

Today at Mediático we are delighted to present an entry from the most eminent member of our editorial team, and one of our founding contributors Paul Julian Smith, FBA is Distinguished Professor, Ph.D. Programs in Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center, CUNY in New York. He is the author of 21 books and 100 articles. His most recent books are [Queer Mexico: Cinema and Television Since 2000](#); and [Television Drama in Spain and Latin Americas](#) and [Multiplatform Media in Mexico: Growth and Change Since 2010](#). In this post he explores the groundbreaking teen gay romance in a Mexican telenovela [Mi Marido tiene familia](#), the resulting Aristemo phenomenon and its theatrical spinoff Aristemo as well as the reception of its stars at Mexico City's [Mix Festival of Film and Sexual Diversity](#).

The Aristemo Phenomenon: Teen Gay Romance in Mexican Telenovela, Theater, and Series

by Paul Julian Smith

Foreign viewers of Mexican media may still think of Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna as the country's consummate example of bromance. Although they first toiled as child stars in television, the now celebrated actors came to joint homoerotic fame in *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2002). This crowd- and critic-pleasing feature's notorious last scene showed the couple, who had spent the course of the film vying for the favors of an older woman, finally making love with each other for just one guilty time. Less known outside Mexico is the pair's soccer comedy, also successful at the local box office, *Rudo y cursi* (helmed by Alfonso's sibling Carlos Cuarón in 2008), where they played enduringly intimate half-brothers.

Yet, most recently, a new and more youthful male couple has come to fame in Mexico, one

which has achieved mainstream stardom in two popular genres (telenovela and series) and in two media (free to air television and legitimate theater). And they have done so, surprisingly perhaps, while desublimating Gael and Diego's extended homosocial tease and creating an unapologetic and explicit queer romance.

Joaquín Bondoni (born 2003) and Emilio Osorio (born 2002) both began, like Gael and Diego before them, as child stars on television, Bondoni in the one-off dramas known in Mexico as "unitarios" (where he had already appeared in a much loved gay role by 2017), Osorio in a family friendly traditional telenovela *Mi corazón es tuyo* ("My Heart is Yours," Televisa, 2014-15), where he played one of seven children of a wealthy widower cared for by a feisty nanny. The latter show was made by Juan Osorio, Emilio's father, one of Mexican television's most prolific and powerful producers. He is also one of the few content creators who has managed to navigate the choppy media waters of a modern Mexico where familiar fare has fallen out of favor with mass audiences.

The elder Osorio's next project was unusually successful, as it was extended to a rare second season and over two hundred episodes, blending in its plot tradition and modernity, drama and comedy, as it did so. It also revealed Mexican television's new global quest for formats, based as it was on a Korean original. *Mi marido tiene familia* ("My Husband's Got a Family," Televisa, 2017-19, shown in the USA on Univision) boasted an implausible premise whereby a cosmopolitan doctor whose adoptive parents live in Colombia moves to Oaxaca, one of Mexico's most picturesque tourist destinations, only to discover that his embarrassing provincial neighbors are actually his birth family. The large cast included dignified seniors such as Silvia Pinal (still remembered by cinephiles for her work for Buñuel some fifty years ago) alongside perky juveniles such as the now teenage heartthrob Emilio Osorio as the unusually named Aristóteles ("Ari").

In the second season supporting character Ari moves to the center and is provided with a touching gay romance with schoolmate Cuauhtémoc ("Temo" played by Bondoni).

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Rebranded as the couple “Aristemo,” they rapidly became a social media phenomenon, prompting such spontaneous social movements as #bluedbondoni, when fans wore blue ribbons to school as a sign of their allegiance to the actor and his gay role. *Mi marido tiene familia* thus reconnected with the young audience who had abandoned local broadcast TV for foreign series and the internet. While this was by no means the first time that gay characters had appeared in a telenovela, even on Televisa, they had not previously attracted such attention from the press and devotion from the fans. Nor had they been so young.



Mi marido tiene familia (2017-2019)

The Aristemo plotline proved, like the telenovela itself, knowingly ambivalent. On the one hand, it trended surprisingly serious, treating such themes as school bullying, parental rejection, and effeminacy. Producer Osorio proudly pointed to input from psychologists so as to treat gay theme in a way that was “serious” and “respectful.”^[1] On the other hand, the show shamelessly teased its audience, endlessly delaying a much desired kiss between the two teens (see featured image). In one of the episodes I saw Temo is afflicted by an ill-timed nose bleed at a crucial moment. The final climax did not disappoint, however, with the boy’s embracing and declaring endless love for each other while formally dressed at their high school graduation. There were also granted a romantic tryst on a tropical beach.



Cast of *Mi marido tiene familia* (Juan Osorio centre)

Soon after the end of his telenovela, Juan Osorio announced the creation of a theater version (“comedia musical”) called, precisely, “Aristemo.” In the capital it played in a small theater

at a complex in the fancy southern borough of Coyoacán, not far from the famous museum-houses dedicated to Kahlo and Trotsky. When I made my visit, the impatient line outside proved to be made up of at least 90% teen and tween girls, with some infants and parents. And in the row in front of me sat producer Juan Osorio himself, who would introduce the show, accompanied by well known TV critic Álvaro Cueva. In what is surely a first at a live performance, Cueva would be publicly thanked for his support from the stage. (He later published a positive article on the event in his column at a national newspaper.)^[2] Although the show also mounted a national tour where it provoked some controversy in conservative cities such as San Luis Potosí,^[3] the crowd in the capital claimed to have come from all over Mexico. Some of them were clearly repeat visitors who sprang to their feet screaming from the very start, cheerfully ignoring the producer's prohibition on recording the musical numbers on their phones.

The premise of the stage show, developed from the then recently concluded telenovela, is modest. One boy has moved to the USA to attend school, where he pines for his lover; the other, equally miserable, prepares reluctantly to celebrate his 18th birthday at home. In spite of the direct address by the enthusiastic actors to the screaming fans at their feet, much of the show relied on digital supports. The two lovers' mournful FaceTime chats were projected onto a screen placed at the center of the stage (a couch stage-right represented Ari's Oaxaca home, a basketball hoop stage-left Temo's academic exile in the USA). And star members of the original telenovela's cast such as the supportive father played by Arath de la Torre, who did not deign tread the boards with the boys, also appeared only in recorded video. Blending the real and the virtual, audience members who uploaded the choicest selfies with the hash tag #aristemodomingo (the show ran only at weekends to accommodate its cast's TV shooting schedule) were invited onstage for the party scene.



Aristemo the stage show

The trials of separation would be predictably resolved by the show's end when Temo unexpectedly emerges from Ari's birthday cake to the surprise and delight of all. But beyond this romantic plot, the musical was surprisingly didactic, even acknowledging the special contribution of Spanish psychologist Silvia Olmedo in its credits. And its villain was a young girl obsessed with the handsome Ari, her schoolmate. Her unwanted attentions gave frequent opportunities for earnest dialogue explaining that, no, homosexuality cannot be "cured" as it is not a sickness; and, yes, gay partners can be faithful to one another even when separated. The proficient musical numbers (whose most emblematic is "Amor valiente" or "Brave Love"), which shuffle between pop, soul, and reggae, provoked a more frothy fun with the word perfect audience drowning out their idols, who to their credit appeared to sing live.

The theater show ended with a shameless plug for the forthcoming series (a relatively rare genre in Mexico) that, unlike the telenovela, would be focused exclusively on the couple and their new life together in the challenging big city, far from familiar Oaxaca. Scheduled for Fall 2019, its title was announced as a significant *El corazón nunca se equivoca* ("The Heart Makes No Mistakes"). Although the stars made stirring speeches on gay rights and being true to yourself during the show itself, the biggest screams came when one character proposed marriage to the other. In a demonstration of *Aristemo's* perhaps unwitting incursions into the political arena, a proposal for marriage equality was ruled out at a federal level by Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador just days later.[4]



Advance publicity for *El corazón no se equivoca* ("The Heart Makes No Mistakes")

The launch of the 23rd edition of Mexico City's [Mix Festival of Film and Sexual Diversity](#), another forum for the ubiquitous Aristemo, took place in the same week that I saw the show and the President rejected a law permitting national same sex unions. By comparison with the raucous musical, it proved a relatively sedate affair. Held in the exquisitely formal theater in the Historic Center named for Esperanza Iris, the actor-producer who had built it one hundred years before, it featured (as such events tend to) a number of speeches thanking sponsors and attendees. Zemmoa, a Mexican trans singer-songwriter and model, gave a sultry performance, at one point accompanied by a video where she impersonated the Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Veteran Ofelia Medina, an actor best known for the title role in biographical feature *Frida, Still Life* (Paul Leduc, 1983) some thirty six years before, received one of the two prizes awarded at the event. But the other prize went once more to the Aristemos. This was something of a surprise given the enduringly cinephilic focus of the festival and its energetic director Arturo Castelán.



Emilio Osorio (“Ari”) and Joaquín Bondoni (“Temo”) receive their awards at the Mix Festival

Here a divide in the audience became manifest. When the boys appeared on stage, accompanied once more by their protective producer, the special guests of the festival director in the orchestra (such as myself) applauded politely, while a previously unseen fan posse in the balcony boisterously chanted “Aristemo” throughout. Clearly the TV stars were the main popular attraction of the festival launch. While this time they did not sing, the young stars gave earnest speeches once more on LGBT pride, while Juan Osorio, serious in a suit, vowed to keep making content with a gay theme within the previously conservative telenovela genre and for the notoriously traditional broadcaster Televisa.

Piquantly, a short shown after the ceremonies was about the first day care center in Mexico

City dedicated to queer seniors. Its moving title was *Déjenos brillar*, or “Let Us Shine” (Héctor Torres Gámez, 2018). Youth and age, visibility and invisibility, came together in this final film. Gay teens, once unrecognized on Mexican screens, are now highly visible in telenovela and series, television and theater. Perhaps it is not too much to ask that, following their example, LGBT senior citizens will soon find their own way into popular drama in Mexico and beyond.

[1] Jean García, “Televisa muestra la homofobia escolar en adolescentes gay #Aristemo,” *Homosensual* (September 26, 2018)

<https://www.soyhomosensual.com/ocio/televisa-muestra-la-homofobia-escolar-en-adolescentes-gay-aristemo/>

[2] Álvaro Cueva, “Aristemo, la comedia musical,” *Milenio* (May 16, 2019)

<https://www.milenio.com/opinion/alvaro-cueva/el-pozo-de-los-deseos-reprimidos/aristemo-la-comedia-musical>

[3] Notimex “La historia gay de los Aristemo ha enfrentado rechazo social,” *El Universal* May 17, 2019.

<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/espectaculos/la-historia-gay-de-los-aristemo-ha-enfrentado-rechazo-social>

[4] Jannet López and César García, “Descarta AMLO ley federal sobre matrimonio gay,” *Milenio* (May 19, 2019)

<https://www.milenio.com/politica/descarta-amlo-ley-federal-matrimonio-gay>

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