

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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HORSE FOR HORSE / Caballo A Caballo (1939)

Genre: Comedy

Link: <https://youtu.be/KcnGCwrpNYI>

OVERVIEW

Caballo a Caballo (Horse for Horse) is one of Juan Bustillo Oro's early ventures into comedic farce, which contains a great deal of physical comedy and absurd situations. It was intended as a vehicle for a wacky criminal duo, namely a quick-witted conman and a goofy sidekick, to find themselves in all kinds of ludicrous scenarios. In this case, there is a remarkable lack of chemistry as all the actors seem to substitute increasingly frantic gesticulation for comedic timing and "straight-man" foils. It is interesting to note that the second half of the script was essentially repurposed as *Dos de la vida airada* (1947) for the duo Manuel Palacios and Estanislao Shillinsky, who, as Manolín and Schilinsky, are much more effective as picaresque rascals than Angel and Inocente. One aspect of the cinematography that distinguishes Bustillo Oro's film techniques from other directors is his use of chiaroscuro, extreme point of view shots, and other Gothic techniques in a way that makes the genre more faceted, to add depth to the questions of reality, good vs. evil, and social norms.

CHARACTERS

Angel Pastor	Small-time criminal, who likes to pose as an elegant gentleman
Inocente Cordero	Small-time criminal, dull-witted like a worn-out boxer
Don Esperidion Espérides	Wealthy industrialist, dotes on his daughter
Marta	Strong-willed daughter of Don Esperidion
Socorro	Loyal maid / personal assistant to Marta
Alberto	Jewel-thief and hustler who conned Marta into marriage

SYNOPSIS

Despite their names, Angel Pastor (Angel Shepherd) and Inocente Cordero (Innocent Lamb) are scamps who make their way through life through petty thievery and grifting. They meet each other when they both steal the same car, which had a newspaper clipping in the glove box describing the owner, Don Esperidion, and the cache of priceless jewels which he plans to give his daughter as her dowry for her upcoming wedding. After the quick-witted Angel invites the rather dull-witted Inocente to a long, multi-course dinner, they decide to join forces to steal the jewels. Little do they know that the new husband is a jewel thief, and already has his eyes on them, and his new bride has figured it out. When she and her maid, Socorro, catch Angel and Inocente in the act, they compel them to masquerade as her miscreant husband and a butler to spare the feelings of her father. Don Esperidion, who only wishes the best for his daughter, comes home to wish the newlyweds the best, but when the jewels are stolen, and Angel and Inocente look guilty, things look bad, until they receive a phone call from the police station informing Marta that her husband was killed in a car crash, and that he had the cache of jewels with him. Don Esperidion encourages Marta and Socorro to marry Angel and Inocente. Nine months later, two baby boys are born, dead ringers for their fathers.

THE STORY

The story is essentially a farce that involves the step-by-step subversion of appearances. Things are rarely what they seem to be, and yet people judge by what they see (or want to see), which

provides opportunities for con artists and grifters to take advantage of the unquestioning majority. Angel and Inocente are neither angels nor are they innocent; instead, they are amoral grifters and petty criminals. The upstanding husband is actually a jewel thief, and the supposedly naïve Marta is one of the first to see through the subterfuge of her fiancé. Throughout the film, con artists play upon the prejudices and beliefs of people in a rigid class-based society, where deference is often given to a person, simply for their appearance.

TO STEAL A CAR

Angel Pastor, a suave and debonair grifter, passes himself off as a wealthy industrialist. He steals the luxury sedan belonging to the wealthy Don Esperidion Espérides.

Police pursue Angel, so he parks the car on the side of the road and abandons it. Another petty criminal, the rather thick-minded Inocente Cordero (who is in no way an “innocent lamb”) happens by and takes advantage of the opportunity to drive off with it.

When the police capture Inocente and accuse him of stealing the car 3 days ago from Don Esperidion, Inocente swears “by his honor” (although by definition, as a thief, he has little or none, which is part of the basis of the humor), that he did not steal the car from Don Esperidion.

A LAVISH MEAL

Angel, who is quick-witted and naturally takes the mastermind role in any kind of rascalion petty thief duo, accompanies Inocente in a lavish dinner in a private dining room in an expensive restaurant. Inocente, who is tall, ungainly, and whose clothes are always disheveled, is attended to by the waitstaff because they know he has money, but they want to hide him from view, hence the private dining room.

They enjoy a multi-course meal with many courses and rounds of drinks. Angel stuns Inocente with his ability to perform sleight of hand. As the meal progresses, Angel manages to steal several hundred pesos from Inocente through his highly developed pickpocketing skills.

Inocente is moved when Angel offers him several hundred pesos. Inocente does not realize that he's simply getting his own money back, and thinks Angel is giving him money. Touched by the “generosity,” he listens receptively to Angel's idea.

Angel wants to break into Don Esperidion's mansion and steal the priceless jewels that were described in the local newspaper. The jewels are to be a wedding present to his daughter, Marta, and her fiancé, who claims to be a respectable attorney, but who is, in reality, a sneak thief who has stolen jewelry in the past.

The dinner concludes. The waiter brings the bill, and Angel directs him to give the bill directly to Inocente. “He has money,” he said. Inocente happily pays with the proceeds of the “gift” that Angel gave him, not realizing he's paying with his own money.

WORKING CAPITAL

Inocente agrees to the plan. They decide to go to the hotel where Don Esperidion has made reservations to get some working capital. Angel dons a white beard, toupee, and bushy eyebrows, wears an old-fashioned suit, and walks leaning and careening on a thick cane.

The faux Don Esperidion checks in, and then gives the hotel a case supposedly containing jewels and cash to put in the safe. Don Esperidion's trusty valet is with him. Of course, that sidekick is Inocente.

The faux Don Esperidion tricks the hotel manager into cashing a check for \$1,000 pesos, which he obtains with peso notes. Then the faux Don and his sidekick, change clothes and leave the hotel. They stay around to admire their handiwork, however, and when the real Don Esperidion is back, it is obvious that the hotel was duped. The real Don Esperidion is outraged.

As Angel and Inocente stride right by the front desk, they do not expect anyone to recognize them. However, Inocente's suitcase falls open, and large, jangling collection of lock picks, plus a white toupee and beard fall out. Inocente and Angel scramble out of the hotel, the hotel security and manager on their heels.

A JEWEL HEIST

Having changed to elegant clothing, Angel encourages Inocente to look sharp and think positively as they go to what they think will be an abandoned or empty mansion with a safe full of jewels.

They arrive in the dead of night at a spooky mansion. Inocente proceeds to diligently attempt to pick the lock, but to no avail. Angel, who realizes the door is not locked at all, flamboyantly turns the knob, which opens noiselessly.

Entering the great hall, they are surprised by the occupants of the mansion, the lovely Marta, who is Don Esperidion's daughter, and her loyal companion and servant, Socorro. Socorro is vocal and practical, and she is instantly suspicious of the two who claim they simply lost their way.

Marta looks at the two, and she decides that the gentlemanly-appearing Angel would be a good stand-in for her new husband, whom she has discovered is a notorious jewelry thief, and that he is marrying her only for money. She is frustrated because her father, Don Esperidion, has been convinced that he is a wealthy, successful attorney.

Marta stoops to extortion to convince Angel to play the part of her husband, and Inocente to be the butler. Angel will have nothing of it, until he looks more closely at Marta and sees how lovely she is. He agrees.

SURPRISED BY LOVE

Don Esperidion arrives home at the mansion. Marta introduces Angel and Inocente, and Don Esperidion is delighted with the marriage. They chat with each other, and Don Esperidion offers Angel a gold watch as a gift. At that, Angel pulls out a gold watch (even larger than the one Don Esperidion offered Angel), and asks him, "Would you like to have your own gold watch as well?" Don Esperidion is astonished when he realizes that Angel has his own watch – then laughs when Angel admits he used his skills (of questionable origin) to separate him and his valuable gold watch.

Later that evening, Don Esperidion urges Marta and Angel to consummate the marriage, which adds to a bit of awkwardness since Angel has no pajamas, but worse, he and Marta do not know each other.

Miraculously, Angel finds pajamas (Socorro locates some), and Inocente maintains his role as butler and general lackey. A comical scene ensues in the "lecho nupcial" (marriage bed), as they awkwardly try to convince Don Esperidion that all is well.

After Don Esperidion leaves the room, Angel pops up, bounds out of bed, and dons Marta's peignoir robe, which creates a comical scene. Angel makes his way to the kitchen, where he finds Inocente making a late-night repast (agape) of chicken, tortillas, and more.

Thinking of the original plan, Angel and Inocente make their way to the wall safe, but find that it is empty. They realize that someone else is in the house – probably Marta's real husband, Alberto, and they make a plan to capture him and recover the jewels.

REVELATION AND REFORM

Angel and Inocente happen upon Marta's husband, Alberto, the professional jewel thief. Angel grabs him and Inocente knocks him out with a swift punch to the head. They draft the thief into the broom closet, where they lock the door. The jewel thief and his booty are in the broom closet.

Hearing a disturbance, Don Esperidion comes into the room to find Angel and Inocente standing next to the empty wall safe that hangs open. Upset with the betrayal, he says he will call the police. Angel and Inocente protest their innocence and claim that the real thief is very close.

The phone rings. Don Esperidion confuses it with the doorbell. He then answers (finally), and listens to a police chief explaining he has news – sad news – for Marta. Marta proceeds to the phone to learn that her husband has died in a car crash, and that a large box of priceless jewels was found at his side.

Upon learning that Angel and Inocente are, in fact, innocent, he proposes that Marta and Socorro should marry Angel and Inocente in a double wedding. Angel is delighted, but Inocente takes a bit of convincing.

Nine months later: Both Marta and Socorro are at the Maternity Hospital. The two fathers and the grandfather rush in. The nurse breaks the news that both babies are male. The camera pans to a single crib where two babies lie next to each other – one has the face of Angel, the other of Inocente.

THEMES

Honor. The film begins with a scene in which Inocente swears on his honor that he did not steal the car from Don Esperidion. The fact that he did steal the car, but from the owner he believed to be Angel, is an irony that is not lost on the audience.

Angel also often pledges on his honor, and also offers his "honor" for his bond that he is telling the truth. Ironically, when they pledge on their honor as thieves, they are telling the truth. However, when they are running scams, they are not the least bit truthful, and in fact, seem to revel in duping their marks.

In the end, both Inocente and Angel reform – for love and for loyalty to their new family and paterfamilias, Don Esperidion. They are truly honorable in this moment.

Identity. There are several times when there are confusions of identity. For example, Angel masquerades as elderly man, who is assumed to be Don Esperidion. The purpose of that was to swindle the hotel for working capital to complete a heist.

Later, in the mansion, Marta asks Angel to disguise himself and pretend to be her new husband, whom she knows to be a thief. Angel and Inocente oblige her, primarily because she will turn them in to the police if they do not comply.

Love and marriage. Throughout the film, marriage is seen as a normative social institution that serves as a pillar of society and makes it possible for families to preserve their status and standing. That said, marriages are shown to be of convenience, and love is proffered up as integral part of the equation. However, Marta does not love the man she married. She married him to escape her father. Her husband does not love her; he simply wants access to priceless jewels.

At the end of the film, true love is shown to be the powerful force that solidifies marriages and also provides impetus for reform.

While love and marriage are themes in the film, there is a strong subtext that suggests that the true love and long-term commitments are not between the married couples, but between the friends and dependents. The true “marriages” are putatively between Angel and Inocente (despite the complete lack of chemistry) and between Marta and Socorro (who demonstrates loyalty and devotion). There is absolutely no evidence of chemistry between Angel and Marta, nor between Inocente and Socorro, a phenomenon that is not unusual in Bustillo Oro films. In fact, when looking at Bustillo Oro’s oeuvre in its totality, there are many repeated motifs or even repurposed chunks of scripts, many of which have a clear subversive or even “queer” subtext.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Angel Pastor: Angel Pastor is the mastermind, who delights in his picaresque life as a grifter and con artist. He likes to dress in an elegant, urbane manner, and to enjoy the best in haute cuisine and spirits.

Quick-witted. Angel is the mastermind and he comes up with creative schemes to enrich himself and his side-kick. He is proud of his schemes, and when sharing the take, he gives himself the lion’s share for “intellectual property.” Later, when one scheme does not go as planned, Inocente then keeps the majority of the take, repeating the “intellectual property” justification. It is a comical moment.

Subversive. Angel’s values do not align with the norms adhered to by the majority of the people. He has no qualms about stealing from the rich, nor does he mind bilking hotels or other thieves. Further, his masquerading as Don Esperidion exposes the fact that many of the wealthy class achieved their standing through corruption or dishonesty. For that reason, the “Robin Hood” elements of his behavior are deeply populist and likely to amuse an audience of middle to lower middle class individuals who enjoyed the “carpas” or tent shows.

Loyal. Angel is loyal to Marta and her father, despite having the goal (originally) to steal from them. Love renders him loyal, and the ultimate message is that character and creativity are more important than rank or social hierarchy.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Angel and Inocente are both petty criminals, but they are quite different from each other. Describe three scenes in which their basic qualities come on display, and explain how they differ from each other.
2. Angel creates a reality with his dialogue and with his appearance. Describe how he uses sleight of hand to fool the public and to create illusions. Then, describe how his entire persona is a larger-than-life sleight of hand that privileges illusion over reality.
3. As a purveyor of illusion, Angel arguably would be incapable of living in a world where what you see is always what you must abide, which is to say that the limits of your world cannot be augmented by illusion. Describe how and why such a world might be repellant to the world of *Caballo a Caballo* and how important illusion and the concept of being able to create a new world (with attendant possibilities) through speech, appearance, and cultural expectations, are key to the notion of transformation.
4. One of the reasons why *Caballo a Caballo* was so successful was that the character of Don Esperidion Espérides was, for all of his bluster, a sympathetic person who wanted the best for his daughter and his family. As Angel dressed in almost exactly the same sort of suits and costumes,

they had the appearance of being of the same social class. What are some of the implications and deeper signification of the fact that a petty criminal and a wealthy industrialist were so similar? List at least three possibilities and explain the social ramifications.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



Title, which uses the characteristic Art Deco font which gives the impression of a modern comedy.



Inocente is entering the elegant convertible roadster after having tricked Angel into thinking that he has a blow-out. Inocente has no idea that Angel stole the car, and that he is essentially re-stealing an already stolen car.



Inocente is pulled over by the police and a detective who have been trying to capture the person who stole a wealthy industrialist's car for several days.



Inocente swears on his honor that he did not steal the car three days ago, and nor did he steal it from Don Esperidion. The police and detectives are not impressed.



A free man, Inocente decides to treat himself to a delicious dinner, and is ushered into a private dining room in the restaurant. He is joined by Angel, a smooth operator who has some ideas for him.



Inocente generously tips the waiter as Angel looks on approvingly. They have decided to join forces and try their luck together.



Angel masquerades as an old man and claims to be Don Esperidion Espérides, a wealthy industrialist. The hotel administrator believes him.



When the real Don Esperidion Espérides checks into the hotel, the hotel administrator accuses him of being a shameless fraud and con man. Don Esperidion is outraged.



Angel and Inocente take off in Don Esperidion's car (again), and as they stop by the road, they review what they have found in the glove box. They split up the money (with more money going to one for "intellectual property"), and also review the details of a letter that promises priceless jewels to Alberto, and that they are at Don Esperidion's mansion.



Inocente attempts to open the door using a lock pick. Angel steps in and simply turns the handle of the unlocked door and they step inside.



To their great surprise, Don Esperidion's mansion is not empty. They are greeted by Marta, Don Esperidion's daughter, and her maid and personal assistant, Socorro.



Marta (on the left) welcomes the intruders, but Socorro looks askance. Marta would like to see if she can convince the more elegant of the two to stand in as her husband, the thief and con artist, Alberto.



Angel agrees to play the part of her husband in order to allay the fears of her father, and to thwart Alberto's evil designs. Angel that, since they are "married," he has the right to request his conjugal rights. He is interrupted before that conversation gets murky.



As maid and his daughter's personal assistant, Socorro welcomes Don Esperidion home. Inocente, who is supposed to be playing the part of mayorodomo (butler), is mystified by what he witnesses and is not sure what he is supposed to do.



Don Esperidion holds up an elegant and valuable gold watch on a fob as a gift to Angel. A few seconds later, Angel offers Don Esperidion an even larger gold watch on a fob – but it is Don Esperidion's own watch, which precipitates much laughter.



Callow jewel thief and husband of Marta creeps in the front door with the intent of opening up the wall safe and absconding with all the priceless jewels that Don Esperidion wished to give to his daughter.



Wearing pajamas that Socorro scrambled rapidly for him, Angel stalls for time as Don Esperidion encourages the two to consummate their marriage.



Having escaped from the “lecho nupcial” (nuptial bed), Angel and Inocente encounter Alberto and they confront him about the jewels. Angel is wearing the peignoir robe of the gown Marta is wearing.



Marta speaks to the police who inform her that her husband, Alberto was killed in a car accident. Before dying, he confessed to stealing the jewels, which he had on his person. Don Esperidion, who has taken a liking for Angel and Inocente, declares that they can easily turn a new leaf. Angel marries Marta, and Inocente marries Socorro.



Some time later, Don Esperidion, Angel and Inocente rush to the maternity hospital where Marta and Socorro have just given birth. Both babies are boys.



Looking down into the crib, Angel and Inocente see two little newborns. Seeing through their eyes, we realize that they perceive them to be little miniatures of themselves – little “mini-me’s.” The film ends on a happy note.