

Ladrón que roba a ladrón: Sharply observed, if inconsistent, Spanish-language film

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Directed and edited by Joe Menéndez; written (in Spanish, with English subtitles) by José Angel Henrickson

A number of critics have lambasted the new Spanish-language heist film *Ladrón que roba a ladrón* (*Thief Who Robs from a Thief*) as a rip-off of the *Ocean's Eleven* series. In the first place, this complaint is worthless, because it is based on an ignorance of the film's background. As originally conceived and before Hollywood began to ask for script changes—writers usually have to pay their pound of flesh in artistic compromises if they want their scripts to be produced—the film's title was *A Poor Man's Ocean's Eleven*. So, whatever resemblance this film has to the *Ocean's Eleven* series is conscious and deliberate.

Which brings us to the second point. Calling *Ladrón* derivative is more than a tad condescending. For it is no mere copy of those films; in fact, it is a much better movie, because it has something to say along the way, even if it's neither sufficiently deep or consistent. It is willing to take chances. It incorporates into its comedy, as broad as it is, a certain social conscience. That alone removes it some distance from the Steven Soderbergh films, which tend to wallow in their smugness.

But derivative or not, *Ladrón* has many things in its favor: wit, intelligence, charm and quite a bit of heart. While it is the story of a heist and the plot borders on minimal, its emotional center, its soul, comes as a welcome and unexpected surprise: immigrants in Los Angeles, legal and “illegal” are the main characters and are played by ... immigrants.

The film at no time treats them condescendingly. They may be broadly represented, but they remain finely etched individuals and never become caricatures intended to get cheap laughs from the audience. They all are quite clever, in fact, each in his or her own bumbling way, but they are also recognizably, convincingly—and humorously—human. Their flaws are never hidden; they share among themselves cockiness, a certain arrogance and a delirious naiveté.

The film's characters represent a varied group of nationalities: Mexican, Argentinean, Venezuelan, Chicano, Colombian, Dominican and Cuban, and that in itself is somewhat historic for Hollywood, for *Ladrón* represents a radical departure from the US film industry's stereotypical

portrayals of Latinos as maids and gardeners or villainous gang members who love to cut people up with switchblades. In a certain way, the film has turned that oft-used phrase, ‘non-traditional casting,’ on its head. In fact, it *is* non-traditional: Latino actors are actually playing Latino characters!

To be more specific, *Ladrón* was written by a Mexican-American, produced by a Panamanian, a Colombian-American and a Mexican American. Its score was composed by a Venezuelan and its stars are from Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Venezuela and the United States. A rather unusual diverse group of Latino Angelinos, playing what else? Real Angelinos in a movie whose title comes from an old Spanish proverb, “The thief who robs from a thief will receive 100 years of forgiveness.”

The two main thieves, López and Toledo, concoct a plan to rob a rich television personality, Moctesuma Valdez, who has made his millions by selling snake oil remedies to thousands of poor Hispanics. At this point, the film exhibits no identity politics based on race or national group. The film makes it very clear that Valdez's can only victimize the poor Latinos because of their social conditions, which makes them vulnerable to his ploys. They spend their hard-earned money on fake medicines and dubious products that supposedly cure a variety of ills, including obesity and even cancer.

The two masterminds immediately come up against an obstacle. How are they going to penetrate the rich man's impregnable fortress mansion and steal his fortune (so they can give it back to the people) when most of their accomplices have either been deported or imprisoned? How are they going to go unnoticed? After some wrangling, they decide that immigrant amateurs—a valet at a parking lot, a gardener, a female auto mechanic, a maid—would make the best accomplices. Why? Precisely because they are, for all practical purposes, invisible. Who, after all, is going to notice them at a special bash Valdez throws for himself and in which many of the guests are the *crème de la crème* of the Los Angeles elite, including Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa himself? López and Toledo train their new crew precisely in what they are best at: not being seen.

How they go about fulfilling their quest, of course, makes up most of the film, which has an involving, effervescent, jazzy rhythm all its own.

Director Menéndez and screenwriter JoJo Henrickson make sure they follow the conventions of the heist film, but they do so using an elegant palette in which characters seem to move the plot, not the other way around. They certainly make sure their social criticism is not lost along the way. They weave modern-day labor-management problems into the plot and make no bones as to which side they are on. They satirize politicians, apparently from both parties, Villaraigosa among them, by portraying them as tools, patsies and partners of unsavory and exploiting businessmen.

Throughout much of the film, they take a few punches at class oppression and sympathetically portray the plight of immigrants, legal and “illegal” alike. In one sequence, one of the characters refers to the rich as criminals who get their wealth by exploiting others, bringing to mind Balzac’s famous dictum that behind every great fortune lies a big crime. Yet, director and writer make sure that their political barbs at racism and class oppression are delivered with irony. A political pamphlet *Ladrón* is not.

Many of the sequences are sharply satirical, but not mean-spirited. Some of these involve an unemployed Cuban actor—played by Cuban actor Oscar Torre—recruited to be part of the plot against Valdez. In many ways, he is the heart of the film. When he tries—opportunistically—to convince Valdez’s complaining workers to go on strike so that the heist can go off more easily, he finds himself slowly convincing himself of the rightness of the workers’ plight and ends his rant in an extraordinarily moving way. The workers, however, are no docile bunch, and they angrily demand he tells them which union is going to represent them. Totally befuddled, he grasps for straws. Silence. “SAG!” [the Screen Actors’ Guild], he suddenly shouts.

Perhaps this joke might be lost outside of Los Angeles, New York and other major entertainment markets, but the audience, composed mostly of Latinos, roared. Why? Perhaps because Los Angeles is full of actors who belong to SAG. But I think because the audience was smart and savvy. Screenwriter Henrickson has said this was one of the scenes the Hollywood suits wanted to cut because Latinos would supposedly not get the joke. Apparently, he and director Menéndez dug their heels in and resisted the pressure.

But there’s another reason why this scene works so well. Not only do the immigrants in the film come to sympathize with the unemployed actor, but the immigrants in the audience, too, come to sympathize with him. In its own way, regardless of the makers’ intentions, *Ladrón* tries to empower immigrants with a sense of self-worth and class solidarity so they can act to defend their class interests as workers who just happen to be Latino.

The film may be “small” by Hollywood standards, but it has certainly struck a chord with the immigrant and Spanish-speaking population, who during the first week of release in September gave it the distinction of being not just the second

highest grossing film, per screen average, in the country, but also the highest grossing Spanish-language film produced in the United States. It has been reported that when Valdez gets his comeuppance at the end, audiences, composed mostly of working-class immigrants, have cheered.

I don’t know if the filmmakers knew when they filmed *Ladrón* that it would find such a response among its intended audience. The fact is that writer and director have instinctively, not necessarily consciously, addressed many of the class issues facing immigrant workers, including the fact that there are many Latino owners who exploit “their own kind.” But it is too bad that they cannot be consistent. One moment is particularly grating and disappointing: when one of the main thieves tells the other that we don’t usually rob “from our own kind,” meaning, of course, that Latinos don’t steal from Latinos. Ethnic and geographical identity suddenly become primary.

Who precisely is not “their kind”? Whites? Blacks? Is the implication that, no matter how great the class divide, Latinos must stick up for Latinos despite class differences? Or is the implication that it’s all right to steal from other ethnicities? This is especially unsavory when one considers that up to now it’s been Latino workers who have concocted a plan to put a rich capitalist Latino in his place. If the phrase was meant ironically, it was lost on the audience.

The film also takes the line of least resistance by making its villain an Argentinean, giving credence to a widely-held stereotype in Latin America that holds all Argentineans to be arrogant and condescending. This is a cheap shot, and it mars, along with the comment about not robbing from one’s “own kind,” an otherwise sharply-observed, elegant, witty film that outdoes Hollywood not only in the entertainment department, but also in the honesty of its social concerns.

In the end, *Ladrón que roba a ladrón* is about justice and helping those in need. This may sound trite, but in the hands of Menéndez and Henrickson, it is anything but. And it’s entertaining and funny to boot.

We hope that Henrickson, at least, will tackle the themes he has explored here with greater depth in his next screenplay. A little study of the history of class relations in the United States and internationally would go a long way toward deepening and giving consistency to his understanding and honest concerns about the plight of the oppressed.



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