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Ballad of Gregorio Cortez

El Pachuco Deflates the Pachuco Image

By FRANK del OLMO

It is probably un-Chicano of me to admit it, but I never really liked the El Pachuco character in Luis Valdez' hit play "Zoot Suit," which had such a long, successful run in Los Angeles a couple of years back.

The mythical character is fascinating, to be sure. El Pachuco speaks as both the play's narrator and the conscience of its protagonist. As portrayed by Edward James Olmos in an acting tour de force, El Pachuco dominated the stage and seemed at times to stand 10 feet tall.

Olmos made El Pachuco the epitome of barrio cool. He didn't walk so much as he glided in and out of the shadows. He spoke the old pachuco slang with the eloquence of Laurence Olivier reading Shakespeare. And he was switchblade-sharp in his trim, black zoot suit and wide-brimmed hat.

El Pachuco was a wonder to behold, but he troubled me.

All cultures produce their swaggering antiheroes, of course, but what worried me most about El Pachuco was the adoring reaction that he got from so many of the young Latinos who flocked to see "Zoot Suit."

The gang life style that El Pachuco represented is still too real, and too uncomfortably close by, for him to be dismissed as simply a fictional character. I feared that some impressionable young people might see in El Pachuco a living symbol of a tragic mode of behavior that is still all-too-common in the barrios, and that they might be tempted to emulate.

I was not the only Chicano who felt that way. Olmos, who played El Pachuco perhaps 300 times on stage in Los Angeles and on Broadway, was another.

Olmos went out of his way during the play's run, and since then, to impress on young Latinos the point that El Pachuco was just a fictional character artfully interpreted by a soft-spoken actor. He has taken that message almost 100 times to Chicano groups "in high schools and grade schools, in youth camps and juvenile halls."

"I tell them that El Pachuco's style of pride and self-assertion may have been necessary for his time" (the early 1940s, when wartime hysteria had prejudice against Mexican-Americans running espe-

cially high), Olmos says. "But it's a negative pride, a defense mechanism—a shield against the outside world that Chicanos don't really need anymore."

The 35-year-old Olmos believes that seeing the man who played El Pachuco portray significantly different roles can also help young Latinos put the El Pachuco character into perspective. Olmos has made several motion pictures since "Zoot Suit," but only recently has he appeared in a film aimed specifically at a Latino audience.

Olmos' latest role could not be more different from the hip defiance of El Pachuco. He plays the title role in "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," a Western based on a true incident that took place along the Texas-Mexico border in 1901—one that is still sung about in corridos, Mexican-American narrative folk songs.

Cortez was a Mexican-American farmhand who shot and killed the sheriff of Gonzalez, Tex., in a dispute that arose because of a misunderstanding over the translation of a single word. Fleeing for his life at a time when Mexicans were regularly lynched in the Southwest, Cortez outran a posse and the Texas Rangers for 11 days. He was captured only after another Mexican-American turned him in for a reward. He was tried and sentenced to life in prison, but was pardoned 12 years later.

It is not a happy story, and the characters and their motivations are ambiguous. Not all the Latinos are heroes, and not all the Anglos are villains. It is a lovely film to watch, a gritty and authentic depiction of the American West at the turn of the century.

Most important, Olmos portrays Cortez not as a swashbuckling El Pachuco-on-horseback but as he must really have been—a frightened, confused and exhausted man fleeing for his life. It is a startling contrast in roles for Olmos, and must be a shocker for anyone who is used to thinking of Olmos as El Pachuco. So it may be a gamble for the young actor.

But it is not the biggest gamble that Olmos is taking. He agreed to co-produce the film with Moctezuma Esparza, and is taking a risk that only superstars like Robert Redford and Clint Eastwood nor-

mally take, using his own money to package "Cortez" for distribution to theaters as a feature film.

"Cortez" was originally a project of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., which obtained funding for the production from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The first of a projected series of films on the Latino experience in the United States, "Cortez" was screened earlier this year on the Public Broadcasting Service, receiving favorable reviews.

Olmos now wants to carry it into theaters, and he has held sneak-preview screenings in San Antonio and Los Angeles to test audience reaction. "I want to prove that Latino-themed films can be successful," he says, raising an issue that is sensitive with the small but growing number of Latinos in the film industry. "I want to show the major studios that a Latino film can be a success without focusing just on gangs and violence," the only themes that Hollywood studios seem willing to treat in films about Latinos.

While films like "Boulevard Nights" and "Walk Proud" received some favorable reviews, they were unanimously—and justifiably—blasted by Latino activists as blatant misportrayals. Even worse from the studios' standpoint, none of them did well commercially.

Even a stage hit like "Zoot Suit" has not been as successful on film as Universal Studios would have liked. Produced on a modest budget of \$2.5 million, the film has thus far grossed only \$4.5 million, not nearly enough by the high-stakes standards of modern moviemaking.

If Olmos succeeds with his gamble on "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," it may change a few minds in Hollywood's executive suites.

But it's more important to me that it change a few minds in places like East Los Angeles and San Antonio's West Side. The more widely Olmos' latest film is played, the more chances there will be for young Latinos to see another side of El Pachuco.

Frank del Olmo is a Times editorial writer.