



Novarro, Ramon (1899-1968)

by Peter J. Holliday

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2003, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Ramon Novarro
(publicity photograph,
1929).

Ramon Novarro became the romantic idol of Hollywood silent films in the 1920s. At the height of his career his fame almost rivaled that of Rudolph Valentino. Although his persona was usually that of "a boy in love," some moviegoers may have found in him a distinctly androgynous quality similar to Valentino's.

Following Valentino's death in 1926 Novarro became the biggest name in a group of "Latin lovers" that included Antonio Moreno and Ricardo Cortez.

Novarro was born Ramon Samaniego in Durango, Mexico on February 6, 1899. In 1916 he moved to Los Angeles, where he took jobs as a model and singing waiter. In 1917 he broke into films as an extra; he further developed his acting skills with a stint in vaudeville.

Rex Ingram, who had directed Valentino in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), discovered Novarro and worked hard to make him a screen idol. In 1922 studio publicity touted Novarro as the new Valentino, but he was always overshadowed by the original.

Ingram directed Novarro in roles as various as that of the villainous Rupert of Hentzau in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1922) and the tragic lover of *Trifling Women* (1922), and co-starred him in three romantic pictures with his wife, Alice Terry.

Novarro reached the pinnacle of his career with the title role in the monumental production of *Ben-Hur* (1926), although he gave a better performance the following year in Ernst Lubitsch's *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927). He also directed the Spanish and French versions of *Call of the Flesh* (1930) in which he starred (*La Sevillana* and *Le Chanteur de Seville*, respectively).

Novarro was less pretentious than Valentino was, and there was a natural style to his acting that distinguished him from other young actors. Contemporary critics praised the ease and charm of his performances.

Although his boyish looks did not adversely affect the critical estimation of his talent during his heyday as a star, retrospectively some film historians find him almost too beautiful to be taken seriously, and he has consequently been perceived as a decidedly effeminate performer. Perhaps that is why he has never quite attained the renown of Valentino or the other reigning romantic lead of the era, John Gilbert.

Novarro continued playing romantic leads into the early 1930s. Age began to take its toll, however, despite Novarro's desperate attempt to look youthful in his early talkies. He later became a parody of his earlier self in such films as *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937). Except for occasional appearances in character parts, his career ended in the 1930s.

Novarro's homosexuality was a fairly open secret in Hollywood. Combined with his androgynous beauty, it

not only challenged prevailing norms of masculinity in the 1920s and 1930s, but it has also profoundly affected the critical estimation of his talent.

Some critics have argued that his sexuality influenced his acting style, as they search for feminine qualities in his acting as evidence of his homosexuality. Others have even (somewhat anachronistically) attributed his apparent propensity for too much make-up (a common effect of the rather primitive lighting on stage make-up in early films) and for semi-nude posing to his homosexuality.

On October 31, 1968, Novarro was found dead in his Hollywood Hills home, having been beaten to death by one of two hustlers he picked up. False rumors still linger that Novarro's killers choked him with a lead dildo replicating the penis of Valentino, supposedly a gift from his former lover.

Joel Harrison assessed the evidence for these rumors in his book *Bloody Wednesday*, and in his more recent biography of the star André Soares presents further evidence for their speciousness (including interviews with principals at the subsequent murder trial). The incident also inspired the story of "Willie" in Thomas Tryon's *Crowned Heads* (1976).

Bibliography

Ellenberger, Allan R. *Roman Novarro: A Biography of the Silent Film Idol, 1899-1968. With a Filmography*. Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 1999.

Harrison, Joel L. *Bloody Wednesday*. Canoga Park, Calif.: Major Books, 1978.

Slide, Anthony. "Novarro, Ramon." *International Directory of Films and Filmmakers*. Vol. 3. *Actors and Actresses*. 2nd ed. Nicholas Thomas, ed. Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1991. 741-742.

Soares, André. *Beyond Paradise: The Life of Ramon Novarro*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.

About the Author

Peter J. Holliday, Professor of the History of Art and Classical Archaeology at California State University, Long Beach, has written extensively on Greek and Roman art and their legacies and on issues in contemporary art criticism.