

It was a dark and stormy night

A bunch of strangers seek shelter at a dimly lit funeral parlor

By Julio Nakamurakare / Herald staff

FILM REVIEW

In Pablo Bucca's gripping thriller *Una mujer sucede* (2005), a handful of perfect strangers – three middle-aged men with no apparent connection – converge on a small-town funeral parlor where the wake for an unidentified woman is being held. As befits a darkly ominous noirish nouvelle, a storm is raging and the dimly lit, damp funeral home is the only available refuge given the time of night, the weather conditions and some comically twisted incidents involving townsfolk short on patience.

A minor digression: if you're a fan of cartoonist Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, you will probably recall that Snoopy, Charlie Brown's adorable beagle pet, had literary ambitions that always, inevitably, ran short. Perched on top of his dog house, he would start, over and over, to type a mystery novel. "It was a dark and stormy night" was as far as he would always get.



In Lozano's novel, and in Pablo Bucca's film adaptation, it's also that kind of night, but the narrative forges ahead in a fittingly intriguing manner. The plot does move ahead while stopping for brief intervals to provide comment – both visual and oral – on the circumstances surrounding an odd death, an absurd game of chance, and a string of revelations.

Santos (Eduardo Blanco), lanky and gaudy, gets off a deserted train wearing a waterproof jacket that does very little to protect him from the wind and rainstorm.

Denied shelter in the town's only hotel, he walks by a funeral parlour and steps in as though he were a mourner.

In the dimly lit room where the wake is being held for an unidentified woman, placed in a casket with the lid tightly closed, there's an elderly man, Villalba (Oscar Alegre), who announces he's there just because, as a town hall employee, he's been offered overtime pay for attending the woman's wake.

Both Santos and Villalba assure one another that they had no connection with the deceased woman, who that same afternoon had a job interview with the mayor. After the brief meeting, the woman died a sudden death on the town's square.

As Santos and Villalba ponder how to while away the long night ahead of them, a third man arrives: Fernández (Alejandro Awada). A university lecturer specializing in comparative literature and the divergence between European and Argentine narrative development, Fernández too has a story of his own to tell about the deceased woman. Lozano's text – original, inventive, full of unexpected twists – must have been a magnet for first-time director Pablo Bucca, who set the action of the movie and shot it entirely in his hometown of Bolívar in the Province of Buenos Aires. Eschewing clichéd *paisajismo* and easy mannerisms, Bucca has constructed a rather well-crafted thriller. For better or worse, *Una mujer sucede* – the movie – is formatted as a

storytelling session that could have been a stage production, which can normally do away with the accoutrements and reconstructions of the film language. This is perhaps one of the minor quibbles in the screen production of *Una mujer sucede*. The reenactment of the three men's diverging, conflicting accounts of who the deceased woman really is and how she affected their lives is well-filmed and mostly engaging, but total immersion into the complex narrative is rather difficult at first. However, warts and all, it comes out as a rewarding experiment in adaptation and transposition.

Out of the three men in the dead woman's life, it's Villalba and Fernández who come up with the most gripping yarns, Santos' account trailing behind due to its predictability and actor Eduardo Blanco's stultified style of acting.

As the stern academic and secretly passionate Fernández, actor Alejandro Awada succeeds in conveying all the nuances of the literature teacher with a highly flammable heart. With or without proper coaching, a seasoned, versatile performer like Awada never finds himself stranded.

As the simple-minded, down-to-earth Villalba (the resignedly unassuming town hall worker), actor Oscar Alegre not only looks the part but also conveys the notion that he is a fine character actor, as true-to-life as Villalba himself.

As the mysterious woman in question (Sofía / Rosita / Laura), actress Viviana Saccone, hard as she tries, never quite manages to get under the skin of the three utterly dissimilar personalities she must bring to life. Clichéd rather than archetypal, Ms. Saccone's interpretive skills are perhaps best suited for TV soaps, where no gradation, acting range or subtlety are normally required.

All in all, *Una mujer sucede* could have been a better product, but it is a more than dignified opera prima from a director from whom much more can be expected. A good thing for him, if we keep in mind that, after a brilliant début, filmmakers find their second feature harder. Directors like Bucca can only get better with time.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Una mujer sucede. Argentina, 2010. Written by: Pablo Bucca, based on Luis Lozano's novel of the same title. Directed by: Pablo Bucca. With: Eduardo Blanco, Alejandro Awada, Oscar Alegre, Viviana Saccone, Jorge D'Elía and Gustavo Garzón. Produced by: Limbico Films / 1971 Cine.