

# THE YOUNG AND THE NAKED

*Love is a double-edged sword and life imitates television in the saucy melodrama Latin Boys Go to Hell*

by Christopher D. Cuttone

**M**adonna would love this movie: *Latin Boys Go to Hell* has a plethora of cute Latinos in various stages of undress, and in various combinations, mixed with a heavy dose of Catholic imagery.

It has the melodrama and stock characters of a soap opera—like *Dynasty* (if it had gay characters) or *Melrose Place* (if its gay character actually had a life)—only the acting's not as good.

## Cinema

But hey, these guys are models, not actors (or so it seems). If the acting were too good, it would seem less melodramatic, and in this case the exaggerated plot and stereotypical characters were actually cultivated in order to make a simple statement about the melodramatic tendencies of real life.

Maybe the film should be granted low-budget amnesty.

To make up for the mediocre performances, *Latin Boys Go to Hell* jumps into a juicy sex scene almost right away and carries that tension throughout most of the film.

Again like a soap opera, or *telenovela* as they call them in Mexico, there's a constant feeling that at any moment a piece of clothing will drop to the floor and a steamy encounter will ensue. As a result, there's an air of unreality that is apropos of the genre. This is a world where love burns hot and fast and happiness doesn't linger.

Set in working-class Brooklyn against a backdrop of club music and strobe lights, the characters stand out as recognizable soap-opera archetypes: the innocent protagonist, 20-year-old Justin; the predator male, sexy and despicable Carlos; the tormented psycho, handsome-yet-frightening Braulio; and the (relatively) wealthy emasculating woman, Latino-obsessed photographer Monica. Add to that list a few characters not common in mainstream TV, like the psycho's fag hag, Andrea, who falls for Justin's sexually confused cousin, Angel.

Living in a bedroom still cluttered with the remnants of childhood, Justin sees plenty of flesh as Monica's assistant, but instead of succumbing to the siren call of a sexy model, he falls for his less-handsome but infinitely more charming cousin. The love triangles multiply as the film gains momentum: With Andrea and Justin competing for Angel, Carlos rejecting Braulio in favor of Justin (or just about anyone, really), Braulio growing jealous of Andrea's new relationship and nursing an unhealthy obsession with Carlos' infidelities, and Justin and Braulio faithfully watching the same *telenovela*, it comes as no surprise when life begins to imitate art (if television can be called art).

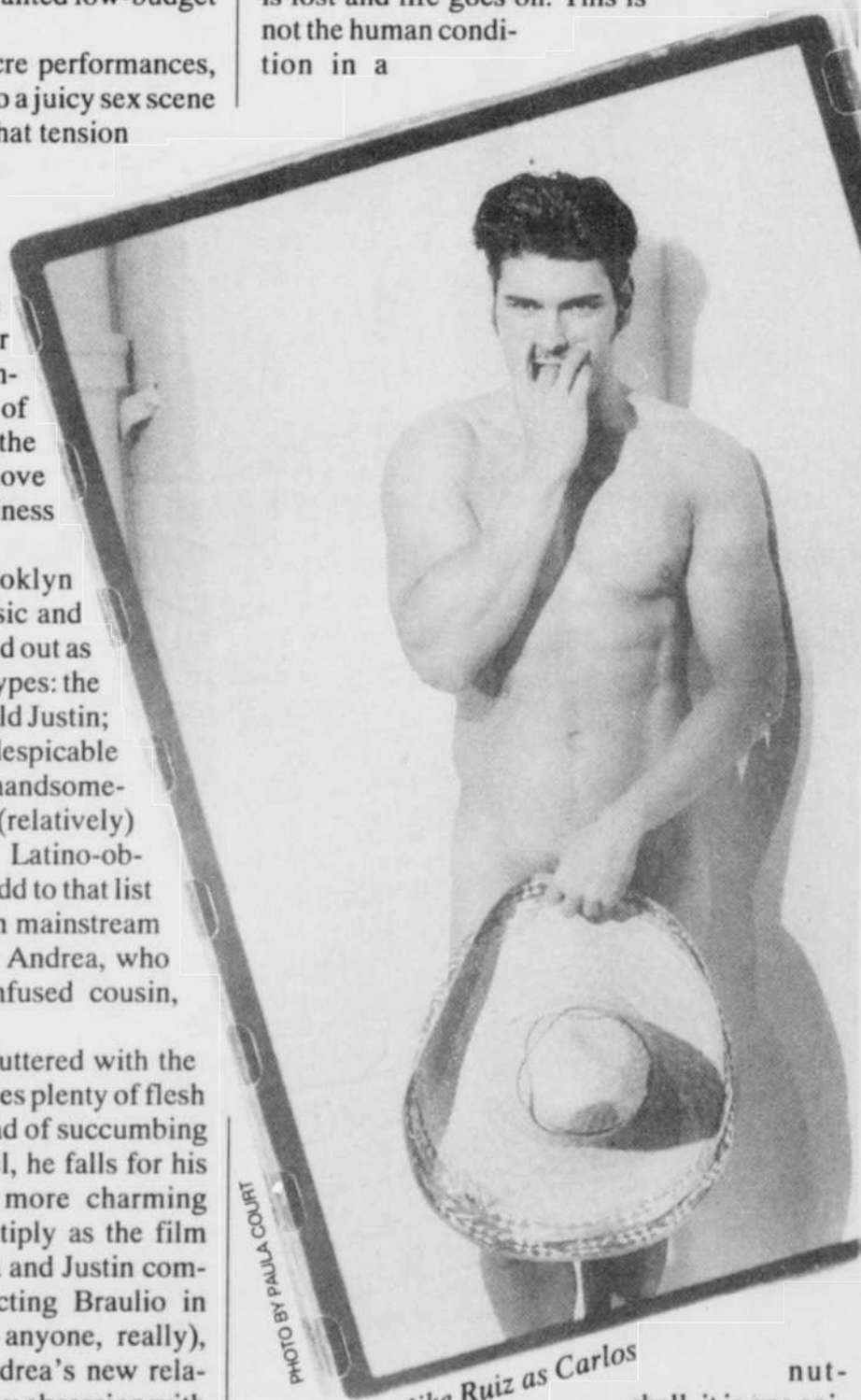
Among the film's triumphs are moments when Justin's angst comes to the surface. During a scene that takes place inside a disco, actor Irwin Ossa concentrates in his expression all the desperation that loud music, dim lighting and a meat-market atmosphere can inspire in the heart of someone looking for love. Later, during his big sex scene with Carlos, one can feel Justin's mixture of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and absurdity, desire and revulsion. The post-coital awkwardness and melancholy are vivid for a moment, then gone.

There isn't a lot of exploration when issues like these come up, just a brief fade-in to the next

scene, because the focus of *Latin Boys* is not on the intimate details but rather on the basic components shared by everyone, that appeal to the common denominator of all lives and loves.

Director Ela Troyano—who also put in time as a writer, helping turn Andre Salas' unfinished novel into a screenplay—shows a deft hand in manipulating images to highlight the archetypal, albeit nontraditional, elements of the story. Although none of the icons escapes unscathed, a lesser talent could easily have flubbed the juggling of Catholic and Aztec gods, castration anxiety and *vagina* (in this case, penis) *dentata*, *flores para los muertos*, and the Latino proverb about the guy born with a flower up his ass (which, roughly translated, means that he's so good-looking he gets whatever he wants).

Although it has its moments, in the end this film is not mythology, and so it returns to its more humble roots. In the small-screen world of the soap opera, the already thin line between love and obsession is blurred even more, innocence is lost and life goes on. This is not the human condition in a



Mike Ruiz as Carlos

PHOTO BY PAULA COURT

nut-shell, it is one episode in an ongoing drama.

As in life, as in art, there is still a lesson to be learned. In this case it comes via a *telenovela* called *Dos Vidas*, which interjects its sordid tale of twin sisters involved in a love triangle at crucial moments in the film. Its final contribution to *Latin Boys Go to Hell* is something never done explicitly in U.S. soaps—something which is justified by the film's mythical aspirations—it offers a moral to the story: "Passion can light the way for a pure and noble love or take us into the darkness of malice and hate."

*Latin Boys Go to Hell* plays Dec. 12-18 at Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave. Shows are at 7, 8:40 and 10 pm nightly, with weekend matinees at 2:15, 3:45 and 5:15. Tickets are \$5.50 general. For more information, call 223-4515.

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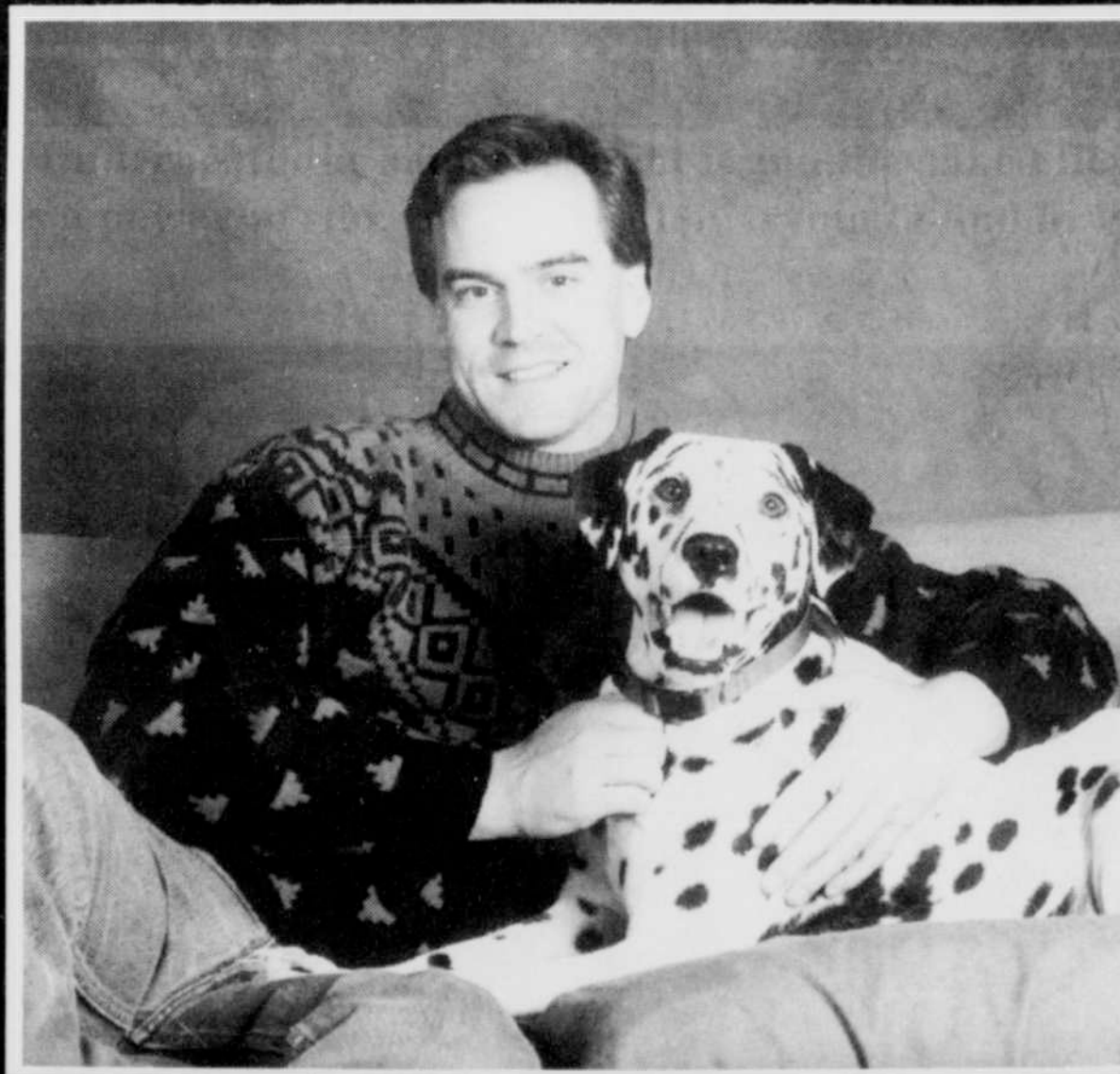
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