A film that makes a difference

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, starring Edward James Olmos, produced by Mervynires and Michael Hausman, directed by Robert M. Young, screenplay by Victor Villasenor; an Embassy Pictures release, now playing at the Nickelodeon.

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez is a stunning, thought-provoking film, easily as important a work of dramatic art as Rocky or Hiroshima Mon Amour. Like these movies, it can be seen time and again, with each additional viewing revealing different subtleties and adding to the experience as a whole.

It is the true story of Gregorio Cortez, a Mexican laborer living in Texas at the turn of the century, who was accused of killing a sheriff and hunted down by the largest posse in the state's history. He became an immediate folk hero in the Rio Grande border area where he lived, and the era's bullies singers, who were both the storytellers and historians of the region, chronicled his tale.

As Cortez' story unfolds, in June 1901, he and his brother, Ronaldo, are at home one morning when Sheriff Morris comes to question them about a stolen horse. Morris is accompanied by Boone Choate, an interpreter with what turns out to be less than perfect knowledge of Spanish.

"No man can arrest me," Choate misinterprets this as a boastful remark or Hiroshima Mon Amour. The absence of subtitles does not hinder the Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, and in fact enhances the effect of confusion and isolation experienced by the movie's characters— the viewer is drawn more closely to the film, and is better able to appreciate the difficulties in understanding and comprehending that it presents.

Through his interpreter, Sheriff Morris and the Cortezes, who speak no English, if they had recently traded one horse for another of the posses, sometimes missing tracks and elude the posses for nine days.

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Finally, only a short gallop from the Mexican border, he is captured—it is not clear that the lawmen realize that there was never any gang, but only one man. This was no ordinary man, however. Within the space of only a few days, he had been transformed from a ranchhand into a larger-than-life legend known across southern Texas and into Mexico. The legend grew so quickly and out of control that it soon became impossible to separate man and myth.

There were two different perspectives on Cortez the myth circulating at this time—the Angélique view, which pictured him as an ultimate villain, and the Hispano view, which pictured him as an idealized hero. Although the truth regarding Cortez was much closer to the Mexican portrayal of the legend than the Texan, both versions contained more fiction than fact, and the reality was somewhere in between.

The divergent viewpoints of the Cortez story point out another major theme of this film: as many different pictures of the same event can be drawn as there were people involved, and the irreconcilability of the differing versions can often obscure the truth rather than clarify it.

After the arrest, The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez continues with one of the most poignant portrayals in any other movie—the courtroom scene where Cortez first learns of the charges being brought against him and the fate of his family. Cortez' court-appointed defense attorney, B. N. Abrahams, has agreed to defend Cortez because he believes him to be innocent, not because he has to.

Abrahams must communicate with Cortez through an interpreter, and Rosana DeSoto shines in this role as go-between. She cuts a tragic figure as a well-dressed and -educated Hispanic, a liberated woman of the twentieth century who will undoubtedly be unable to completely fulfill her potential because of racial prejudice. Although her part in this film is small, it should bring DeSoto deserved acclaim.

At Cortez' trial, Abrahams attempts to untangle their situation and lay his case on the preponderance of evidence indicating the likelihood of a reasonable doubt. The defense attorney uses the facts of the case in hard to pray to the sympathies of the jury, ignoring the conflicting testimony often damaging to the lawman. The jury's verdict: murder without malice. The sentence: fifty years.

Edward James Olmos, whose portrayal of Cortez is but one of this film's many outstanding acting jobs, said that such a verdict was unheard of in those days for a Mexican who was a "cop killer"— and Anglo cops at that. "It was an extraordinarily fair trial under today's standards, but in 1901 it was a totally different story," he said, adding that this case ushered in a new era of justice to the previously lawless American West. Eventually, the governor of Texas granted Cortez a full and unconditional pardon.

Emey and Podsbury award-winning di- rector Robert M. Young's first major works were documentaries for NBC's White Paper series in the '60s; one of these was banned as being far too controversial for commercial television, so he switched to making theatrical features in order to have more say. His movies, which include Nothing But a Man, Alahrista, Short Eyes, and One Trick Pony, still maintained the flavor of the documentary style in the context of a fictional movie picture. Young, a self-described "MIT dropout" (he did eventually graduate from Har- vard), researched the facts concerning the Cortez case with the care and diligence most often reserved for academia.

A major portion of the movie's source material was provided by Judge E. W. Pat- terson, who presided for many years in the county court at Laredo. "We threw the trial on paper and presented the facts, and the rest was left in the hands of the jury," he said.

In summation The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, it might be best to let Olmos' words speak for themselves. On Young: "He is a gifted and unusual man, loaded with integrity.... He refines standards of filmmaking through the craftsmanship and subtlety of his art." On Cortez: "He was no more a hero than you or I [but was] a man who made a difference." On the film: "...People will value this film 20 years from now even more than they do today."