

The Twelve Chairs (Las Doce Sillas)

Cuba | 1962 | 90 minutes

Credits

Director	Tomás Gutiérrez Alea
Screenplay	Ugo Ulive & Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (screenplay) Ilya Ilf & Yevgeni Petrov (novel)
Photography	Ramón F. Suárez
Music	Juan Blanco
Cast	
Hipólito Garrigó	Enrique Santiesteban
Oscar	Reynaldo Miravalles
El Cura	René Sánchez
Gertrudis	Pilín Vallejo

In Brief

Upon learning that his mother-in-law had hidden a fortune in jewels inside one of twelve identical parlor chairs taken from her villa by revolutionary authorities, a young Cuban man sets out on a frantic treasure hunt in this classic comedy from Strawberry and Chocolate director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. The Cuban Revolution has swept through the land, and now the property of the rich is about to become nationalized. Despite a decree by the government stating that citizens are to allow revolutionary authorities full access to their possessions, not everyone is willing to turn over their valuables so easily. When a wealthy but elderly woman awaiting death confides to her son-in-law Hipólito that she has stashed her most valuable gems inside a typical parlor chair that had been confiscated by revolutionary authorities, the anxious young man makes it his mission to locate the chair and extract the precious stones. But Hipólito isn't the only one who knows about the hidden jewels, and in order to claim the prize he'll be forced to outwit a series of worthy adversaries.

~ Jason Buchanan, Rovi

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (December 11, 1928 – April 16, 1996) was a Cuban filmmaker. He wrote and directed more than 20 features, documentaries, and short films, which are known for his sharp insight into post-Revolutionary Cuba, and possess a delicate balance between dedication to the revolution and criticism of the social, economic, and political conditions of the country.

Gutiérrez's work is representative of a cinematic movement occurring in the 1960s and 1970s known collectively as the New Latin American Cinema. This collective movement, also referred to by various writers by specific names such as "Third Cinema", "Cine Libre", and "Imperfect Cinema," was concerned largely with the problems of neocolonialism and cultural identity. The movement rejected both the commercial perfection of the Hollywood style, and the auteur-oriented European art cinema, for a cinema created as a tool for political and social change. Due not in a small part to the filmmakers' lack of resources, aesthetic was of secondary importance to cinema's social function. The movement's main goal was to create films in which the viewer became an active, self-aware participant in the discourse of the film. Viewers were presented with an analysis of a current problem within society that as of that time had no clear solution, hoping to make the audience aware of the problem and to leave the theater willing to become actors of social change.

Early life

Born in Havana on December 11, 1928, Gutiérrez was raised in an affluent, politically progressive family. After receiving his law degree from the University of Havana in 1951, Gutiérrez studied cinema at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, graduating in 1953. He was heavily influenced by Italian Neorealism, and created his first films in Rome with future Cuban colleague Julio García Espinosa, with whom he co-directed the documentary film *El Mégano* (The Charcoal Worker).

Shortly after the success of the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1959, Gutiérrez, Espinosa, and several other young filmmakers founded the Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). As ardent supporters of the Revolution, ICAIC was a filmmaker's collective which believed film to be the most important modern art form and the best medium to distribute revolutionary thought to the masses. Gutiérrez's *Esta Tierra Nuestra* (This Land Of Ours), was the first documentary made after the revolutionary victory. ICAIC focused mostly on documentaries and newreels in its formative years, but eventually expanded into production of feature films, including Gutiérrez's early *Historias de la Revolución* (Stories Of The Revolution) (1960), ICAIC's first fiction film, and *Doce sillas* (Twelve Chairs), (1962).

Most popular works

Gutiérrez's first widely successful feature, *Muerte de un burócrata* (Death of a Bureaucrat) (1966) introduces itself as a sort of homage to the history of cinematic comedy, and includes direct allusions to the work of Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy, Luis Buñuel, and many others. The story follows a young man's confounding plight through bureaucratic offices to have his dead uncle exhumed and then reburied after the body is buried with his identification card.

His next film, *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment) (1968) was the first Cuban film to be shown in the United States since the Revolution. Based on Edmundo Desnoes's novella "Inconsolable Memories," the film is the memoir of a morally



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ambiguous bourgeois intellectual living in Havana in the period between the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The protagonist is unwilling to take a political stance one way or another, yet continues to despise the country around him for being backwards and underdeveloped. His life eventually fades into nothingness, becoming a personality which has no use in this new Cuba.

In a self-reflexive cameo appearance, Gutiérrez calls the film a “collage... with a little bit of everything”. Gutiérrez uses a dizzying array of materials and filmic styles in *Memories*, from documentary-style narrative sequences which use long unbroken shots taken from handheld cameras to agitational montage sequences reminiscent of the films of early Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein. *Memories* makes use of various types of media including direct documentary footage shot, still photos, archive and newreel footage, clips of Hollywood films, and recorded speeches by Fidel Castro and John F. Kennedy, to create a seemingly disarticulated film

language that is in direct contrast to the straightforward Hollywood style.

Although criticism of the Revolution and Cuban society was at the heart of not only *Memories*, but all of Gutiérrez’s works, Gutiérrez continued to be a dedicated supporter of Cuban Socialism. But his works could hardly be described as propaganda either. Gutiérrez described the motivation for his contradictory approach by saying: “... cinema provides an active and mobilizing element, which stimulates participation in the revolutionary process. Then, it is not sufficient to have a moralizing cinema based on harangue and exhortation. We need a cinema that promotes and develops a critical attitude. But how to criticize and at the same time strengthen the reality in which we are immersed?”

Late career

In the following decades, Gutiérrez divided his time between making his own films and mentoring promising young filmmakers through ICAIC.

In 1972 and 1976, respectively, Gutiérrez completed two historical feature films, *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (A Cuban Fight Against the Demons) and *La última cena* (The Last Supper). Both set in Spanish colonial Cuba, the films study contradictions and hypocrisy in Cuba’s past of imperialism, religion, and slavery.

Hasta cierto punto (Up to a Certain Point) (ez’s wife, Mirta Ibarra.) The film underwent some censorship and remains to this day consider by Cuban critics one of his lesser works, yet still an enjoyable film. Jokingly the director himself said that the film was only successful “up to a certain point”

In the early 1990s, Gutiérrez fell into ill health, forcing him to co-direct his last two films with his friend Juan Carlos Tabío. The first, *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate) (1993) became the first Cuban film to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. The film’s story centers on the oft conflictory relationship between a committed Marxist student and a flamboyantly gay artist. Gutiérrez’s final film, *Guantanamera*, (1994) uses traditional elements such as an ensemble cast and romantic comedy to take a more subtle approach to Gutiérrez’s old targets: underdevelopment and bureaucracy.

Titón, as he was known to his friends, died at age 68 on April 16, 1996. He is buried in the Colon Cemetery, Havana.

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