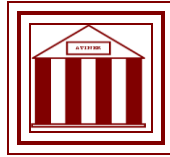


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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
HUM2013-0814**

**Iconic Bodies/Exotic Pinups:
The Mystique of Rita Hayworth and
Zarah Leander**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN 2241-2891

22/1/2014

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Bakhtiarova, G. (2013) "Iconic Bodies/Exotic Pinups: The Mystique of Rita Hayworth and Zarah Leander" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: HUM2013-0814.

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Abstract

Rita Hayworth (1918-1987), born Margarita Carmen Cansino, achieved mythical status through her performances in Hollywood blockbusters, pinup pictures from magazines and her highly publicized marriages to Orson Welles and international playboy prince Ali Khan. Transformed into an all-American sweetheart with the help of Hollywood wizards, she became a femme fatale, 'sex symbol,' 'bombshell' and 'love goddess,' in the language used by the press of the time to describe her appeal. Swedish-born Zarah Leander (1907-1981) was the most prominent actress of the German cinema in the 1930s and 1940s after the departure for Hollywood of such stars as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. A deep contralto voice and unique singing manner combined with her voluptuous body made Leander an icon not only for German housewives of the time, but also for generations of admirers long after she stopped performing. Zarah Leander and Rita Hayworth were made into stars and sex symbols through sophisticated advertisement and propaganda machines at the disposal of big studios as well as through constant transformation of their bodies. Since the second half of the twentieth century, these two icons continue to be prominently evoked in the North American and European cultural imagination through film and other media.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

American actress Rita Hayworth (1918-1987), born Margarita Carmen Cansino, achieved mythical status through her performances in Hollywood blockbusters, pinup pictures from magazines and her highly publicized marriages to Orson Welles and international playboy prince Ali Khan. Transformed into an all-American sweetheart with the help of Hollywood wizards, she became a femme fatale,' 'sex symbol,' 'bombshell' and 'love goddess,' in the language used by the press of the time to describe her appeal. Swedish-born Zarah Leander (1907-1981) was the most prominent actress of the German cinema in the 1930s and 1940s after the departure for Hollywood of such stars as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. A deep contralto voice and unique singing manner combined with her voluptuous body made Leander an icon not only for German housewives of the time, but also for generations of admirers long after she stopped performing. Zarah Leander and Rita Hayworth were made into stars and sex symbols through sophisticated advertisement and propaganda machines at the disposal of big studios as well as through constant transformation of their bodies. Since the second half of the twentieth century, these two icons continue to be prominently evoked in the North American and European cultural imagination through film and other media. Rainer Werner Fassbinder prominently evoked Leander's image in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun* (Fassbinder, 1979), a film that asserted New German Cinema internationally. In the United States, Steven King's novella, *Rita Hayworth and the The Shawshank Redemption* (1982), adopted for the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994), retrieved and recycled Hayworth's image for those who were not familiar with it.

In 1937, as Germany was rising to a new order under Nazi rule, Zarah Leander appeared in a musical melodrama entitled *La Habanera* (Sirk, 1937) where she played a northern belle who falls in love with a rich landowner while visiting exotic Puerto Rico. The Latino lover turns out to be a jealousy obsessed all-macho husband and an overall bad man, while tropical paradise turns into hell. At the end, the protagonist is saved from her imprisonment in the hot tropics by a fellow Northerner who comes to rescue her and the island from a fever that has overtaken it. The film's director Detlef Sierck, known to American viewers by his Hollywood name Douglas Sirk, fled Nazi Germany almost immediately after shooting *La Habanera*.

Rita Hayworth and Zarah Leander have experienced a prominent revival not only in academic circles and among a hard-core fan base, but through multiple re-runs of their movies on TCM in the United States and Arts TV channels in Europe. Coincidentally, the major star vehicles for both actresses, *Gilda* and *Affair in Trinidad* (Sherman, 1952) for Hayworth, and *La Habanera* for Leander, were set in lavish tropical or southern locations such as Buenos Aires and Montevideo in *Gilda*, Port of Spain in *Affair in Trinidad*, and Puerto Rico in *La Habanera*. *Affair in Trinidad* was designed as Rita's comeback to Hollywood after her failed marriage to prince Ali Khan and drew heavily on *Gilda*. Even though the setting for *Gilda* was chosen because of the production code that did not allow gangster representations in the U.S. cities, the tropical ambiance enhanced the effect of exotic dancing and unruly behavior of the

female protagonists. *You Were Never Lovelier* (Seiter, 1942), another major vehicle for Rita Hayworth where she performed with Fred Astaire, also took place in Buenos Aires. *Gilda*, *Affair in Trinidad*, and *La Habanera* are drama, not musical films, yet a major emphasis in them was placed on musical numbers.

A blown-up picture of Rita Hayworth is staring at me from the wall in the living room of an elegant apartment where I stay while directing a summer study program with my students in San Sebastián, Spain. Apparently furnished for the movie-loving clientele who comes to the San Sebastián film festival, the most important in the Spanish-speaking world, the apartment also has a still from *Vacanze Romane*, a 1953 film directed by William Wyler. Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn however are so much involved with themselves that they do not care about me. Rita's gaze follows me everywhere. In this picture she looks very much like Gilda in that very famous scene when she and her former lover, now antagonist, Johnny Farrell meet for the first time. Even before we see Gilda, her new husband asks the famously ambiguous question, 'Gilda, are you decent?' In response, we see a movement of Hayworth's body, impossible to imitate, and the swaying of her gorgeous hair. 'Me?' is her cunning question/answer as she gazes at us from the screen. It is at this moment that she almost recreates her famous pinup picture so dear to the hearts of American GIs during World War II.

The picture by photographer Bob Landry first appeared in *Life* magazine on August 11, 1941, when Rita was only twenty three years old. It was deemed so risqué that the editors chose to publish it in the middle of the magazine instead of on the cover. The red-headed beauty is kneeling on a bed covered with luxurious satin sheets in a silk slip and looks directly at the camera over her shoulder. The popularity of this photo that sold more than five million copies was such that there was actually a record available with the sound of Rita's heartbeat. The U.S. Navy named her 'The Red-Head We Would Most Like to be Ship-Wrecked with.'¹ According to Rita's and Orson Welles's biographer Barbara Leaming, Welles, who had not met Rita prior to seeing her picture in *Life*, decided that he would make her his second wife when he saw the picture (Leaming 1989: 79). In 1946, to Rita's horror and dismay, numerous newspapers reported that a nuclear bomb to be tested at the Bikini Atoll was named *Gilda* and had her picture on it.

Gilda re-asserted Hayworth's image as a beloved pinup and a bombshell as GIs flocked to the movies to see their idol come to life. The film tells the story of an American conman, Johnny Farrell, (Glenn Ford) who appears low on luck in Buenos Aires and eventually goes to work at an illegal casino owned by an obscure and menacing Ballin Mundson (George Macready). Mundson introduces Johnny to his now wife Gilda (Rita Hayworth) who happens to be Johnny's former lover. In the convoluted and rather hectic plot, Mundson turns out to be a Nazi collaborator, while Johnny and Gilda engage in a love/hate

¹*Iconic Photos* (2009), 'Rita Hayworth Pin-Up', <http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/05/10/rita-hayworth-pin-up/>. Accessed 1 March 2013.

relationship and Gilda goes out of her way to provoke Johnny's jealousy. In the end, Mundson is punished and Gilda and Johnny resolve their differences and leave the stage together. Released just after the end of World War II, *Gilda*'s subject rather playfully touched upon the consequences of the war and the pursuit of the Nazis who were finding refuge in the Southern hemisphere. However, at the time of the film's release, nobody cared about the vicissitudes of the plot. Movies continued to be star vehicles and *Gilda*, like no other, highlighted Hayworth's ability to entertain by singing and dancing. Actually, she lip-synched the songs that were recorded by Anita Kert Ellis.

Gilda is a former cabaret performer who marries Mundson in Buenos Aires low on her luck. This is what unites her and Johnny's characters. Even though there is no explanation for why she is in South America in the first place, fashioning Gilda as an American showgirl in Buenos Aires and Montevideo allowed and justified her performance as an exotic dancer. Rita's dancing numbers in *Gilda* perpetuated her status as a 'love goddess' and sex symbol, as the press of the time liked to call her. The most famous number 'Put the Blame on Mame,' in which Rita wore a gown that was as open as one could imagine in the 1940s, generated more analysis in film scholarship than any other dance. The lyrics of the song by Doris Fisher and Allan Roberts were provocative in the context of the confrontation between Gilda and her former lover Johnny, whom she continues to love. Women, not surprisingly, are to be blamed for all evils in the world. The dance and performance in which she took off her gloves and a necklace entered cinema annals as the most famous mock striptease ever. In Spain, rumors about Rita's alleged striptease spread long before the film was released, and a Catholic Church official notoriously demanded that the picture should be prohibited from screening. Needless to say that he demanded it without having seen the film. When *Gilda* was finally released in Spain, the audiences rioted because they believed that the film had actually been censored, even though it was not.

Rita's second number 'Amado Mio' reflected the duality of her carefully crafted Hollywood image. Having started as an ethnic dancer in her first movie appearances in 1934, she gradually transformed into an all-American sweetheart. Yet her desirability was rooted in her past as a hot Latino dancer. Arguably, 'Amado Mio' falls into the category of 'latunes,' songs with a Latin beat and an English language lyric that were popular in the 1930s and 1940s.¹ An exotic outfit and smooth movements of a trained Spanish dancer promised the fulfillment of fantasies and desires for GIs and their girlfriends. 'Amado Mio,' the only Spanish line sung in the film, added a Spanish touch to what was an all-American dream of love forever, now that the GIs were back home.

Hayworth's most memorable role was a logical culmination and an ironic twist in her Hollywood career and public image. Margarita Carmen Cansino was born in Brooklyn to the family of Eduardo Cansino, a Spanish immigrant, and Volga Haworth, an American of Irish-English descent. Her parents met

¹For more on latunes, see Gustavo Pérez Firmat, "Latunes: An Introduction," http://lasa-2.univ.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/Vol43no2/08_43.2firmat.pdf. Accessed 1 March 2013.

while they were both dancers with the Ziegfeld Follies. Eduardo Cansino came from a family of professional dancers in the small Andalusia town, Castilleja de la Cuesta, near Seville, Spain. His father was a well-known dancer who owned a dance school. Together with his sister Elisa and Volga, Eduardo formed a dance troupe, The Dancing Cansinos. They performed widely and successfully on the vaudeville and burlesque circuit. Volga quit after Rita was born, followed eventually by Elisa. Rita's training as a dancer started before she was four. At age eight she had already performed on stage and in 1928 even participated in a short documentary about her family troupe. By the age of twelve she was a seasoned performer. When Elisa went back to Spain to care for her family, Eduardo chose his daughter as his dancing partner. Because American laws did not allow employment of underage performers, The Dancing Cansinos appeared mostly at clubs south of the U.S. border in Tijuana, Agua Caliente and at floating casinos anchored outside of California waters. Margarita was dressed and made up in a way that concealed her age and the father-daughter pair were frequently taken for husband and wife.¹ Apparently, the Cansinos specialized in exotic ethnic dances.

In 1934, not yet seventeen, Rita was dancing with her father in Tijuana, when she was noticed and invited for auditioning in Hollywood by the Fox Vice President Winfield Sheehan. Because of her dark hair and appearance as a 'Spanish' dancer, studio bosses expected Rita to appear in feature films for Spanish-speaking audiences. Soon they realized, to their surprise, that she spoke English better than Spanish. The first Fox feature in which Margarita Cansino appeared in 1935 was *Dante's Inferno* (Lachman, 1935). As a 'hot' Latino dancer, she danced with her partner Gary Leon to the famous song 'María La O' by the Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona. Cansino's ethnic looks led to casting her as an Egyptian in *Charlie Chan in Egypt* (King, 1935); an Argentinian in *Under the Pampas Moon* (Tinling, 1935), and a Russian dancer, Tamara Petrovich, in *Paddy O'Day* (Seiler, 1935). In most of her screen appearances at the time, she had her long and thick black hair parted in the middle and gathered in a low bun. This was the look fashioned by Dolores del Río, the Mexican star and idol of the time who had by that time returned to Mexico. Following in the steps of del Río, Margarita hoped to get the leading role in the 1935 remake of *Ramona*, a novel by Helen Hunt Jackson. The extremely popular novel told the story of a half-Indian orphan raised in a Spanish household in Southern California. Having turned into foundational fiction for California, the book was first adapted to film in 1910 with [Mary Pickford](#), directed by [D. W. Griffith](#). Dolores del Río starred in an a popular 1928 version. Her appearance was definitely more ethnic than that of Pickford who was of English and Irish descent and was known as 'the girl with the curls.' In the end, to her disappointment, Margarita Cansino did not get the part, as Darryl F. Zanuck, the founder of 20th Century Fox 'did not share Sheehan's enthusiasm for Rita' (Ringgold 1991: 66). In *Human Cargo* (Dwan,

¹Rita's biographer Barbara Leaming claims that Rita was sexually abused by her father at that time (Leaming 1989: 17).

1936), once again capitalizing on her ethnic looks, the young actress played an illegal alien who was willing to testify and break up the smuggling ring.

Margarita Cansino's transformation into a star renamed Rita Hayworth passed through small roles in A and B movies where she played 'every kind of good and bad woman imaginable,' in the words of Gene Ringgold (Ringgold 1991: 79). Through 1937, she appeared in other small roles in *Rebellion* (Shores, 1936), *Trouble in Texas* (Bradbury, 1937), *Old Louisiana* (Willat, 1937) and *Hit the Saddle* (Wright, 1937). She also performed dance numbers, often presumed to be Spanish, as in *Criminals of the Air* (Coleman, 1937). It is about that time, when Rita's image, carefully crafted by studio moguls and her first husband Eddie Judson, started shifting from the Latino type to an all-American sweetheart/seductress. When Rita had been brought to Fox by Sheehan, he saw her as a successor for the Mexican Dolores del Río. Now, however, Columbia boss Harry Cohn was interested in a glamorous American girl. And for that, Margarita, slightly overweight by Hollywood standards, needed transformation. First, her name was changed to Rita Hayworth, a take on her mother's maiden name. Her appearance had to be transformed too, not only with diet and exercise but with significant help from Hollywood wizards. Columbia hair stylist Helen Hunt and Rita's husband Ed Judson decided that her face had to undergo a dramatic metamorphosis. She needed a higher hairline that would highlight her eyes. For two years Rita subjected herself to a painful weekly electrolysis procedure that removed hair from her forehead in order to gain a much higher hairline in the end. With the help of Hunt, Rita's hair was changed from her natural dark brown to a striking auburn that would eventually become her trademark (Leaming 1989: 41). Rita's appearance changed with almost every role that she played. No other movie star was as eager or as obedient as Hayworth to change her hair color and style.

Ironically, despite all the efforts to distance herself from the Spanish typecasting, Hayworth's first real success came with the role of a Spanish temptress, Doña Sol, in Rouben Mamoulian's adaptation of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's novel *Blood and Sand* (Mamoulian, 1941). Later on, her Carmen in *The Loves of Carmen* (Vidor, 1948) also boasted a mane of luxurious auburn hair defying Spanish stereotypes. By that time, her image as a sex symbol had already been built in the press through pinups and the studio promotional machine. Rita was known among the Hollywood reporters as 'the most cooperative girl in Hollywood,' which meant that she never turned down an interview or a photo session (Leaming 1989: 50).

The next step in Rita's career were Hollywood musicals that exploited to the fullest her glamorous looks and her dancing skills. *You'll Never Get Rich* (Lanfield, 1941), *My Gal Sal* (Cummings, 1942), *You Were Never Lovelier* (Seiter, 1942) and *Tonight and Every Night* (Saville, 1945) gradually built Rita's image as a sex bombshell towards *Gilda* that was arguably the pinnacle of her career. The formula for a successful musical at the time was to include the best dancing and singing stars, design an opulent and sometimes outlandish stage set, and fill it with voluptuous and exotic melodies. A straightforward objective of wartime motion pictures was to distract the audience from the

hardships of war and give them an illusion of happiness. It was achieved with a dash of tropical melodies and tons of glittering sequins on dancers and singers. Interestingly, more than one of those optimistic stories took place in exotic settings such as the Caribbean, Argentina, México or Spain, even though those landscapes and shores were most often built on the backlots at Melrose Avenue in Hollywood or in Burbank. If not in person, but on screen, the audiences were transported to either a tropical paradise or the seedy criminal ambiance of *film noir*. In the case of *Gilda*, an underground casino in distant Buenos Aires made Rita's American girl simultaneously desirable and unattainable. Hayworth's performance was so effective that she was forever associated with Gilda's charm and incredible sexuality.¹

'Amado mío,' the tune and dance that seduce the audiences in *Gilda* is an exotic habanera. This melody, sometimes erroneously called rumba or samba, always evokes the frivolity and opulence of the South. The word habanera points to its connection with Havana where it originated in the nineteenth century. In the North American imagination, the capital of Cuba for decades had the reputation of a pleasure island that allowed for all kinds of transgressions like easy drinking and sex. This reputation owes much to the time of Prohibition (1919-1930) when Havana became a watering hole for alcohol thirsty American tourists. Interestingly, habaneras achieved incredible popularity in Europe where they turned into a nostalgic yearning for the tropical paradise left behind after the end of the colonial era. The most famous, by all accounts, is the habanera from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* that premiered in 1875.

In 1937, shortly before fleeing Nazi Germany for Hollywood, the film director Detlef Sierck chose the seductive and languid melody of the habanera as a narrative device for his feature film *La Habanera*. Outlandish Spanish coloring associated with this mysterious musical rhythm served as an excellent vehicle for the exotic Zarah Leander, a Swedish actress whose German was not as perfect as the Nazi propaganda machine wanted it to be. Yet, as Horak writes, Leander 'may have been the most erotically charged female star of the Nazi cinema' (Horak 2004: 1). Playing into the Nazi propaganda long-term objectives, the film asserted the prevalence of North over South and focused on return to the fatherland.

Leander's protagonist Astrée is trapped in a Southern tropical setting from which she is rescued by a hero who arrives from the North, her native Stockholm. As the film opens to the sounds of a Spanish song and dance accompanied by castanets and guitars, Astrée is a tourist who arrived in Puerto Rico with her stiff and conservative old aunt (Julia Serda). Musicians wear wide-brim sombreros, local women fashion mantillas and parasols, and fan themselves. Heat is in the air. The landscape and the white washed church at

¹Rita's association with Gilda was so strong that she even thought that her third husband prince Ali Khan was more interested in her screen image than in her. Vincent Sherman who directed Rita in *Affair in Trinidad* mentions in his autobiography that Rita told him that Ali Khan "had a print of *Gilda* and would often run it before he'd make love to her, which caused her to wonder if he had married Gilda or her" (Sherman 1996: 234).

the plaza create unmistakable Spanish ambiance. The film was shot in the Spanish Canary Islands as Franco and Hitler were affirming their mutual love affair. In homage to Rudolph Valentino's image of a hot Latino lover, even the taxi driver in this imagined Puerto Rico is wearing a flower behind his ear and is singing a habanera, in German, of course. When Astrée refuses to return to Stockholm, the aunt who is appalled by this sudden decision calls her a 'savage.' The camera moves to a shot of a semi-naked native boy who is herding goats in a tropical landscape with a steaming volcano as a backdrop. When Astrée and her aunt first arrive in a small town, they are saved from the brutality of the local police chief by a knight on horseback. A magnificent gentleman clad in an all embroidered riding outfit comes to their rescue. Don Pedro de Ávila (Ferdinand Marian) literally looks down at Astrée and her aunt as he rides alongside them on horseback. He invites them to a bullfight, which is of course the epitome of Southern/Spanish barbarity, man versus bull. The owner of virtually everything on the island, Don Pedro is greeted like a matador himself when he accompanies his guests to their seats. Astrée is visibly in awe of his natural qualities for which she longs. She chooses him over her unexciting life in the stuffy high society of Stockholm where her aunt wants her to return. Bizet's toreador's song from *Carmen*, musical all-macho exuberance, underscores Don Pedro's macho/matador allure. When a hapless bullfighter does not stand up to the task, Don Pedro jumps into the bullring from the bleachers, skillfully kills the bull and saves the day and the bullfighter. Looking back at *La Habanera* later in his career, Sirk noted that this scene, actually the first representation of a bullfight in German film, was 'irony dressed up as romanticism' (Sirk 1972: 50). Most likely, the director's irony was lost on his audiences.

Astrée falls for Don Pedro as does Carmen for the toreador in the eponymous opera. The bullfight seems barbaric to her aunt who cannot stand it and leaves the scene in indignation. Not happy with what she has just seen and scared for the life of the matador, Astrée is entranced and enchanted by Don Pedro's powerful performance. 'A single thrust to the center of the heart,' as Don Pedro explains, seems to describe not so much the bull's death but Astrée's own emotions. As the protagonist and her aunt prepare to leave the island on a steamer to return home, a group of gypsy-looking performers sing the habanera again. The appearance of a female singer is redolent of operatic images of Carmen with a low décolletage and a tambourine in her hands. Seeing herself as a free gypsy who can choose whom she loves Astrée runs away from the ship and her aunt and joins her Latino lover. As Antje Ascheid points out drawing on Helma Sanders-Brahms, for the Nazis, Leander functioned as an "enlisted sinner," as the latent image of the very eroticism that Nazism wished to suppress in the everyman of National Socialism' (Ascheid 2003: 159).

Ten years later, the once happy couple bitterly argues over the upbringing of their nine-year old son. Don Pedro intends to take him to a bullfight, while Astrée is trying to prevent it. Don Pedro tears apart her dress because it reminds him of an episode when a British naval officer admired his wife's

appearance. Their differences seem to be irreconcilable. While he owns the island and its people, she admits that she was 'mad' ten years ago when she chose to stay on the island. She yearns for her past, for her native Stockholm and even for her aunt who now founded a Tropical Research Institute and has just sent her emissaries to Puerto Rico. 'Everything that seemed so charming ten years ago, has turned repulsive: this eternal summer, the stupid gaiety that gets on my nerves...the habanera that drives me crazy. I thought this was paradise... but it's hell,' muses the protagonist. Sweden and snow become an obsession for Astrée and her son whom she decides to kidnap from the 'barbaric' island and his father.

In the meantime, the island is engulfed by a mysterious Puerto Rican fever and the Swedish doctors come to save the island and the unhappy protagonist. Don Pedro, whose power extends to the local hospital that he also owns, gives orders to the local doctors to deny the existence of fever. This should prevent damaging the reputation of the island and the ability to sell their merchandise. An anti-American mood is prominently featured in multiple repetitions of the failure to combat the fever on behalf of the Rockefeller Institute doctors. As Sirk wrote in his reflections on his career, 'it was an anti-capitalist movie, which went down well in Germany at the time' (Sirk 1972: 50).

When Don Pedro learns about the past liaison between Astrée and the Swedish doctor Sven Nagel (Karl Martell), and about her plans to leave the island, he sadistically insists on entertaining the doctors at his place. Even as the 'Don Juan of the doctors' arrives with the mission to rescue her, Astrée, the good wife, resists his advances and makes an effort at reconciling with her husband. She offers to sing a habanera for his guests and to wear a special Spanish outfit that he had made for her. Clad in a presumably Spanish outfit showing almost no skin, with three curly locks on her cheeks and dark braids, Leander looks more like a protestant Carmen-impersonator than a seductive gypsy. Even though this appearance stands in sharp contrast to her Arian/Scandinavian looks during most of the picture, the disguise turns her into a passionate and exotic other, a desired fantasy for male and female viewers. The latter could now project their quest for fulfillment outside of the *housefrau* life through outlandish looks and exotic singing. The ambiance of a Spanish themed mansion contributes to the creation of a fantasy of passion only possible in the tropics. Leander's choreography even more than the lyrics convey the inner passion that made her commit a mad act in the first place, when she fell for a stranger in the tropics, a 'Medieval Lord,' as her aunt had called him. Even as Leander sings with her body puritanically covered, her undressing takes place through the eyes of the two men who are competing for her attention. The camera alternatively focuses on her Latino lover/husband and her old love, 'Don Juan of the doctors' sent to rescue her from the evil and harmful tropics. The wind about which she sings becomes a palpable presence through the movements of her hands and arms. Her strong contralto, like nothing else, expresses the sexual tension among the three characters.

While Gilda's song and dance numbers range from the promise of love to good-girl- gone-bad because men misunderstood her, Astrée's intensity in the

habanera seems to express sexual frustration even as Sirk was expected to create a sexual fantasy for German housewives. Ascheid quotes Friedemann Beyer who noted that Leander was ‘a constructed synthetic figure consisting of hairstyles, make-up and the right lighting...a membrane, which resonates with what millions of mothers, wives and girlfriends felt during wartime: the pain of separation’ (Ascheid 2003:158). The film opened and closed on the images of the ocean which, as Robert Keser observes, suggested ‘the untamable and chaotic depths of eros’ (Keser 2004:1). Sirk himself noted that ‘Zarah Leander’s feelings on that boat are not entirely linear. She has been in the place for ten years, the ten best years of her life. As she looks back she is aware that she is getting out of rotten—but definitely interesting – circumstances. Her feelings are most ambiguous’ (Sirk 1972: 52).

Zarah Leander and Rita Hayworth were made into stars and sex symbols through sophisticated advertisement and propaganda machines at the disposal of big studios. At the time when movie studios were responsible for most of the entertainment available to the public, their image was reinforced and perfected with a touch of exoticism associated with the frivolity and transgression of the South. A resemblance to uninhibited gypsies and Carmen-like allure conveyed through evocative dancing and singing could only happen in the outlandish ambiance south of the border or in the steamy tropics. The two films explored here seem to tell stories that have little in common. Yet, they are united not only by their musical numbers and exotic setting, but by the common premise that beloved female protagonists, even though sometimes looking and behaving like femmes fatales, will in the end turn out good and obedient wives, and have to be rescued from the vile and menacing South.

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