

# For María Felix/ Watching Juana Rooster On Sunday Afternoons

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**She strides**, a black-skirted she-rooster, gun strapped on her corsetless waist. She doesn't need one, this dusty campesina, the peasant-woman who has become a ravishing coronela smelling of men's blood on her boots. The ones that spark the earth once littered with dead revolutionaries like her father and fiancée, Chon.

Juana Gallo, they call her. Juana Rooster. In honor of the woman who has led an army to avenge the death of the people she loved most in the world.

Her men tremble and cheer when she speaks. Some men are afraid of her. One will die for daring her. But I think most men just fall in love despite everything. Ay, how I love to watch her on Sundays when people think all I do is read *The New York Times*.

Juana Rooster was a legend during the Mexican Revolution. María Felix, the actress who played her in a series of movies as in real life a world-class diva before she died last month. In real-life, La Doña (and nobody else could be called María in her presence) had much more interest in plastic surgery and jewels than the problems of the Mexican poor.

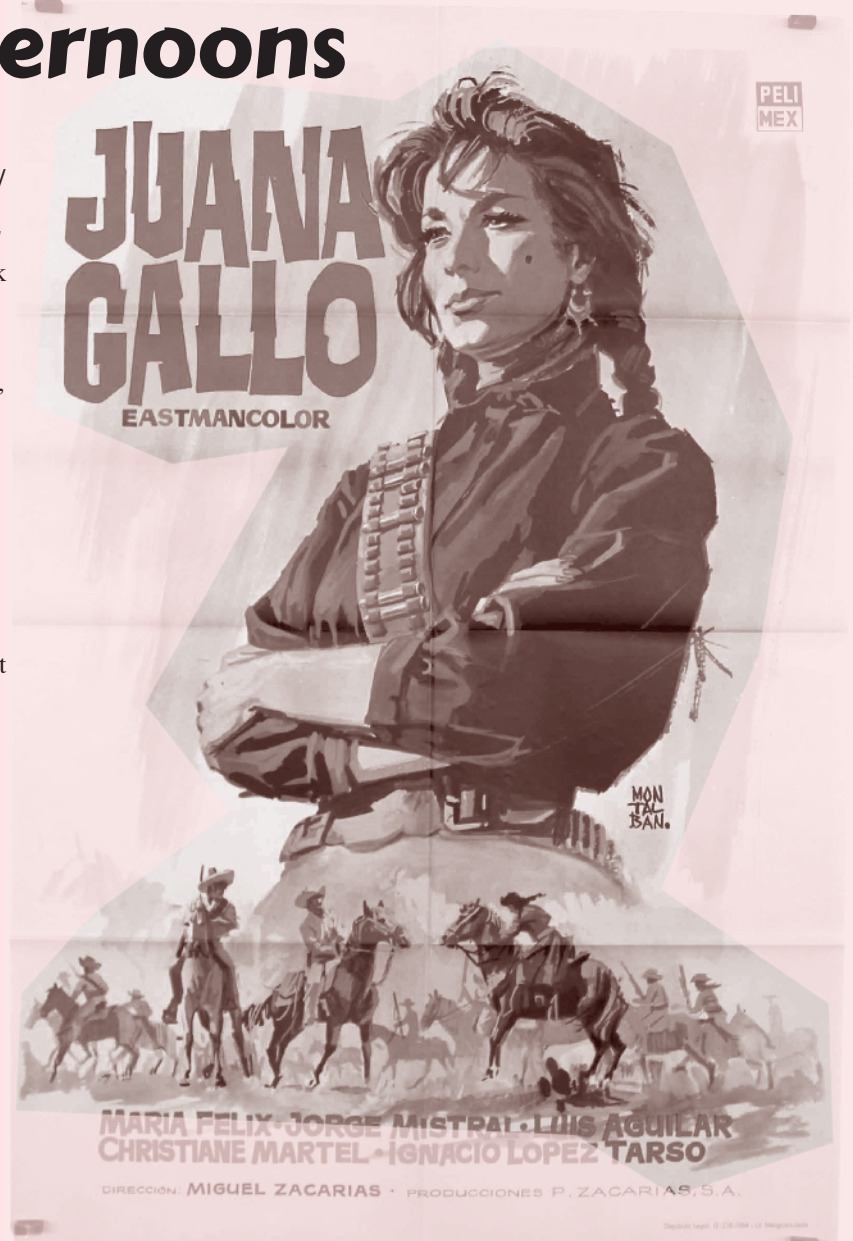
But in these famous movies, María depicted a peasant woman fighting for justice against the tyrants who have been Mexico's destiny like Victoriano Huerta or Porfirio Díaz. Men who looted Mexico's treasury as ruthlessly as the Americans who stole Texas. According to my mother.

Because I was born on this side of the river, my Spanish isn't as good as my mexicana mother, who never let me forget it. So I tell myself that I watch these movies to learn my language better. Valiente. Brave. Enaguas. Petticoats. Provecho. Benefit. Sangre y fuego. Blood and fire.

These movies are from Mexico's famous golden era, depicting a past that never was, except in my mother's imagination. A tiempo pasado that was mythologized, romanticized, serving as propaganda for Mexico's nationalism after the Revolution. Produced in the forties and fifties with the divine chiaroscuro of cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa (*Night of the Iguana*, *Under the Volcano*), they were already old when my mother took me to see them at the drive-in during the sixties.

But they were the only way she had to show me a Mexico we could rarely visit in those days. Even if the Mexico lindo she remembered never existed for her. A Mexico that I keep searching for. And defending.

In *Juana Gallo*, Pioquinto, the faithful (and besotted) assistant, brings her a heavy gold rope of a necklace, a prize of war for the victorious beauty. She has just commanded a surprise attack, you see, that captured the hacienda representing all that is wrong with Mexico. Juana Rooster caresses the necklace, but not in the same way that her



hands lingered over the crosses placed on the graves of her father and fiancé killed by the federales, General Huerta's troops. The two deaths that took her from plowing the fields as Angela Ramos to a colonel leading an army of men.

She falls in love, of course, but with the good bad-guy who is on Huerta's side, not capitán Cevallos, the chubby Zapatista-type who swaggers and sings his way into her life, conquering every woman except her. A macho who is a revolucionario like her. But Juana is aflame with the cultured and Spanish-educated capitán Valverde, the elegant enemy who prefers death rather than the cowardly option of running when she gives him the chance. Impressed at the bravery that matches her own, Juana lets him go free.

In the meantime, Zapata-Cevallos won't give up. Outside her room, he croons eres buena o eres mala. You give a kiss or you shoot me. It's the same thing.

But the federales retake the hacienda, forcing Juana and capitán Valverde – who has defected to her side – to hide in the tunnel that

winds under the building and cathedral. It rains, there is lightning, and you-know-what happens. Then the bad good-guy Cevallos, who can't forget her, ingeniously storms the hacienda with his men. Visiting her new queen-size bedroom, he accepts her gratitude but wants more. It seems that the Zapatista has repented, as they always do, since winning isn't worth much if you can't surrender your heart. We are at war, he says. Then he tells her:

*If I'm going to die  
My luck would be for you to kill me.  
To be something in your life  
If only a regret for your conscience.  
That's if you have one.*

Don't say that, Juana laughs at his poetics. It's true she has killed other men, but only when they have stolen from the people, or like those drying into beef jerky because they killed her father and Chon. She's not like Cevallos, who has killed for its own sake, like so many men do in battle. Cevallos, now a three-starred colonel, knows he doesn't have a chance, but she is so damn beautiful...though there are no words in English or Spanish yet for this kind of woman.

I've asked other men to name an American movie star who compares to Juana Gallo, and they are silent. You see, Juana Rooster had the sexual wattage of Rita Hayward with the ferocity of Sigourney Weaver in that movie "Aliens." Now that's my kind of Mexican woman.

I have saved a little corner for you, the large-sized Zapata-capitán says as he touches his heart. Just for you. Here, inside. Oooh, how many corners you must have, she tosses the words like the

long black braids under her traditional rebozo. Do you say that to all the others?

They haven't even come in.

Why would they want to go in that bottomless pit?

He is dismissed, and the Spanish capitán with a purer heart and track record tells her that he can't continue to stay with her – the men are calling him the little chicken. La galinita wants a transfer. He is a man, after all. Has he been a macho all along? Maybe she's not good enough for him. She can barely read after all, and can't walk in high heels, though she begins to practice...

The federales come back. After several grueling days at the final battle of Zacatecas, Cevallos is shot. A playboy to the end, he begs Juana for a goodbye kiss. As she looks up from el beso de la despedida, she sees that her ex-lover Valverde has witnessed this last scene from the sangre y fuego of war. Or the blood and fire of love. With eyes blazing, he gallops off in heartbreak, jealousy, quién sabe. And the next image is a field of wooden crosses.

Juana is alone. Wandering like one of those Juan Rulfo stories of desert, graves, stones and shawls. So much tragedy. All for love of country. For the love of a man.

They never learn do they. I ask Juana Rooster.

When will they learn.

I go to sleep.



Mária Felix as Juana Gallo

*Before the human race descends into caves may we not change the emotion that guides us from that of fear to that of love? May we not change our course from building fallout shelters and hydrogen bombs to building understanding among nations and love between peoples? Let us attempt this policy at once...*

—LaVonne Platt, 1961

## La Vonne Platt

LaVonne Platt, a lifelong Kansan, born in 1932, died with her husband, Dwight, by her side in their rural Newton home in February. She joined the Methodist Student Movement while at the University of Kansas where she met Dwight who worked for an American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) village development project in Barpali Thana, Orissa, India where they married on June 21, 1956. While there she researched the effects of the Barpali Project.

In the autumn of 1957, as they left Barpali to return to the U.S. she wrote, "This was such a hard day for us. I can't express how I feel about having been at Barpali, and lived in rural India, but it is so deep in me and so much a part of me that I can hardly pull away from that physical environment even though the spirit and depth of it will live on as part of me." In 1970 they returned to India with their children where Dwight taught at Sambalpur University and LaVonne continued her work as an administrative assistant, researcher and writer.



LaVonne was a teacher—teaching Home Economics in high school and college; women in a village education program in Orissa, children in Sunday School and conducting workshops on world hunger. She also tested recipes for the *More with Less Cookbook*; collecting nutrition data for a study on aging.

Above all, LaVonne was a prolific writer and editor with publications on farm issues as well as award winning children's books. She started a publishing business, Wordsworth, in order to publish *Bela Banerjee, Bringing Health to India's Villages* (1987) and 20 subsequent books (1988-2009). She also sold books in the Meadowlark Center and at many events.

The weft-thread that transverses La Vonne's life was her desire to seek understanding among people(s) demonstrating this most recently by welcoming refugees to Newton's community.

The Esperanza and staff extend heartfelt condolences to Dwight Platt; children, Kamala and Richard Platt and their extended family and friends. Memorial contributions may be made to the AAUW or to the Mennonite Central Committee for refugee and immigrant aid via the Petersen Funeral Home, 215 N. Main, Newton, KS 67114.