

# BRICK a literary journal

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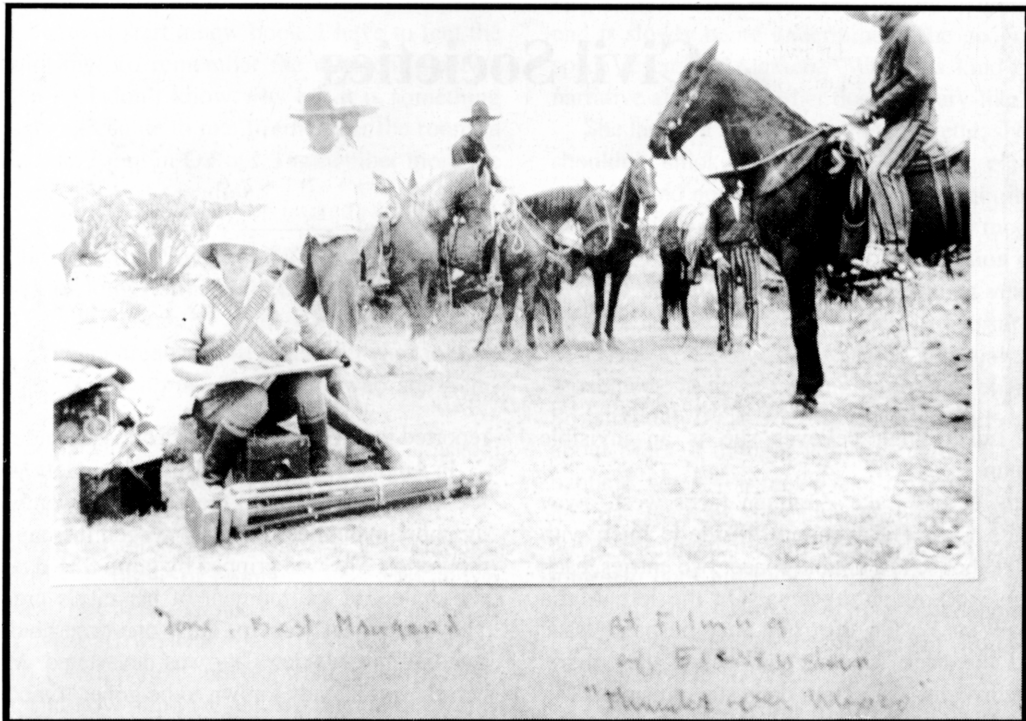


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Cover Photo of Luis Buñuel and Garcia Lorca. Madrid, 1924.  
Credit: Juan-Luis Buñuel



*Whatever the reason, Jean Charlot and I walked to the outskirts of Cuernavaca, then sat down to rest while watching some chickens pecking in a mud puddle.*

*That was another nice thing about Mexico in those days. You could sit around on it. If you were in a strange town, and you got sleepy, you could go to sleep in the plaza. My favorite spot was the stone steps of a church. Sunny and warm, the wide church steps always seemed the perfect place to curl up and go to sleep.*

*I'm not sure what the chickens had to do with it, but it was during this conversation that Jean and I decided to get married, but not to each other. I said I would find him a wife with domestic instincts and he said he'd find me a husband with the beauty of Don Julio, the practicality of Eisenstein, and his own brand of lovingness.*

**– Zohmah Charlot**  
*Mexican Memories* (1931)

# Making Movies

*excerpted from a memoir of 1931*

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by ZOHMAH CHARLOT

While my roommate was away in Puebla, a man came calling at the door. He was disappointed that she wasn't around but I invited him in because he looked nice and sophisticated.

His name was Adolfo Best-Maugard and he said he had just come into town from a large Spanish *pulque* plantation at Tetlapayac in the State of Hidalgo. He was there working with the famous Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein. He had come to invite Ione to the *hacienda* for a visit but since she wasn't there he asked me if I wanted to come instead.

The next morning I met Best-Maugard and the Norwegian cameraman of the film company, Edouard Tissé, at the Buena Vista station. Tall and handsome, they were each wearing tropic suits and pith helmets. I thought they looked like the leading men for the actress Marlene Dietrich in one of her desert films.

During the train ride to the *hacienda*, about eighty miles southeast of Mexico City, they took pictures of the scenery from the windows with their cameras. I wished they had wanted to take pictures of me. Why was I born such a little pug nose?

The train finally stopped for us to get off in the midst of a great expanse between mountains. Maguey grew close to the train tracks and great long spiked rows of it were growing across the flat valley as far as I could see.

We were met by eight fierce-looking Mexicans, each armed with two pistols apiece and wearing tight striped trousers and great hats shading the expressions in their eyes. They pretended, for my benefit, to be bandits and I thought they were kidnapping us when they put us on a miniature train that was drawn by donkeys. The animals pulled us along tiny tracks between the rows of huge maguey plants.

About an hour later (by then I had learned that we were not being kidnapped after all) the large rectangular *hacienda* appeared in front of us, outlined against the long slope of the mountains. When the train got nearer I could see the beautiful red earthen walls and the large towers at the front gate.

We entered the outer courtyard of the *hacienda* through a side entrance and then passed under a large arch into a stone paved inner courtyard. Long flights of stairs led up to the main house which was surrounded by dozens of little mud huts where the Indians lived. Everybody ran out to greet the train when it arrived.

The first person I saw was Eisenstein. He came up to me and said, "hello, gringo kid."

He then walked me up the stairs of the main house which had thick walls and lovely windows. There didn't seem to be much furniture, however. I was given a room that opened to a view of the distant volcanoes.

"Dearest Prudence," I wrote to a friend soon after my arrival, "Imagine sitting in a little window balcony overlooking the village of a *hacienda*; the towers of the main gate; and out beyond the wall a long slope of green planted in orderly rows of maguey plants; and miles and miles further on, mountains and two snow-capped volcanic peaks. From this great scope of hills, mountains, and volcanoes, one can look immediately below and see the activity of a *pulque hacienda*: women are washing clothes in a long stone basin; beside them, men are scrubbing out the *pulque* strainers; a stream of children, donkeys (how they yell), pigs, women carrying water jugs on their heads, and now a soldier who has ridden in the side gate is passing beneath my balcony."

Eisenstein had met the owner of the *hacienda*, Don Julio Saldivar, while he was scouting around for film



Zohmah Charlot at the *hacienda*. "Directed" by Eisenstein.



locations in Mexico. Don Julio was crazy to be a movie star and he invited the director and his crew to his place for a few weeks. They had liked it so well they were still here months later, having decided to use the *hacienda* and its maguery fields for the background of their film.

Eisenstein had one other Russian assistant besides Tissé the cameraman. There was a terribly handsome boy named Gregori Alexandrov. Everybody at the *hacienda* called him Grisha.

Don Julio, our host, was a good-looking man. No wonder he wanted to be in pictures. He was one of the few *hacienda* owners who had come through the revolution with all his lands. One day he told me that he had bought machine guns and took shots at the revolutionaries from the gate towers.

My eyes just about popped out. I was surprised that somebody who looked so young would have been a part of an historical revolution. He had a manner so proud that I wondered why he even needed machine guns.

After we were introduced he asked me if I wanted to see him shoot. I nodded my head and he called for a peon to walk across to the other side of the garden and hold up a bottle. He took aim and then shot the bottle from out of the man's hand. I'm glad he was a good shot.

"Our host," I wrote in my letter to Prudence, "really deserves a whole book for he is a fascinating 'animal.' I never before saw anyone ride so well, shoot so well, look so handsome, wear such swell riding clothes, have such big cars, be so generous, have such beautiful black curly hair, and have so darn much fun.

"Then there are two girls who are playing in the picture (the rest of the cast are people off the *hacienda* and friends who happen in); one of them is very beautiful and bad, and the other is a very nice Indian girl who I like a lot. There is also one of Mexico's important composers, who fell off a horse during one of the wild riding scenes and blacked both his eyes. Then there is an American from Los Angeles who is managing the finances, and he is nice but I don't care for his attitude about people. Besides this rather permanent assortment, the host's wife, one of the president's aides, the grandfather, an artist, people from neighbouring *haciendas*, and miscellaneous Mexicans arrived. One time nineteen sat down at the table for dinner....

"One night the American brought back some films from Mexico City and we had a picture show in the *hacienda* theatre (yes, the house also has a large room with a stage and really lovely, old grilled windows). This room is also used for the native school — you should really see that school. The population of the *hacienda* that could, crowded into the theatre; they

were dressed, of course, in their straw hats, blankets, and sandals, and the women barefooted with shawls (*rebozos*) over their heads. For many of them, I am certain it was the first picture they had ever seen, and what a terrible picture it was.

"Other days I spent with the whole company, on location on top one of the hills where a variety of cactus grows thick and high. They were taking riding scenes, and the twists and wild turns of the horses through the cactus was something worth seeing. We would also look for strange flowers, and have picnics. What picnics they did give; some dozen servants would dash everything from the house, hot and ready.

"On one side of the *hacienda* is a large room where they bring and prepare the *pulque*. It is an interesting room with the walls all painted in large oil paintings of life about the *hacienda*, and on the floors are large vats filled with white foamy *pulque*. When you come in they give you a half of some kind of shell filled with the greenish drink. When the day's work is done the workers all gather in a large circle and sing and chant a song of praise to God for its successful completion."

While I was staying at the *hacienda*, Eisenstein was the quietest and most comfortable person there. I frequently took a book to his room to read. He liked me and didn't seem to mind. I became kind of a mascot. He gave me the Russian stamps off the letters he was reading and always showed me his latest drawings.

Eisenstein drew them as fast as his pencil could race across the paper. They were mostly of people viewed from complicated camera angles. He also did some humorous caricatures of me although I didn't think they were up to his best work.

Meals at the *hacienda* were always the most interesting time of the day with everyone making conversation. All but the girls (one was an art student and the other Eisenstein found in a dance hall) spoke English. Eisenstein had learned to speak English during the previous six months, but he seemed to speak it better than I did.

Our meal routine was fairly regular. In the morning everybody got up early and had breakfast before going out to do filming. Lunch was at two or three. We usually sat down to eat dinner about ten and food was served, course after course until about midnight. One dish came at a time: soup, rice, eggs, vegetables, various meats, a small sugary desert and then always finishing up with beans.

Eisenstein always had me sit next to him at the dinner table and told everybody that I was crazy about vermouth. Although I didn't really like it he thought I did and insisted I drink it. I couldn't hurt his feelings. None of the Russians, or Tissé, the Norwegian, drank.

After dinner Eisenstein would go off for a walk by himself. When he returned he would go up to his room and sometimes we would hear him playing the piano before going to sleep.

One morning the sky was full of billowy clouds so we went out to take pictures. Eisenstein left first on foot to find the location he wanted. The men on horseback followed him and the rest of us, along with the cameras, went in the car.

He chose a wild thicket of stubby dry trees for the shooting scene and had the crew spread a blanket on the ground by the cameras for us girls to rest on. The men acted their parts well, riding their horses wildly through the thickets and firing real bullets because they didn't have any fake ones. They enjoyed themselves so much that Eisenstein had a hard time stopping them after he turned off the cameras.

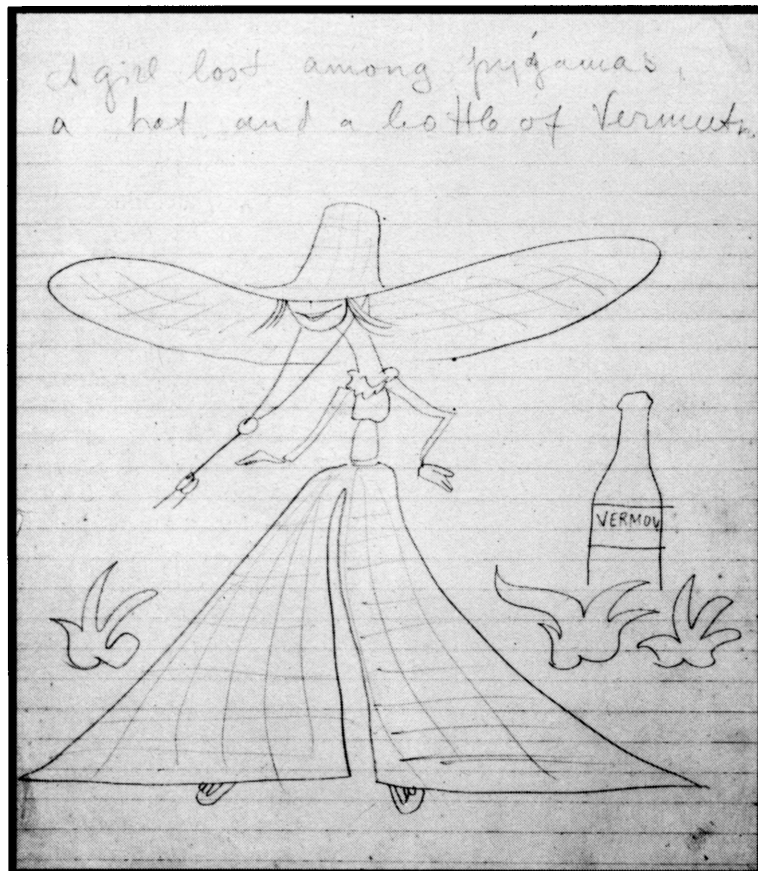
Eisenstein was a very quiet person whenever I watched him directing the picture. He had so thoroughly planned the scene beforehand that once the cameras started he really didn't have to say anything. I knew I

wasn't very helpful to the moviemakers but Eisenstein didn't mind. He especially liked the swishy checked taffeta pajamas that I wore around the house. He drew a picture of me wearing my pajamas and holding a bottle of vermouth.

Eisenstein also asked Grisha to take my picture in the pajamas. He directed several shots and, for one of them, he got down on his stomach behind me and asked that I hold out the yards of taffeta for the photograph. When the picture was developed I was shown standing there with a sweet expression and Eisenstein was visible, sticking out from behind. Grisha let me help him sort the photographs and I kept a few.

A few days later we were both reading in his room. I got up and turned a somersault over his bed. The idea had seemed like fun, but I landed clear off the bed with my feet out the window. I will certainly never be confused with an athlete.

Eisenstein decided to leave for Mexico a few days later with Grisha and Tissé. That seemed like a good time for me to leave too.



Drawing of Zohmah by Eisenstein