**Yo, la peor de todas (I the Worst of All) (1990)**

**Director:**  María Luisa Bemberg

**Starring:**  Assumpta Serna (Juana Ines de la Cruz), Dominique Sanda (La Virreina), Héctor Alterio (the Viceroy), Lautaro Murúa (Archbishop), Graciela Araujo (Sister Ursula), Alberto Segado (Father Miranda), Gerardo Romano (Siguenza), Franklin Caicedo (Santa Cruz)

Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz of Mexico is punished for her writings

**Spoiler Warning:** below is a summary of the entire movie.

Very good movie.  Mexico, 17th century.  The Archbishop of Mexico announces that the first convent the Viceroy will visit will be theirs.  The Viceroy and the Virreina are very eager to meet the author Juana Ines de la Cruz, who is a nun at the convent.  At the time, Juana was directing her own play.

The Viceroy and Virreina may be fans, but the Archbishop comments: "This is not a convent.  It's a bordello."  He forces the nuns to wear their long veils to hide their faces and his first goal he says is to combat the laxity in the convents.  The nuns especially notice the Archbishop's animosity to their convent.

The nuns ask Juana to run against the strict Sister Ursula for abbess of the convent, but Juana does not want to run for office.  She wants to be left to her writings.  At the convent, she teaches singing and does the accounting for the convent.  At age three, she learned how to read.

This will come as no surprise, but there was and still is a great deal of animosity to women in the church and elsewhere.  For example, the Archbishop won't even sit at a table with a woman.

These are dangerous times.  The Inquisition is busy burning heretics, among them Giordano Bruno.

It is said that Juana has the largest library in the New World.  But, it is claimed, she has dangerous books by authors such as Descartes, Gassendi and Kircher.  Juana defends herself by saying that her own confessor, Father Miranda, censors her books.

The Virreina is a great admirer of Juana.  The two women form a very tight bond with each other.  But the Virreina is concerned for Juana.  She is very worried about the Inquisition.  Juana is warned not to defy the church.

The Virreina gives birth to a baby boy.

Juana reminisces about her time at the University.  She relates the story of how the doctors of the University did not believe that a 17 year old girl (and a lady-in-waiting) could be knowledgeable.   So they gave her a thorough examination.  One of the more interesting questions was about Sabellianism, a heresy of Rome in the 3rd century that denied the trinity, holding that neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit were divine.  Juana nailed the exam.

The Virreina and Juana are so close that the Virreina gives Juana a necklace with a painted miniature of the Virreina.

The Archbishop and other clergy meet to discuss the writings of Juana.  Most of the comments are very negative: "I only see lasciviousness; the most morbid sensuality"; "And it is written by a woman" and "to another woman."  "They exalt the Virreina."

Sister Ursula informs Juana that "By order of the Archbishop, you are forbidden access to your books."

The Viceroy tries to protect Juana from the Archbishop.  There is a showdown and the Spanish court comes down on the side of the Archbishop.  The Viceroy is dismissed and has to return to Spain.  Copies of Juana's books *Primer Sueno* and *Villancios* are burned.

The Monsignor is not at all fond of the Archbishop and he begins to try to provoke the Archbishop.  The Monsignor "orders" Juana to write a treatise refuting the logic of one of the Archbishop's favorite theologians.  He agrees with Juana that the treatise will not be published.

Juana's mother is dying and so she visits her.  In her talks with her mother she says "I was always averse to marriage."

The Reverend Mother Leonor tells Juana that she is in deep trouble.  She shows her that her treatise has been published against her will.  She will undoubtedly have to answer to the Inquisition.

Juana has a confrontation with the Archbishop, the traitor Monsignor, and the unfaithful confessor Father Miranda.  Juana tells the Archbishop:  "If I were not a woman, my theological impertinence would not matter!"  The Archbishop responds with "God did not create women to philosophize."  Father Miranda tells Juana that he cannot be her confessor any longer.

In Spain, the Virreina publishes the first volume of the works of Juana.

Back in Mexico Juana's spirit seems to have been broken.  She is serving as a caretaker for nuns who have fallen ill of the plague.  The convent is down to a small group of still healthy nuns.  Now that she is beaten, down on the ground scrubbing floors, Father Miranda returns to Juana as her confessor.  The bastard tells her that he much prefers this new, humble (or humbled?) Juana.  She has been stripped of all her possessions, including her books and even her miniature portrait of the Virreina.

Juana confesses publicly that "My crimes deserve everlasting hell" and signs in her own blood a document declaring her sins.  Below her name she writes "I, the worst of all."

Shortly after this, she dies of the plague, one of the greatest poets of the Golden Age of Spain.

I enjoyed the movie very much.  Juana Ines de la Cruz was a very brilliant and talented poet.  But she was destroyed by the Church for her sins of pride, owning banned books, writing lesbian-tinged poems and general "insubordination."   I would imagine that the Catholic Church's response today would not be so different, except that they would have tamed down their sexist rhetoric.  But the Church remains anti-homosexual and anti-woman, both violations of basic human rights.  It is the Church that is guilty of the sin of a belief in and dissemination of social prejudice that violates basic human rights.  Their sense of religion is a very primitive one that one can only hope will one day be upgraded.

Patrick L. Cooney, Ph. D.

**Historical Background:**

1391 (June)  --  pogroms took place that killed hundreds of Jews.  The pogrom in Seville was especially bloody.  Mass conversions of Jews took place, but the "new Christians" were not trusted by many Spanish Christians and Jews.

1477-1478  --  Alonso de Hojeda convinces Queen Isabel of the existence of crypto-Judaism in Andalusia.

1478 – the Spanish Inquisition established, by Ferdinand and Isabella to maintain Catholic orthodoxy in their kingdoms.

1480 -- the first two inquisitors named.

1480-1530  --  the Spanish Inquisition may have executed some 2,000 people, mostly Jewish converts to Christianity. (Of some 80,000 Jews, 40,000 of them left Spain.)

1483 (October 17)  --  the infamous Tomás de Torquemada named Inquisidor General of Aragón, Valencia and Catalonia.

1551  --  publication of the first Index of Prohibited Books published. Subsequent Indexes were published in 1559, 1583, 1612, 1632, and 1640.

1569  --  Inquisition tribunals established in Lima and Mexico.

1651  -- birth of Juana Ines de la Cruz, an illegitimate child, in Mexico.

1654  -- at age three, she taught herself to read.  She became a voracious acquirer of knowledge. She would punish herself for not acquiring a given amount of knowledge within a pre-set amount of time.

She was precocious and pretty and as a young lady-in-waiting she was a favorite of the viceregal court in Mexico.

She tried to get her mother's approval for her to dress as a boy and go to the University in Mexico City.

c. 1659  --  Juana becomes known as a protégé.

1664  --  A new viceroy Antonio Sebastian de Toledo and his wife Leonor Carreto arrive in Mexico City. Vicereine Leonor takes the sixteen year-old Juan under her wing.  Juana becomes  a maid-in-waiting. The Viceroy had Juana's knowledge tested by learned men from various specialties.  She performed brilliantly.

1664-1669  --  Juana writes poems and sonnets.

1667  -- at age 16, she joined the Convent of the Discalced Carmelites of St. Joseph. Finding the atmosphere too strict, she soon leaves.

1669  --  Juana enters the Convent of the Order of St. Jerome where she remains until her death. The nuns were treated well and Juana, as other nuns, had a servant.  She created a library in the convent.  She was often criticized for ignoring her religious duties for her intellectual work.

1673  --  the terms of  the viceroy and his wife ends.  Juana remains on good terms with Archbishop Friar Payo Enr iques de Ribera.

1680  --  Friar Payo is succeeded by the Marquis de la Laguna and his wife Maria Luisa.  Juana and Maria become very close friends.  Maria encourages Juana's writings.  (In Juana's poetry, she is referred to as Phyllis and Lysis.)

1688  --  the Marquis and his wife Maria have to leave for Spain, which denies noble protection to Juana.  The misogynistic Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, Archbishop of Mexico quickly becomes an opponent of Juana's writings.

1690  --  the Bishop of Puebla encourages Juana to write her critique of a famous sermon given forty years earlier by the eminent Portuguese Jesuit, Antonio de Vieira. Without Juana's knowledge or permission, the Bishop publishes the writing *Missive Worthy of Athena*.  That was not so bad in and of itself.  But the Bishop (under the penname Sor Philothea de la Cruz) included a letter of his own that criticized Juana for her intellectualism.  This opened Juana to attack by the Archbishop.

1691  --  in a letter now considered a classic she answered the criticisms of Sor Philothea de la Cruz and the objections to the education of women.  But the pressure increased on her against her writing.

1693  -- Juana repents and she is silenced.

1695  --  she died while treating the convent victims of an epidemic.

She wrote poetry that proved that she was the greatest lyric poet of the colonial period.  Her masterpiece is *Primer sueño.*

1834  -- during the reign of Isabel II., the Spanish Inquisition was finally abolished