

‘The girl the whole world is waiting to see more of!’ Isabel Sarli, and the failed attempt to launch a new star in 1960s Britain

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This article details how a chance discovery of papers in an ancient suitcase at Pinewood studios helped uncover the tale of Argentine celebrity Isabel Sarli’s brief flirtation with Britain in the mid-1960s (Figure 1). Picking through the scraps of history to reveal long-forgotten narratives is central to my own doctoral research, in which I am highlighting the vital contribution independent distributors made to the film industry during Britain’s most significant decade of social change. This particular case study is currently something of a footnote, rather than playing a major role in the main body of my thesis; yet the practice of finding order in the chaos of 50 year-old scraps of paper appeals to the historian in me, so I present my findings to you here.

Born in 1935, Isabel Sarli came from a very poor background, but thanks to winning the Miss Argentina contest in 1955 became a national sensation; even meeting General Perón shortly before he was overthrown in a coup. Through this she came to the attention of film director Armando Bó, who then dedicated the rest of his career to making her a star. His 1957 film *El trueno entre las hojas/Thunder Among the Leaves* was the first Argentinian film to feature full frontal female nudity, when Sarli bathes innocently in a river. This kind of action would be repeated throughout her film career, as Sarli herself admitted:

He [Bó] thought that if I didn’t bathe in the movies, my audience would be disappointed. I bathed in different parts of the world: from the Indian Ocean to the Pilcomayo River with piranhas. In

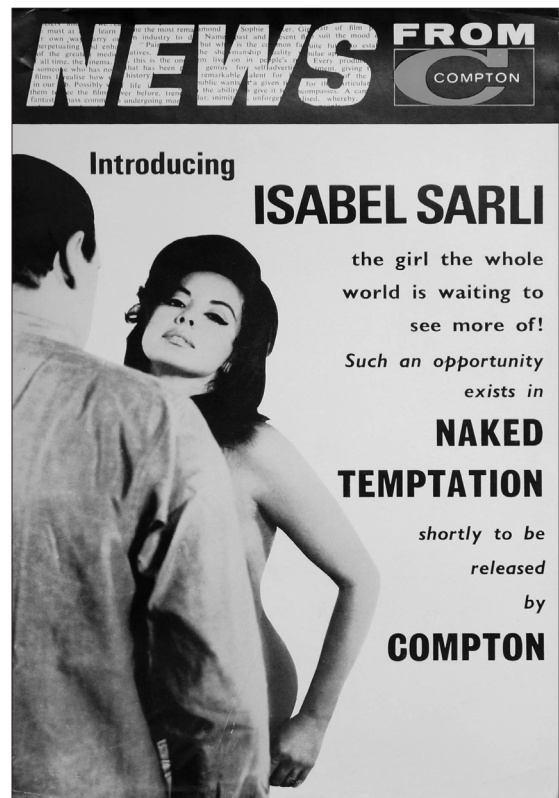


Figure 1: News From Compton – a press release introducing Isabel Sarli.¹

that location, soldiers had to dynamite the river [to clear the piranhas away] (in Vanairsdale 2010).

Together Bó and Sarli made 27 films together. As Argentina is a Catholic country, the films were often subject to censorship, but this did not prevent Sarli from becoming a South American pin-up or developing an international reputation. Although her films

had not yet been seen in the United Kingdom, as early as 1958 the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror* described her as a 'dark-haired, hot-blooded beauty... a sturdy Mexican female with a zestful flair for partial disrobing' (Anon. 1958: 11). Despite actually originating almost 5,000 miles away from Mexico, the description, alongside a photo featuring Sarli in a low-cut dress, is a fairly accurate distillation of her appeal. Over a decade later she was described in *The Times* as 'Argentina's most renowned stripteaser [sic]' (Anon. 1971: 7).

Which brings us to my discovery, two years ago, of a collection of material from when Sarli and Bó visited the UK in December 1965. Compton Film Distributors were planning to release four of their films into British cinemas: *La tentación desnuda/Naked Temptation* (1965), *Los días calientes/Hot Days* (1966), *Lujuria tropical/Tropical Sun* (1962), and *La mujer del zapatero/The Shoemaker's Wife* (1965). Although only in operation since 1960, Compton had already risen to become Britain's biggest and most significant independent distributor, buying in films from across the globe as well as distributing their own productions. With this latter aspect in mind, there were also plans to co-produce Bó's next five films, the first tentatively titled 'My Father's Woman'.

This packet of materials from the Compton archive includes original press material from the office of Pel-Mex, the distributors who handled most of Sarli and Bó's films in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. The press release for *Los días calientes*, translated into slightly clunky English, states somewhat breathlessly that, 'Armando Bó gives us his best film and adds an outstanding mark to his career of successes. "The Hot Days" places him among the great film directors in our times'.

The large, glossy press book for *Los días calientes* features six photos of Sarli in a bikini, describing her as 'una creacion magistral', and the film as 'Sexual... Exótica... Apasionante... Brutal... Poética...' (you can probably use your imagination to sense the meaning here).

A smaller press book for *La mujer del zapatero* again focuses heavily on images of Sarli's chest, alongside brief biographies of herself, her co-star Pepe Arias (evidentially a famous Argentine comedian) and Armando Bó himself (Figure 2). It seems that

they are keen to stress Sarli's comedy skills alongside notions of her sexual power.

With some fanfare, Compton Film Distributors produced press releases to state their intentions, with much of it focused on Isabel Sarli's physical assets (Figure 3). For instance, in case anyone needed to know:

Height: 5' 6"
Weight: 56 kg.
Eye colour: grey-brown
Hair colour: Black
Bust: 38"
Waist: 24"
Hips: 38"

Perhaps unsurprisingly her favourite sport is listed as swimming.

Sarli was known as 'The Goddess' in much of her publicity, a nickname no doubt sealed by her film *La diosa impure/The Impure Goddess* (1963). Compton were keen to make sure audiences saw her as such. One of their two press releases titled 'News From Compton' states 'THE "GODDESS" ARRIVES!', before going on to describe the events of a press conference:

SHE CAME
THEY SAW
"The Goddess"
CONQUERED.

Dynamic Argentine sex symbol, Isabel Sarli, flew into London in mid-December to a tumultuous and rarely accorded welcome from the British press.

This could be true, or an entirely made up claim; something I would not put beyond Compton's publicity department. Co-founder Tony Tenser once hired strippers to stage a protest outside a West End screening of *And God Created Woman* (Dir. Roger Vadim, 1956), claiming that Brigitte Bardot was putting them out of business (Hamilton 2005: 9-10). The reason I question this is that I cannot find any press coverage of such an event in either national or London newspapers from that time.

Regardless of whether the press welcome



Figure 2: Armando Bó, Isabel Sarli and Pepe Arias pose on the set of *La mujer del zapatero*.

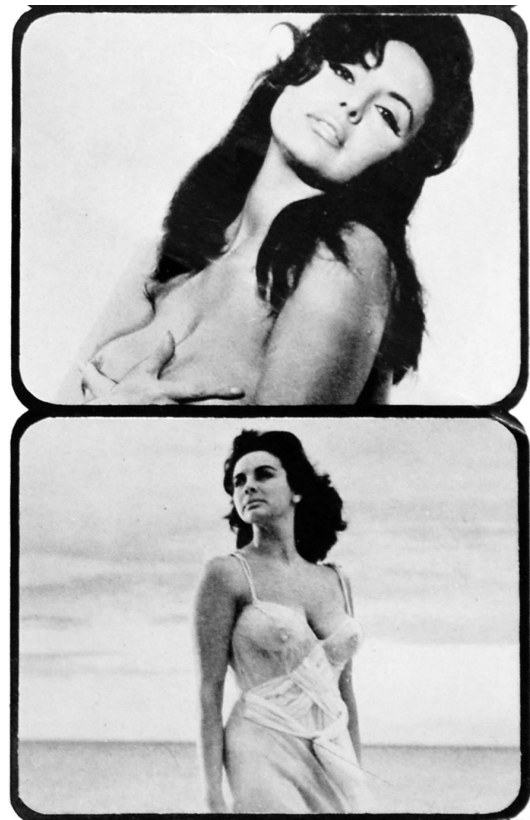


Figure 3: Images from one of Compton's press releases.

took place or not, Sarli and Bó visited London twice during this period, something which fellow Compton co-founder Michael Klinger's son Tony remembers very well:

They came over at least twice, because I had lunch with them twice, two different trips. I'd never met her, and my Dad said, "Wait till you see this woman," and she came into the room and it was like Sofia Loren. Incredible to look at. A fantastic body and a low-cut dress and a wiggle like you wouldn't believe! Just a woman to the nth degree. She came in and literally, it was like the waves parting, all the guys stood up in the restaurant. I can't remember which restaurant it was but it was a very famous, nice, very smart restaurant and everybody stood up and more or less started to applause. She was a stunning woman. She couldn't help it, it was beyond beautiful, sexy, and something exceptional. She was charming (author's interview, 18 July 2013).

Compton moved quickly, creating a quad poster for

their first planned release, *Naked Temptation* (Figure 4). It is a colourful affair, with a black and white image from the film overlaying bright orange and yellow flames. The strong black frame allows the title of the film to stand out in white. Knowing the domestic market for foreign sex films as well as they did, Compton anticipated an 'X' certificate. Given that prior experience, it is surprising that they did not make more of her cleavage on the poster than they did in their other publicity materials. The chosen photo gives very little away as to Sarli's physical qualities. She appears to be balanced on a man's shoulder, but her expression suggests she is happy to be carried away. The tagline, '5 men and one woman caught together in a Tropical Hell...' does suggest that these men are fighting over her, and maybe the man in the photo has won a temporary victory.

Unfortunately for Sarli, Bó and Compton, their planned collaboration was thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. Compton submitted *Naked Temptation* to the British Board of Film



Figure 4: *Naked temptation* British quad poster.

Censors in early 1966 and it was refused a certificate. Compton appear to have been unable to negotiate cuts to achieve an X certificate, and that would seem to be that. Currently, the archival evidence needed to explain why Compton did not persist with their planned releases, or why they did not go ahead with the five films they planned to make with Bó, is missing. I can only speculate that if *Naked Temptation* could not get through the BBFC, it was highly unlikely that Sarli's other films would either. Consequently, the *Naked Temptation* quad poster could be extremely rare, given that the film never went into UK cinemas.

So despite two visits to the UK, a not inconsiderable journey in the 1960s, Sarli had to settle for not becoming a Goddess in the minds of British audiences.

All was not lost as far as international exposure was concerned. Simultaneously Bó had been working with Steve Prentoulis Films in New York to develop a similar campaign for *La tentación desnuda*. Retitled *Woman and Temptation* (possibly to appease cinema owners who might have been afraid to have the word 'naked' on the marquee), they also created a large foyer stand featuring a bedraggled Sarli and the tagline 'KNOCKS YOUR EYES OUT!' (Figure 5).

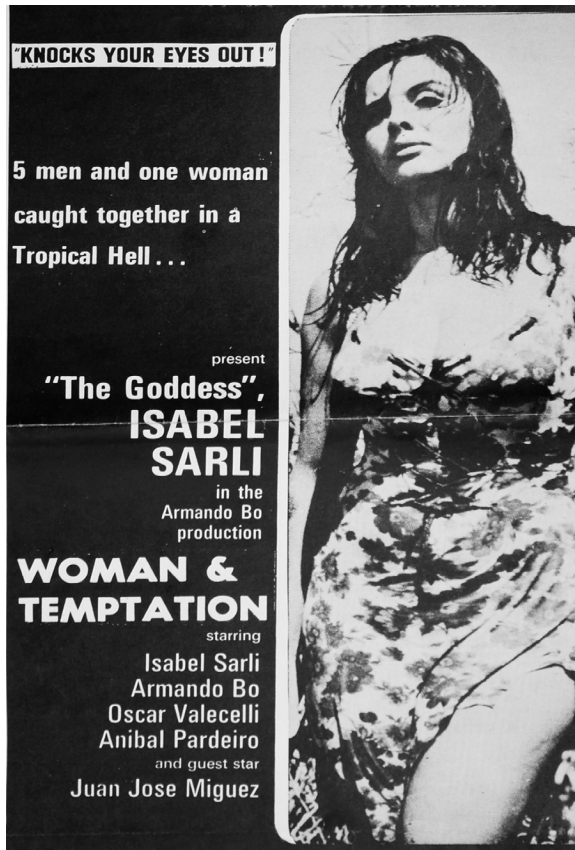


Figure 5: US lobby stand for *Woman & Temptation*.



Figure 6: Ad for *Muhair*, *New York Times*, February 27, 1970, p. 30. Sourced from ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index.

No prizes for guessing which of Sarli's assets could cause such potential injuries.

Following a strategy which Compton often employed, Prentoulis give cinema owners the following marketing suggestions:

1. The name of Isabel Sarli will be completely new to audiences – stress the "Goddess" angle at all times.
2. Place stills and story with the local press in advance of your playdate.
3. Organise composite pages along the lines of "Be a Goddess when you shop at". Or "Be treated as a Goddess at"
4. Launch a "Goddess" search in your situation.
5. A Press Teaser Campaign along the lines of "The Goddess is coming" or "The Goddess means Isabel Sarli".
6. Utilise as many blow-ups in your foyer as possible – create a jungle effect with bamboo and reeds.

7. "Woman and Temptation" will appeal to the male element of your patrons. Print teaser strips for distribution in men's shops, barbers, etc.

This really does harken back to a different world, when cinema owners actually went above and beyond simply placing the film title on the marquee. One can only imagine how amused the 'male element' would have been to fight through a man-made jungle in the lobby on their way to the movie screen.

Prentoulis clearly had some success with Sarli's films in New York. As this *New York Times* ad demonstrates, she was still drawing audiences five years later (Figure 6). Her professional and personal collaboration with Armando Bó continued until his early death in 1981, when she virtually retired from the screen.² She continues to make waves however; in 2012, at the age of 77, former Argentine President Cristina Kirchner named her the Argentine Ambassador of Popular Culture.

Notes

¹All imagery from the author's personal archive unless otherwise noted.

²For more detail on Isabel Sarli's career see Ruétalo, V. (2009) 'Temptations: Isabel Sarli Exposed' in V. Ruétalo and D. Tierney (eds.) *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America*. London: Routledge.

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Adrian Smith is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sussex, studying the distribution of popular international cinema in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. This has involved digging in archives and locating people previously presumed dead. Adrian has written on censorship and distribution for blu ray releases of cult films including the recent Arrow Video edition of *Five Dolls for an August Moon*.