

Rhythm, Romance and Revolution: An Interview with Javier Mariscal

Written by Steven Heller

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Spanish designer, illustrator, author and restaurateur Javier Mariscal and Oscar-winning director Fernando Trueba (*Belle Epoque*, *Calle 54*) have teamed up to create an epic animated love story that occurs around the time of the Cuban Revolution. Focusing on the evolution of jazz and traveling from Havana to New York, *Chico y Rita* is a tribute to the music, culture and people of Cuba in 1948, almost a decade before Castro. Chico is a young piano player with big dreams. Rita is a beautiful singer with an extraordinary voice. They are joined by music and love, but their journey—in the tradition of the Latin ballad, the *bolero*—brings heartache and torment. From Havana to New York, Paris, Hollywood and Las Vegas, two passionate individuals battle impossible odds to unite in harmony. Mariscal, whose work often has a cartoon-like quality, applied a neo-realist approach to this project. His animations bring a sensuality to this profound and gripping film, now touring the festival circuit (*Chico y Rita* has already earned critical praise at Telluride and is now headed for other festivals in Canada and the United States). In addition, Mariscal has a retrospective currently on view through January 30 at the Pedrera de CatalunyaCaixa in Barcelona, where his work is divided into six thematic spaces as a way to explain his many methodologies. I spoke to Mariscal about the importance of this work and his commitment to the medium.

Heller: What was the inspiration for *Chico y Rita*?

Mariscal: The film arose as a result of being in love with the city of Havana and with Cuba, places which, due to their historical relationship with Spain, have a great emotional charge for me. Fernando Trueba feels the same as I do about everything Cuban. It is not just a fascination for its architecture, geography and history, but also for its culture, its music and its people. We both wanted to express this love and affection in a film, trying to narrate, by means of a story, how much we have enjoyed it all. We felt that the 1940s and '50s were a crucial period in its music. They were years of creative explosion in Havana.

Heller: Where does the film take place and why did you choose this setting?

Mariscal: The action takes place in Havana and in New York, two cities which, in the 1940 and '50s, thanks to their proximity and the fascination that Americans and Cubans had about each other, enjoyed great cultural interchanges, particularly with regard to music. We felt that this creative flow between both cities could be expressed through a love story, a story of encounters and misunderstandings such as the ones narrated in the lyrics of Cuban songs from this period.

Heller: The graphic style of this film is more representational than the comic style you are known for. Why did you decide on a film that tells a more serious tale with more realistic imagery?

Mariscal: Once we had decided on the concept of the film, an entertaining film based around the musical theme and with a love story as a backdrop, we felt that realism was the most suitable aesthetic to remember this period. The story it tells is a very real story, therefore the creation required a graphic style somewhat different to that which characterizes me. We had to adapt the thousands of sketches I had made of Havana and of New York, and try to give expression to all that imagery in the most realistic way possible to recreate an environment set in a specific time and place. The most suitable aesthetic seemed to us to be the Hollywood movies of those two decades. It is a classical style in this sense, and yet, to me, it is innovative.

Heller: You have long been in the vanguard of comics and design. Do you see this film as a turn back on tradition?

Mariscal: The comic is a way of narrating and of freezing reality. A comic strip is a frozen piece of time; it is an exercise in synthesis. A film allows you to animate it, something that I have done on other occasions. I have never stopped doing cartoons. Perhaps this will be seen as a piece of work that is better classified in the comic tradition than as vanguard, but I never think about this. I simply do what I feel like doing and what seems to be best to deal with the job I have in front of me.

Heller: You have a book out that appears to sum up your career to this point. Is *Chico y Rita* the beginning of the next stage of your career?

Mariscal: To some extent, yes, it is a new stage, in the sense that this project will have greater repercussion; it will be seen by more people than my work usually reaches. The dream of the team working on *Chico y Rita* is to carry on working on audiovisual projects. We already have three more cartoon projects lined up.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com