

Mexican stars, Hollywood dreams

More actors from Mexico are working on both sides of the border in English- and Spanish-language productions, a trend sparked largely by the surging Latino population in the U.S.

By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

July 10, 2011

A few years ago, Eugenio Derbez, Mexico's most popular comic actor, got some well-meaning advice from a Hollywood executive that still makes him smile.

Derbez was playing a key secondary role in Patricia Riggen's "Under the Same Moon," a Fox Searchlight drama about a Mexican mother, played by Kate del Castillo, forced to leave her young son in her native village while she searches for work in Los Angeles. Derbez's otherwise serious character had a couple of lighthearted moments in the movie, and the studio honcho was impressed.

FOR THE RECORD:

Mexican actors: An article in the July 10 Calendar section about Mexican actors working in Hollywood translated the film title "No Eres Tu, Soy Yo" as "I'm Not You, I'm Me." The correct translation is "It's Not You, It's Me." —

"He told me, 'You should try comedy, because I think you have a lot of potential,'" recalled Derbez, now 48, who by that point had written, produced or starred in many Mexican TV shows, including the long-running sitcom "Vecinos" (Neighbors). He was also well known to U.S. Latinos for numerous TV and movie roles, notably as the goofy patriarch of the comically dysfunctional "La Familia P. Luche" (The Plush Family), which originated on Mexican TV and became a hit for the Miami-based, Spanish-language Univisión Network.

"It was so funny," Derbez said good-naturedly. "It was like if somebody in Mexico said to Jim Carrey, 'You ought to be a comedian!'"

These days, Hollywood is getting better acquainted with the varied talents of Derbez and other prominent actors from Mexico who increasingly are turning up in U.S.-made movies and high-rated TV shows such as Telemundo's "La Reina del Sur" and the Venevision-Univisión co-produced "Eva Luna" as well as in advertisements, award ceremonies and on theater stages.

advertisement

CHEVY MODEL YEAR WRAP UP

2.9% APR FINANCING FOR QUALIFIED BUYERS ON '11 CRUZE!

1. Length of contract limited. Not available with some other offers. See dealer

FIND YOUR MODEL >

Derbez, for example, cohosted last fall's Latin Grammy Awards in Las Vegas, appears in the upcoming film "Jack and Jill" with Adam Sandler and Katie Holmes, and recently visited Los Angeles to film a CBS comedy pilot starring Rob Schneider as a lifelong bachelor who marries into a close-knit Mexican American family. He also starred in last year's romantic comedy "No Eres Tú, Soy Yo" (I'm Not You, I'm Me), a huge hit in Mexico.

If the unnamed CBS comedy gets green-lighted, Derbez plans to uproot his family this summer and move to the United States, joining a growing number of L.A.-based, brand-name Mexican actors working in Spanish and English on both sides of the border. "For me it would be a big change but worth it," Derbez said.

A number of factors are driving the influx to Hollywood of bilingual Mexican actors, whose ranks include Demián Bichir ("Weeds," "A Better Life"), Adriana Barraza ("Babel," "Thor"), Ana de la Reguera (costarring in this summer's sci-fi western "Cowboys & Aliens" with Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford), Blanca Soto (a former Miss Mexico who appeared in "Dinner for Schmucks"), Ana Claudia Talancón ("One Missed Call") and "Under the Same Moon's" Del Castillo ("Weeds," "La Reina del Sur").

Most obviously, there's the surging number of Latinos in the U.S. — about 50 million, or some 16% of the total population. According to the Motion Picture Assn. of America, Latinos bought more movie tickets per capita in 2009 than any other ethnic group.

Such numbers have led to a flourishing Spanish-language and bilingual entertainment market, creating opportunities not only for U.S.-born Latinos but also for bilingual Latin American actors, particularly those with proven box-office power and built-in fan bases across the hemisphere.

Moctesuma Esparza, a film producer and chief executive of the L.A.-based Maya Cinemas movie theater chain, which caters to Latino audiences, said the burgeoning Latino youth population makes it "inevitable" that more Latin American actors will be drawn to find work in Hollywood.

Esparza sees that trend as a boon for Latino audiences. "You want to be able as an American Latino to see anybody who at least looks like you, has a last name like you, who you can identify with," he said. "At the same time," Esparza continued, the success of Latin American actors in Hollywood "does not satisfy the aspirations of American Latinos, nor do I believe it satisfies the need for diversity of the industry in this country."

Mexican acting talent also is being driven to Hollywood by Mexico's creatively limited television market, which serves up a steady diet of *telenovelas* (soap operas), sports and comedy programs but little else in the way of original programming.

Meanwhile, the Mexican movie industry, after hitting an artistic peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s with such films as "Amores Perros" and "Y Tu Mamá También," went into a production slump, generating only 25 feature films in 2005. That number rebounded last year to 68, according to the Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica. But no recent Mexican film has enjoyed the international critical impact of those earlier movies.

James McNamara, head of Pantelion Films, a joint venture of Lionsgate and Mexico's Televisa media conglomerate that produces movies aimed at Latinos and Latin Americans, said Hollywood always has drawn established stars from around the globe, including Spaniards such as Antonio Banderas, Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem. Mexican actors, like those from other countries, are attracted to Hollywood's bigger budgets and larger infrastructure, he said. "It's just a natural human tendency to aspire to the major leagues."

One challenge for Pantelion, McNamara said, is to make sure that the star Mexican actors in its films appeal sufficiently to younger, second- and third-generation, U.S.-born Latinos who may not know the actors or have not been following their careers as long as their parents or grandparents have.

"You have to overcome what we call the *abuelita* effect — 'Oh, my *abuelita* watches that,'" McNamara said, using the Spanish word for "grandmother." But once a movie with a Mexican actor builds momentum, he added, "we have found that [younger audiences] will pile on."

The greater array of stateside acting opportunities drew Soto, the former beauty queen, to New York in the late 1990s to model, learn English and study acting. She now lives in Los Angeles with her writer-director-producer-actor husband, Jack Hartnett, and alternates between English-language movie parts and Spanish-language telenovelas, including the lead role in "Eva Luna," the highest-rated U.S.-produced telenovela in history and the fourth most-watched Monday prime-time program on all U.S. broadcast television.

She's part of the growing group of native Spanish-speaking performers as well as directors, cinematographers and other industry professionals living permanently in Southern California, forming an expat community jokingly known as "Frijol-y-wood," a pun on the Spanish word for "bean."

"I love my country," Soto said, but "do I want to be there for the next 35 years of my life being a *novela* actress? No. I want to live in Japan, in Spain, I want to go to France and work here, in New York, in Miami."

Of course, Mexican actors working in Hollywood are hardly a new phenomenon. Anthony Quinn, Ricardo Montalban and Salma Hayek, for instance, all successfully crossed the career border. Chon Noriega, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, said that "there has been a kind of back-and-forth migration of creative personnel between Mexico and Hollywood" ever since the silent era, facilitated by the countries' close physical proximity.

But De la Reguera, 34, a Veracruz native, said the exodus of Mexican actors to Hollywood has accelerated since she relocated to Los Angeles 51/2 years ago, around the time she costarred as an uncommonly comely nun opposite Jack Black in the wrestling comedy "Nacho Libre."

Although she doesn't think that moving to Hollywood is an essential career step for every Mexican actor, De la Reguera believes it has increased her professional options both in English and Spanish. In 2008 she returned to Mexico to star in the prison drama "Capadocia," one of the most critically lauded TV series in the country's history.

"I'm very adaptable, and I believe I'm also very free and very independent," said De la Reguera, who learned to speak English as a 15-year-old exchange student in New York. "It has a lot to do with your individual personality."

Few Mexican actors have been able to work both sides of the border better than Bichir, 48, a Mexico City native and member of a well-known acting family. Although as a teenager he'd already launched a promising TV and film career in Mexico, at 22 he decided to move to New York to learn English and eventually break into U.S. theater and film roles. Initially, he helped support himself by working as a bartender and waiter, just like tens of thousands of his countrymen.

"Everyone thought I was crazy," Bichir said. "Everyone in Mexico, not only my parents but everyone, because I had my place there and my name. And I told them, 'I'm still going to have that, because I'm not quitting, I'm not closing my doors in my own country.'"

Today, he's best known to U.S. audiences as the corrupt Tijuana Mayor Esteban Reyes on Showtime's "Weeds" with Mary Louise Parker. He also has acted at the Geffen Playhouse in Westwood and portrayed Fidel Castro in Steven Soderbergh's Che Guevara diptych "The Argentine" and "Guerrilla." This summer he's starring as an undocumented immigrant gardener, struggling to secure a piece of the American Dream for himself and his teenage son in Chris Weitz's L.A. drama "A Better Life."

He has maintained his career in Mexican and other Spanish-language film and television, including a TV miniseries performance as revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata. Like many famous Mexican actors, when he's strolling L.A.'s streets or eating at a restaurant here, he's as likely to be recognized by Spanish-speaking waiters as by an English-speaking Hollywood peer.

That situation could change as English-dominant, Spanish-speaking and bilingual U.S. audiences gradually converge, at least around shows and stars with cultural crossover appeal.

To take one prominent example, Telemundo executives said that "La Reina del Sur," which stars Del Castillo as an international narco-trafficking queen, drew a chunk of its record-setting audiences from English-dominant viewers who watched the show with closed-caption subtitles. Its May 30 finale was the highest-rated program in the network's 19-year ratings history, besting its English-language time-slot competitors.

The network, owned by Comcast's NBCUniversal, is mounting a campaign to earn the show a prime-time Emmy. No Spanish-language show ever has won a prime-time Emmy in any major category. But clearly this isn't your *abuelita's* entertainment market anymore.

"Kate had a very long and very important career in Mexico," said Joshua Mintz, executive vice president of Telemundo Entertainment, in partly accounting for the show's ardent following here. In the United States, he said, "There's a natural market for Mexican actors."

reed.johnson@latimes.com

Copyright © 2011, [Los Angeles Times](#)