



# The Heiresses

**Director:** Marcelo Martinessi

**Country:** Paraguay

**Date:** 2017

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

We've all seen films about old people who experience a poignant and bittersweet late-life flowering. But not that many about a well-off lady in Paraguay whose love life starts to come into its own only after her gay lover is sent to jail. This excellent debut movie from writer-director Marcelo Martinessi, an award-winner at this year's Berlin film festival, is a secret love story set among the complacent wealthy gerontocracy of the nation's capital, Asunción. It reminded me weirdly of Hollywood movies such as *Driving Miss Daisy* or *Harold and Maude* or *The Trip to Bountiful*, but with its own singular flavour. There is also a little bit of Dickens in the sharp social satire, the chattering world of card-playing and the chaos of the debtors' prison.

The stars of the movie are two wealthy women, the heiresses Chela and Chiquita, superbly played by Paraguayan stage actors Ana Brun and Margarita Irun, who almost incredibly are making their screen debut. Chela and Chiquita have lived together all their adult lives – during which they've never had to do a day's work – in a beautifully appointed house that belonged to Chela's family.



Martinessi contrives a sad, sweet moment when one is seen reclining on a sofa near a photo of herself as a young woman, head angled in just the same position. He shows how these women's relationship has been armoured against anything like homophobic complaint by the prerogatives of wealth and class.

Chiquita is the more dominant of the two, while Chela is gentle, complaisant, sweet-natured. Brun's subtle and introspective performance reminded me of the maxim about famous people becoming fixed at the mental age they were when they became famous: when they stopped needing to make an effort. In a way, Chela is frozen into the delicate, withdrawn, girlish shyness she had when she first realised her social status and, probably, when she first fell in love with Chiquita.

As the story begins, disaster has struck. Chiquita is in trouble with the bank and must go to jail while her debt remains unpaid. The couple must humiliatingly sell most of their possessions, swallowing their pride and allowing prospective buyers into their house to inspect the furniture, crystal, paintings and even the rickety old car that Chiquita prefers to drive because Chela is so nervous behind the wheel.

With her robust social confidence, Chiquita immediately settles into the Marshalsea-like prison life, easily chattering away with her fellow prisoners in the chaotic communal yard, while shy Chela hangs back. Even here, as a prison visitor, poor Chela is a fractionally lesser being.

A quasi-miracle happens. While Chiquita is "away", Chela receives an imperious request from an equally entitled old neighbour, the formidable and opinionated Pituca (a terrific performance from María Martins). She asks if Chela can drive her to her weekly card game, offers to pay, but, with pointed questions about where Chiquita is, drops tiny hints that a refusal to help might result in gossip being spread about what has happened to Chiquita.

Yet Chela doesn't mind driving her, likes being of use and gets more confident at driving. Among this circle, she meets the fascinating and sensual Angy (Ana Ivanova) who also wants to be driven and begins a flirtatious friendship with Chela. Chela can hardly believe that this gorgeous, complex young woman actually finds her attractive.

Martinessi shrewdly combines subtlety, melancholy, satirical observation and candour about sex. He concludes a tense dialogue scene between Chela and Angy with the older woman perched alone on the edge of her bed, semi-unclad, her back to the camera, masturbating with a keening sound like an asthmatic wheeze.



With her glasses (Angy also encourages her to try wearing sunglasses, an unaccustomed glamorous touch), Chela reminded me of another lonely but adventurous movie character: Gloria, played by Paulina Garcia in the 2013 film of the same name by Sebastián Lelio, and by Julianne Moore in the forthcoming US remake. They are both characters who have become autumnally liberated, with a combination of excitement and bewilderment, aware of a new physical power that has materialised within them, or was perhaps there all along.

Sex is a big part of it, but not everything. Suddenly, Chela can see something that she may never have seen in her life: potential. As her partner's prison sentence comes to an end, Chela figures hers must, too.

From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/09/the-beïresses-review-marcelo-martinessi-ana-brun-margarita-irun>