

UCLA Newsroom

ARTS + CULTURE

Film rescued by UCLA prof makes the National Film Registry

“Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” is the first Chicano feature film ever made

Noela Hueso | January 07, 2015



Courtesy of UCLA Film and Television Archive

Made in 1976, “Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” was restored and re-released after UCLA professor Chon Noriega finally found the filmmaker who had just discovered the only existing print. Noriega deposited that print in the UCLA Film and Television Archive. As the first Chicano feature film ever made, it was recently included in the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry.

In 1989, Efraín Gutiérrez was missing.

Foul play wasn’t involved; by all accounts, it appeared that the director of the very first Chicano feature film had decided to remove himself from the filmmaking scene.

But his absence — and the fact that no copies of his pioneering 1976 film seemed to exist and were presumed lost or destroyed — left a void that Chon Noriega, a UCLA professor of cinema and media studies and current director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, was determined to fill.

“Before I had a chance to see ‘Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!’ I knew it was important because it was considered the first feature made by a Chicano director,” Noriega said. “It was also significant because Gutiérrez played numerous roles — director, producer, actor and distributor — and because the film was made completely outside Hollywood in terms of style, financing and production-distribution.”

Not only did Noriega finally connect with Gutiérrez in 1996, but the professor’s efforts to track down, restore and re-release “Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” with assistance from the UCLA Film and Television Archive and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, made possible the film’s selection as one of 25 cinematic treasures named in 2014 to the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry. Other esteemed works selected include “The Big Lebowski” (1998), “Saving Private Ryan” (1998) and “Rio Bravo” (1959).



UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Part of a movie poster advertising the 1976 pioneering film.

“The National Film Registry showcases the extraordinary diversity of America’s film heritage and the disparate strands making it so vibrant,” said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington in announcing the selected films last month. “By preserving these films, we protect a crucial element of American creativity, culture and history.” All told, the registry includes 650 titles, movies of cultural, historic and aesthetic significance that were made from 1913 to 2004.

“Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” tells the story of a young Chicano man who questions his and his people’s place in society as thousands of his fellow Latinos return from the Vietnam War in coffins.

“The film is important as an instance of regional filmmaking, as a bicultural and bilingual narrative, and as a precedent that expanded the way that films got made,” Noriega explained.

It was shot in San Antonio, Texas, over a four-year period on a shoestring budget of \$60,000. And it grossed more than \$300,000 in the first four months after it was released, outperforming the Oscar-winning “All the President’s Men” in some markets.

To find the film and its maker, Noriega repeatedly visited San Antonio during the annual CineFestival, the oldest Latino film festival in the country. In 1996, six years after first reading about “Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!,” Noriega received a phone call from Gutiérrez himself, who had heard about Noriega’s quest. At the time, Gutiérrez had left filmmaking to become a union representative for teachers.

The timing of the call turned out to be serendipitous: Gutiérrez had just discovered a 16mm print of the movie. “It had been packed inside a garbage can and stored in a relative’s garage,” Noriega said. “Oddly enough, it was in good condition!”

After Noriega saw the film, which was in English and Spanish without subtitles, and therefore an early example of a bilingual feature, he realized it was also noteworthy for the way the filmmaker incorporated Chicano forms of popular theater and music and “long observational, almost documentary-like passages to situate the film in a cultural and political context.” Gutiérrez had set a precedent in terms of production and distribution, carrying out both independently within the framework of the Chicano movement and outside the Hollywood and Mexican film industries.

To protect it, Noriega deposited the found print in the UCLA Film and Television Archive, which presented it in a restored form in 2004 at the archive’s 12th Festival of Preservation.

Because “Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” and other independent films made by Chicano and Latino filmmakers have historically lacked the protection of major studios and television networks as well as any other organized efforts to protect them, Noriega launched in 2002 the Chicano Cinema Recovery Project, a collaboration between the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

The idea of creating the recovery project “had been percolating” for a while, said Noriega, who had come across other significant works by Chicano and Chicana filmmakers.

The two other features Gutiérrez created, “Chicano Love is Forever” (1977) and “Run, Tecato, Run” (1979), have also been restored at UCLA. Most films salvaged through the Chicano Cinema Recovery Project are now [available on DVD](#) for exhibition and educational use.

“Please, Don’t Bury Me Alive!” isn’t the only title to be added recently to the National Film Registry with ties to UCLA. Also included is the 1965 student documentary short film, “Felicia,” about life in Watts before the Los Angeles riots. It was created by two UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television alumni, Trevor Greenwood and Alan Gorg.

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