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'The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez' (1982) Is A Landmark of Chicano Cinema, And A Passion Project for Star Edward James Olmos

By Akiva Gottlieb Aug 21, 2018 | 10:55 AM



Edward James Olmos in a scene from the 1982 movie "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez." (Embassy Pictures)

Having starred in films like "American Me," "Selena," "Stand and Deliver" and "Coco," the Los Angeles-born Edward James Olmos is perhaps the most prominent Mexican American actor of his generation. But the film he is most proud of has long remained under the radar.

Now, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," which helped kick-start the Chicano cinema movement on its release in 1982, is finally ready for its close-up.

Recently restored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the morally complex, socially conscious English- and Spanish-language western is newly available as a Criterion Collection Blu-ray and is streaming for a limited time on Filmstruck.

Said Olmos: "It's still the best film I've ever been a part of in my life."

"The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," directed by Robert M. Young, is based on historical fact. On June 12, 1901, near Gonzales, Texas, a sheriff named Morris rode out to the home of a cowhand named Gregorio Cortez, played by Olmos in the movie. Suspecting him of stealing a horse, he confronted Cortez, using an interpreter. In the conversation, the interpreter mistranslated the Spanish-speaking man's reply, and a panicked gunfight ensued. Morris died on the scene, and the Texas Rangers set out to find the fleeing Cortez.

"The misunderstanding of one word caused the biggest manhunt in the history of Texas up to that time," Olmos said. "Hundreds and hundreds of people tracking this 'outlaw gang,' and it was just one guy on a horse." Once Cortez was caught, he became the first Mexican to be tried in court in the United States, with an interpreter to translate the proceedings.

Cortez's story became a piece of popular folklore, and "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" takes its name from the *corrido* that memorialized the outlaw's heroic struggle in song. It was later adapted into "With a Pistol in His Hand," a 1958 book that doubled as author Américo Paredes' doctoral dissertation, and served as the basis for the screenplay.

After being approached by producer Moctesuma Esparza with the idea of collaborating on the movie, Olmos hand-picked Young as the director. The two had made the border-set road picture "¡Alambrista!" together, and according to Olmos, "His aesthetic was superior to any other filmmaker I had worked with. He was documenting human behavior and different cultures at the highest level."

The film's bona fides as a work of social realism are apparent from the opening frame. Young began his career as a documentary director, preferring to work with available light and handheld cameras, and he grounded "Gregorio Cortez" in authentic period detail. Olmos and Young traveled to Gonzales to research locations, and they ended up filming in many of the places where the events really took place.

“When Bob started to write, and it started to come alive, and we were standing there looking at all this [primary source] material, every single thing that was said in the court trial, in the real prison that held Cortez, and the scaffolds were still the same... it was just amazing — almost too much,” the 71-year-old Olmos said recently.

But “Gregorio Cortez” is not a historical pageant; it’s also a thrilling chase film told via a “Rashomon”-like network of conflicting perspectives, anchored by a subtle, anguished performance by Olmos, which he delivers entirely in unsubtitled Spanish.

For Olmos, not yet an Oscar-nominated Hollywood star, the Spanish-speaking role must have been a risk.

“I didn’t care,” he said. “I’ve been an activist my whole life. I’m not afraid of the hyphen. I’m not afraid of being a Latino American actor. A lot of my peers don’t want that. They just want to be actors. They don’t want to be categorized in a cultural dynamic, because they don’t want to be stigmatized for only playing one thing. But I didn’t care. I would play nothing but Latinos — and I have, just about.”

The movie’s other defining element is its synth-driven score, which Olmos orchestrated with W. Michael Lewis. “It was just me and Lewis and a guitar player,” Olmos said. “We couldn’t afford anything else. Vangelis had done such an incredible job using electronic music in film, in ‘Chariots of Fire’ and ‘Blade Runner’...so we thought, ‘Why not do it in a western?’ It was so off-the-wall different that it kind of makes sense. To this day, I think it really works.”

Assuming that a multilingual, documentary-style western that sounds like “Blade Runner” wouldn’t be an easy sell, Olmos pursued a unique exhibition strategy.

Back in the day, he said, “you couldn’t pay to see this movie.”

“You could only see it on Saturday mornings, when I would put it on for free at the Los Feliz Theater,” he added. “I started off by inviting my friends, and about 300 showed up. The following week, I played it again, but didn’t tell anybody, it was just word of mouth, and over 400 people came, and the following weekend, it was 800 people.”

After Olmos moved the screenings to Beverly Hills, L.A. Times critic Charles Champlin attended and then wrote a rave review, calling it “a smashing chase Western.”

According to Olmos, “Gregorio Cortez” opened against “Conan the Barbarian” in El Paso and beat it at the box office; it also set a sales record at a San Francisco theater. “We had a hit movie — it was a hit!”

So why haven’t today’s audiences heard of the picture? Olmos blames Embassy Pictures, which he says picked up “Gregorio Cortez” for nationwide distribution, then opened it in more than a dozen cities without doing any promotion. “It tanked,” he said. “They buried it.”

Now, Olmos said he’s trying to get the film a theatrical release again.

“It’s always a struggle to get authentic portrayals of Mexican Americans into the marketplace,” he said. “But Chicano cinema is a movement. A big one. We’re strong and growing. We haven’t even begun to spread our wings yet.”