

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez

by Emily Soares | March 09, 2009



Just who was Gregorio Cortez and what did he do to warrant his 10-day pursuit by posses, sheriffs and rangers across the state of Texas in June of 1901? That is a much contested point in history, in myth and in the film that explores the nexus of the two, **The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez** (1982).

Initially known for his documentaries, director Robert M. Young continues themes prominent in his first feature *Alambrista!* (1977) in **The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez**, which stars Edward James Olmos in the title role. At root, Young explores the nature of foreignness and stereotype as well as the disintegration of fact that is a natural part of the storytelling process. But as Young presents it, there are no real white hats or dark ones; everyone suffers when communication breaks down. None of the characters in **Gregorio Cortez** seems larger than life - as a hero or a villain. And Cortez's role in the story changes throughout the film, depending on who's doing the talking.

The actors' faces and performances, like the terrain of the film's setting, feel unadorned and decidedly untheatrical, which is no surprise from a seasoned documentarian. In fact, **Gregorio Cortez** is striking in its epic ordinariness, and it is out of a clear blue sky that the entire misadventure begins.

Cortez's unhappy tale is thanks to the shortcomings of a translator who didn't understand the distinction in Spanish between "horse" (*caballo*) and "mare" (*yegua*). The sheriff, investigating accusations of horse theft, is instantly convinced of Cortez's guilt and comes after him with a gun, shooting Cortez's brother in the process. Cortez shoots and kills the sheriff and the hunt begins.

Gregorio Cortez as a film, is as rooted in history as its subject matter. It was produced by activist/producer Moctesuma Esparza, with funding from the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and based on *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* by Américo Paredes. David Rosen writes in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (edited by Chon A. Noriega): "Like the film's wrongly accused hero, Esparza had been wrongly indicted by a Los Angeles grand jury during the 1960s because of his political activities. Esparza was committed to making a film that could speak to a broad, multiethnic, multilanguage audience about cultural misunderstanding. He saw the film as 'a project of the Chicano community, not *for* it.'"

Gregorio Cortez was slated to have its initial debut on PBS' *American Playhouse*, but its producers insisted it be shot as a theatrical release, not a made-for-TV movie. So the film was shot in super 16mm and framed for an eventual 35mm blowup for the big screen. Another unconventional aspect to the production was the decision to do the film in English and Spanish without subtitles, replicating, for many viewers, the confusion the film's characters experienced.

The film's producers, of which Olmos was one, had negotiated a contract requiring a theatrical premiere before the PBS premiere, but they didn't have much time. Just three weeks before the PBS airing, Olmos organized an unusual screening in San Antonio, Texas. With funding from La Raza and Esparza, he "four-walled" a theater-renting it out for free showings to encourage people to see it. According to David Rosen, "At the first screening...only two paying customers attended. By week's end, however, favorable word of mouth was drawing 250 people per screening."

Once **The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez** had aired on PBS, it lost its status as "virgin property" and the prestige of its first window, so to find distribution, the producers had to prove there was a larger audience who wanted to see it. Another four-walled series of screenings took place in Los Angeles and caused such a stir that Embassy Pictures soon agreed to a distribution deal and a radical marketing approach. They hired the films' producers as well as community activists to employ a revolutionary grass-roots approach in developing a potential fan base for the film.

Unfortunately, Embassy rushed the campaign and pulled the \$1.3 million film after three months, disappointed with the returns. The producers managed to negotiate another distribution deal with Embassy and earned an additional \$100,000 from the film. Though it wasn't a blockbuster by any means **Gregorio Cortez** received a wealth of critical acclaim, including the *Los Angeles Times*'s review by Kevin Thomas:

"A cordial welcome to Robert M. Young's *Gregorio Cortez*, which proves a relieving shot in the arm of a palsied, disfavored genre, drawing its narrative thrust from a popular Mexican corrido or folk-ballad woven around one of the most famous man-hunts in Texas history."

Producers: Moctesuma Esparza, Michael Hausman

Director: Robert M. Young

Screenplay: Victor Villasenor; Robert M. Young (adaptation); Americo Paredes (book "With His Pistol in His Hands")

Cinematography: Reynaldo Villalobos

Art Direction: John Bertucci, Arthur Coburn, Richard Soto

Music: W. Michael Lewis, Edward James Olmos

Cast: Edward James Olmos (Gregorio Cortez), James Gammon (Sheriff Frank Fly), Tom Bower (Boone Choate), Bruce McGill (Reporter Blakely), Brion James (Captain Rogers), Alan Vint (Mike Trimmell), Timothy Scott (Sheriff Morris), Pepe Serna (Romaldo Cortez), Michael McGuire (Sheriff Glover), William Sanderson (Cowboy), Barry Corbin (Abernathy), Jack Kehoe (Prosecutor Pferon), Rosanna DeSoto (Carlota Munoz), Buddy Vigil (Skin), Zach Porter (Fly's Posse).

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