkeley musicals featuring the Brazilian Carmen Miranda was turned into what was perceived to be a war zone, populated with anti-Yankee leftists (who stoned Richard Nixon in Venezuela), Communist-leaning leaders (against whom the United States organized an invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965) and masses bent on the destruction of the American way of life (as in the bloody 1964 riots in Panama). It wasn't until 1975, 16 years after the Cuban Revolution, that a network took a chance with another lead role for a Latin character: Chico of "Chico and the Man," starring the Puerto Rican comedian Freddie Prinze.

Even before the United States and Cuba began locking horns, a seemingly unimportant incident that would have repercussions worldwide took place in a bus in Montgomery, Ala. Rosa Parks, a black woman going home after a hard day's work, refused to give her seat to a white man because she was too tired and her feet hurt. Thus, the civil-rights movement began its march toward the aboli-

tion of the overt Jim Crow policies that perpetuated segregation. With this action, blacks seized the limited attention span of the country's ruling class.

American blacks, as a group, began to demonstrate skill and determination in organizing and enforcing a political and economic agenda, a skill yet to be matched by the Latin community. The long struggle by the black community for respect and equal opportunity in the arts has paid off. Almost without exception, movies, television and music feature blacks in multifaceted roles. Television particularly is filled with black characters, with several programs revolving exclusively around the black experience, however inanely conceived some of the shows may seem to critics.

Yet there are currently no Latinos in major roles on prime-time television. Both Jimmy Smits ("L.A. Law") and Mr. Olmos ("Miami Vice") are no longer on television in their supporting roles. If you happen to find a Latin character in television nowadays, he or she is likely to be a drug dealer, guerrilla, pimp, whore, maid or that perennial favorite, the Latin lover.

Despite Latinos' ever-growing numbers in the United States and their cultural wealth, no parts are written for them that take into consideration their contributions to this country's social fabric, or its economic and political development. One reason for this omission can be found in the behavior of the diverse groups that make up the Latin presence in the United States. Latinos, who come from racially and geographically distinct backgrounds, behave more like warring, independent factions than a group united by similar idiom, culture and idiosyncrasy.

Unless Latin groups coalesce — to present a coherent position on access, opportunity and political respect, and to end negative stereotyping — their fortunes in the United States may well fail to flourish.