

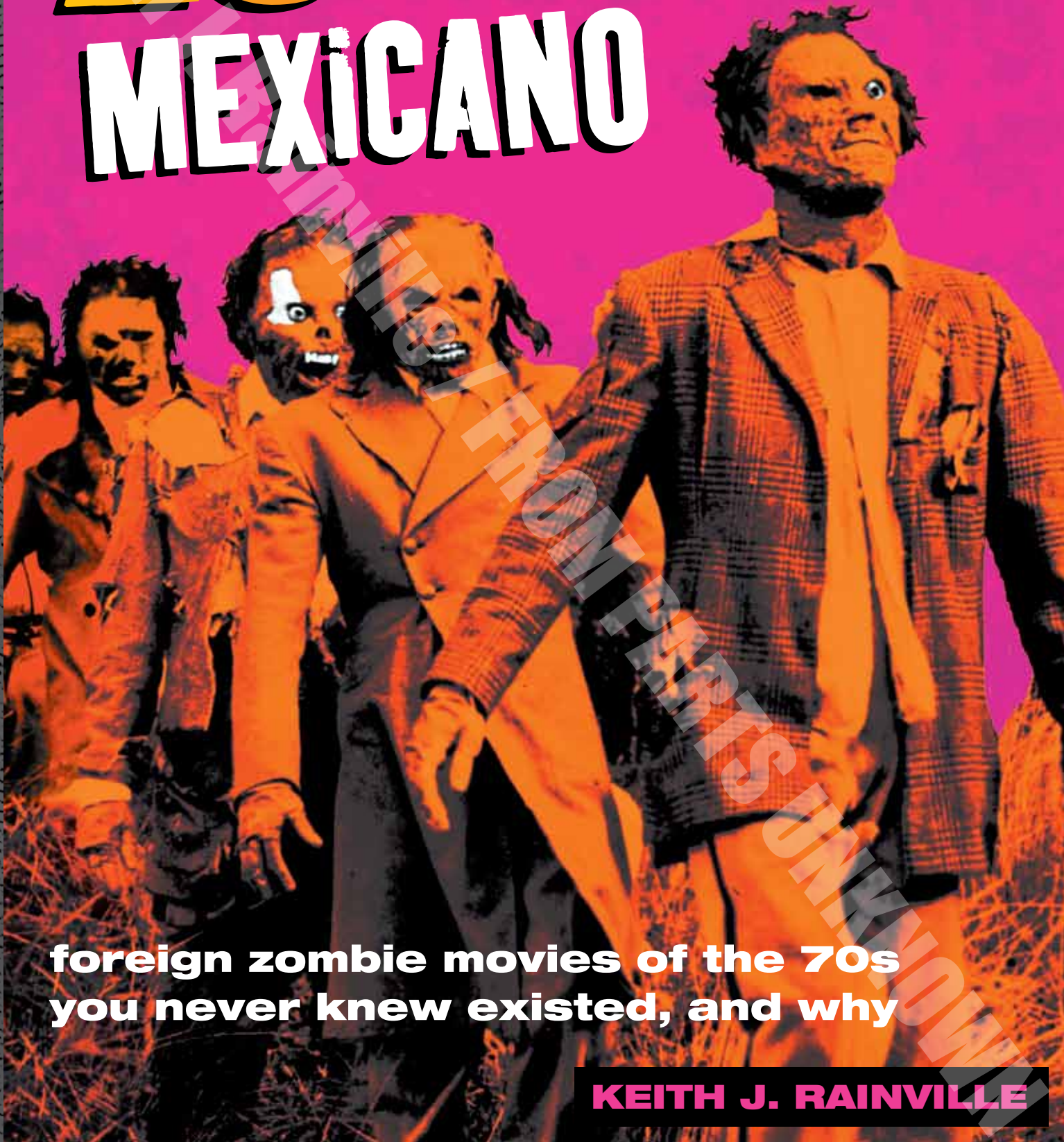
ANOTHER FINE



PUBLICATION

ZOMBI

MEXICANO



foreign zombie movies of the 70s
you never knew existed, and why

KEITH J. RAINVILLE



Sunny, beautiful GUANAJUATO, where **THE DEAD DON'T ROT!**

A rather necessary pronunciation lesson for most of us:

Guanajuato — *GWAH-NA-wah-toe*

Perhaps the tongue-twisting name of the zombie capital of Mexico played a part in keeping these films contained to the Spanish-speaking world?

Guanajuato is a Spanish Colonial city known for prolific silver mines, being the birthplace of **Diego Rivera**, oh... and over 100 accidentally preserved corpses on display in one of the world's most macabre museums.

Beginning in the 1860s, remarkably unrotted remains have been unearthed from the San Sebastian cemetery. Conflicting theories credit the high-alkali soil, or the lack of humidity spoiling above-ground tombs, but either way a percentage of the city's long-buried dead have not turned to ashes or dust.

The naturally mummified dead, said to be exhumed for reasons of space, or non-payment of 'burial taxes' imposed by the local government, have been a curiosity on display to the public in one way or another since their discovery. A modern museum with bodies under glass has replaced the old open catacombs where the dead were propped up like wall flowers at a school dance.

"An embarrassment of horror"

Ray Bradbury brought the grisliness of Guanajuato to light with his 1947 short story *The Next in Line*. A dysfunctional vacationing American couple drive to Guanajuato and take in the taboo *momia* display with some devastating psychological results. Bradbury described the catacombs with a poetry of personal fear equal to that felt by his characters:

There was an embarrassment of horror. You started with the first man on your right, hooked and wired upright against the wall, and he was not good to look upon, and you went on to the woman next to him who was unbelievable and then to a man who was horrendous and then to

a woman who was very sorry she was dead and in such a place as this.

And later:

They were screaming.

They looked as if they had leaped, snapped upright in their graves, clutched hands over their shriveled bosoms and screamed, jaws wide, tongues out, nostrils flared.

And been frozen that way.¹



Bradbury was really on target with the true horror of the mummified. Between rigor mortis and the stretching of dry skin and muscle, many of the dead have gaping open mouths as if caught in a death shriek.

But in a country where skeletal imagery is as common a holiday theme as Santa Claus, and death isn't something to hide your head in the sand from, such otherwise terrifying elements are fair game, even for the likes of a super-hero action film.

So in 1970, producer **Rogelio Agrasánchez** set out for Guanajuato with three legendary masked wrestlers and sparked an entire sub-genre of the zombie film.

Wrestlers? Super-heroes? Read on, I'll explain... 🧟

¹ From "The Next in Line" as reprinted in Archie Lieberman's *The Mummies of Guanajuato*, Harry N. Abrams, 1978



Mansión de la siete momias

MANSION OF THE SEVEN MUMMIES

(Cinematográfica Tikal-Producciones Fílmicas Agrasánchez, 1975) Assoc Prod: Rogelio Agrasánchez; Dir-Scr: Rafael Lanuza; Photo: Armando Castellón; Music: Luis Hernández Bretón; Prod. Mngr: Carlos Lanuza; Assy Dir: José Luis Urquieta; Ed: José W. Bustos; Make-up: Antonio Castañeda; Sound & Special FX: Roberto Muñoz; Chief of Tech: Febronio Tepozte; Sound Ed: José Li-Ho

CAST: Blue Demon, Superzán, María Cardinal (Sofía de la Garza), Claudio Lanuza (hunchback), Laura Fierro (Isabel Calzadilla), Manuel Palacios "Manolín," Enrique Bremermann, Edgar Echeverría, Julio Santos, Alfonso Milián (lawyer Jiménez), Rafael Lanuza (tourist guide); wrestlers: Rolando Clausmann, Fulvio Echeverría, Carlos Álvarez, Raúl Valencia, Guillermo Camero, Carlos Valdéz, Mario A. Reyes

Poor **Sofía de la Garza** — buxom, gorgeous, woman-of-the-author's-dreams — but she's also the last descendant of a cursed family. In order to break that curse and inherit the clan treasure she must complete a series of daunting and grisly tasks. Scheming ancestors from beyond the grave, **Lucifer** himself and their seven magnificent zombies are in her way, but with self-appointed protectors **Blue Demon**, **Superzan** and withering golden age comedian **Manolín** to help her, how can she fail? *I adore this film...*

Filmed around colonial ruins in Antigua, Guatemala, the 'mansion' is question is more of an estate grounds. Her initial task is retrieving a jeweled scepter from the lair of the *momias*, a familiar chamber with arched doorways that house the dead. Blue and Superzan run interference, slapping the zombies around long enough for her to grab the scepter. The *momias* are indestructible, however the second she completes a task, they go dormant. A nice gimmick.

Sofía's second 'penitence' sequence is the absolute height of the film, and a high point in the entire sub-genre. She must retrieve the skull of an ancestor and give it a proper burial, but the skull (which looks like it was sculpted with chewing gum harvested from under a school desk) is *living*, has a totally bad attitude and rests at the end of a rickety wooden bridge over a swamp infested by zombies! It's the only time any of the *momias* saw action in water, and is by far the best conventional horror scene in the series — ranking with anything contemporary from Italy, Spain or the U.S.

The film's climax is a bit clunky, alas. Sofia is walled-up with the evil troublemakers, now revealed as dried-up animated corpses. A creepy hunchback who's been stalking her since the film's beginning turns out to be possessed by the spirit of her father, and sacrifices himself to save her. Meanwhile, the lucha-heroes have perhaps the most violent and crisply executed fight of any of these films. The action is good, and Sofia's predicament is indeed dire, with a nice touch in the tragic hunchback saving the beautiful girl deal. All the pieces are there, but my kingdom for a better editing job.

The cast here is all good. I'm positively smitten with the rather Claudia Cardinale-like **María Cardinal** as



Sofía — a perfect combination of big hair, giant fake eyelashes and other talents that, say, a **Russ Meyer** would have loved to shoot himself. The side characters are rather outré, from the ancestors still dressed in colonial garb to the horned Satan, with Sofia's lum-mox boyfriend **Rodrigo** making trouble too. Demon is his standard heroic self, but Superzan must have been on acid when he packed his suitcase for Guatemala because his wardrobe is a hoot.

The music is an odd mix of traditional instruments (the bowed saw figures prominently) and experimental electronics, with a light-motif that harkens to **Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *The Gnome***.

The zombies are in the familiar masks, and in some killer scenes of clawing at the screaming damsel, their hands have actually been made-up nicely too. I salute the poor S.O.B.s who had to submerge in the really gunky-looking swamp water in full *momia* gear. See this film for this scene alone. 🧛

- Swamp zombies!
- Tragic fashions
- Has much of the Italo-Spanish zombie flavor of the 80s
- Two words - **MARÍA CARDINAL**



Above: The lucha-hero genre is mostly greasy kids stuff and this set is Saturday morning Sid and Marty Kroft quality, so when zombies start torturing screaming, bloody chained-up innocents with electrical burners it's a real shocker.

Below: The dirty dozen dead were complemented by a cadre of little people as henchmen. Several Agrasánchez classics used little people in gang roles, sometimes with superpowers, sometimes as rat men, you name it. Once again, the simple face masks and crude appliances end up being remarkably effective. These are on par with anything seen in *Burial Ground* or *Zombie Holocaust*.



