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THE OUTSIDERS

TRUE GRIT

From a committed band of independent filmmakers comes one of the best Westerns in years.

by Pat Aufderheide

10/83 Movies

American cinema is best known for Hollywood's "storyteller to the world" kind of movies. Neorealism didn't take hold here in the postwar years the way it did in Europe, where many filmmakers felt that making up a story to illustrate reality was, in the words of Italian screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, simply "superimposing dead formulas over living social facts."

It is living social facts that provide the material for *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, a film that was put together by participants in Robert Redford's Sundance Institute summer workshops in Provo Canyon, Utah. *Gregorio Cortez* is a very American movie—grounded in events that occurred in turn-of-the-century Texas—but it has the gritty texture and concern for ordinary people caught up in an unjust world that one associates with European films. A gripping chase adventure and also a wrenching tragedy of crosscultural misunderstanding, it's the kind of movie that sets a standard.

The filmmakers started out with a terrific story. In 1901, a sheriff tracking down horse thieves in south Texas interrogated a young Mexican cowhand, Gregorio Cortez. Questions and answers were relayed through an interpreter, and guns were drawn. Suddenly Cortez's brother and the sheriff were both dying in the farmhouse yard, and Cortez was in flight, Texas Rangers on his trail. After eleven days and some 450 winding miles of pursuit, followed avidly by newspaper readers nationwide who devoured speculation on the exploits of the "Cortez gang," the Rangers got Cortez at the border. He was tried and sentenced for murder; after twelve years of appeals and retrials he was finally freed. Meanwhile, the story took on epic proportions. For whites, it was a glorious triumph for the Texas Rangers. For Mexican-Americans, it was a saga of heroic resistance, immortalized in a *corrido*, or folk song (still

sung, by the way, on the border). Somewhere between the two myths lay the "living social facts" of a frontier occupied by two semi-hostile cultures.

What really happened that afternoon in the farmyard? That's the subject of *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, and the answer is complicated. In fact, at the center of the film is perspective itself, the influence of interpretation on events, of attitudes on actions. The film begins with the return to town of the bodies of two white men killed at the beginning of the manhunt. After a flashback to that incident, the long chase continues. Along for the ride is a genial journalist who interviews the posse members, and with each interview we get a visual re-creation of their version of the story. When Cortez is jailed a lawyer listens to his version, told, again, through an interpreter. The differences in the telling are tiny, but they are important. The killing turns out to have been precipitated by linguistic confusion, the sheriff's interpreter not understanding the Spanish use of the words *caballo* for horse and *llegua* for mare. In the muddle of the moment the sheriff drew a gun. "And for this my brother died?" Cortez says.

Gregorio Cortez has all the elements of a conventional Western—cowboys, outlaws, townsfolk, horses, trains, judges, and lynch mobs—but is surprisingly realistic about the Old West. When the journalist interviews a cowboy, he asks, "Got anything to say to the folks back home?" The man is embarrassed. Gaze averted, he says bleakly, "Nuh. They wouldn't even know where I was." So much for the Marlboro man; the frontier cowboy was a migrant worker. Perhaps the most dramatic contrast between this West and that of Hollywood can be seen in the staging of the capture



of Cortez. Just as he settles into the corner of a shed, long afternoon light filtering through the boards, a Ranger peers in and asks tentatively, "Are you Cortez?" That's it. No fireworks, just the end of the road. It is a quiet moment, stinking of death, and conveys the collapse of Cortez's hopes far more strongly than a melodramatic rain of bullets would have.

Cortez isn't a cliché hero in this story, and the Rangers aren't heartless villains. None of the characters, in fact, comes off the screen with labels. The interpreter, a man who lied about his own incompetence and rabble-raised to cover his tracks, could have been made an easy villain. But here he is an insecure, stalwart little man, so haunted by the fear of not measuring up to the male codes of honor that he defends himself with violence. The woman who interprets Cortez's prison testimony could easily have become a symbol of Mexican martyrdom. But the quiet dignity with which Rosana DeSoto plays her, tears welling in her eyes while she tries to make sure the lawyer gets the story clearly, transmits not just the tragedy but her own role in an unequal power relationship.

The real work of a manhunt becomes palpable when you see how small the men are before breathtaking, unforgiving landscapes, forbidding canyon brush, and the dark of a starless night. The desperation of a man on the run becomes a horse, a cookfire, a clump of bushes. The dull despair of jail is marked with dank, green light and the scaffold that awaits Cortez's sentencing. Eager lynchers at the jail door

are seen with anxiety from inside the jail.

The film's use of language reinforces the sense that we are seeing things through the eyes of others. This is a movie where the central character never speaks a word of English. Spanish dialogue isn't translated, giving English-speakers a sense of what the Mexicans experience and reminding us that the confusion in the farmyard was part of a way of life. It's an insider's view of the Old West and of social conflict. As the director, Robert M. Young, explains it, "It was our desire to create experiences, and to take people into those experiences." Edward Olmos, who plays Cortez, puts it another way: "You let the audience in on the event, let them step into the situation and judge for themselves."

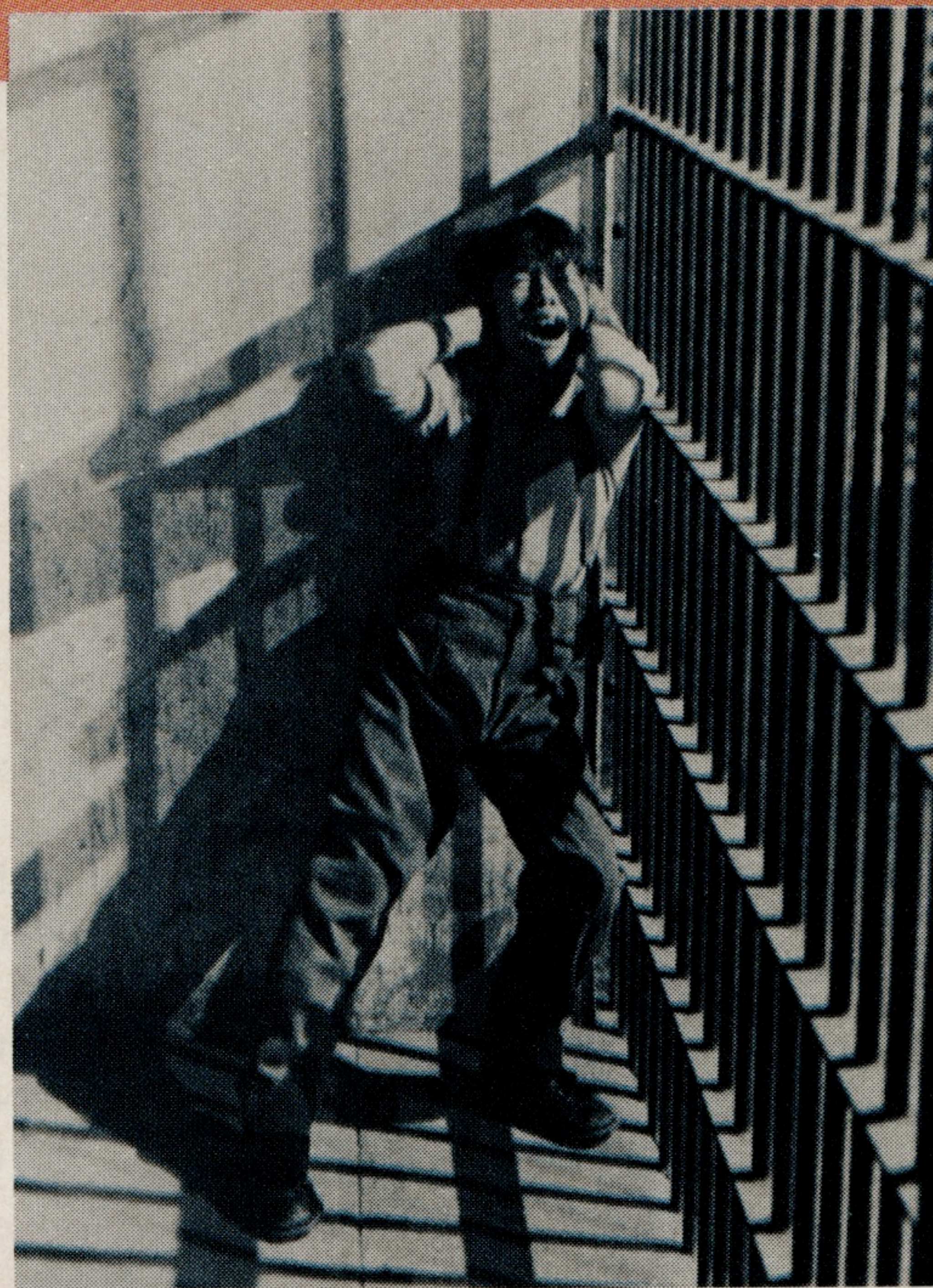
The National Endowment for the Humanities, working with the National Council of La Raza, originally backed the project. (Sadly, the NEH is unlikely to back anything so offbeat as a film about values in conflict in these strict-constructionist days on the culture front.) It can congratulate itself on getting a bargain. The whole thing was done on a couple of shoestrings and some dental floss. It was made for \$1.3 million, coming from not only NEH but also the Corporation for Public Broad-

casting, the National Council of La Raza, Public Television Stations, and Moctesuma-Esparza Productions. That's a third of the marketing budget alone for a major Hollywood release. Money, it is clear, cannot explain the high production values in this film. Bob Young, who also made *Nothing But a Man*, *Short Eyes*, *Alambrista!*, and other well-crafted films on unsung parts of American culture, surely carries some of the credit for that. He seems to inspire unparalleled dedication in the people who work with him.

Everyone involved in the film helped to shape it, from early research to improvisation on the set. Principals went hunting through libraries and museums to learn more about Cortez and the era. They made friends with people who had become fascinated with the Cortez legend. The story was tracked down to the actual jail, still used today, where Cortez was tried. When the filmmakers told the local judge they wanted to use the jail in the movie, they were surprised at his response. "I've been waiting for you boys for twenty-five years," he said. The Cortez case had been a lifetime hobby for him.

Although Young had reworked Victor Villasenor's script, giving it the element of shifting perspective, each scene was the result of nights of group work before the next day's shooting. "The atmosphere was incredible," says Olmos. "Everyone committed themselves to the picture—from the gaffer to the best boy to the producer."

The film was shown on public TV, as NEH and CPB funding required. Then the filmmakers began a most unusual publicity campaign. *Gregorio Cortez* circulated among schools, prisons, youth and ethnic groups, and members of the cast accompanied it, answering questions after screenings. For months the film showed every Saturday morning in a Los Angeles theater, for free. Hispanics, whites, cowboys, slum kids—eventually 20,000 people—saw



Cortez's small son is held in jail while the posse searches for his father.

the film, and word began to spread that something unusual was happening.

Now *Gregorio Cortez* possesses a wall full of awards, and Embassy Pictures has picked it up for distribution. The "Cortez gang" has taken over one of Embassy's trendy executive offices high up in Century City. One midsummer morning there Eddie Olmos was sorting through letters from fan clubs across the US calling themselves "Friends of Gregorio Cortez." On a questionnaire from a community screening at a Denver high school, a woman had laboriously scrawled, "A sad story of misunderstanding; it could happen today." Several questionnaires ask why there aren't more movies like this. Publicist Bob Hoffman was on the phone tying up loose ends from the Seattle Film Festival, where a student audience loved it. Friends from the production popped in, each greeted with a welcome-to-the-clubhouse air. These guys make marketing look like fun.

The Cortez gang has great expectations for this movie. They'd like it to make money. But they'd really like it to make waves. After all, they weren't just storytelling, but doing something outrageously ambitious. One is reminded of something else Cesare Zavattini wrote: "The world is composed of millions of people thinking of myths. The time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life." □



Gregorio Cortez and his brother a few moments before the shootout.