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Marathon Mann

A Welcome Re-release of Director's 1961 Epic

BY DAVID HUNTER

Comprised of equal parts -courtly intrigue and large-scale pageantry, *El Cid* is not the most overwhelmingly exciting epic produced in the halcyon era of the wide-screen spectacle. But it deserves its reputation as one of Hollywood's more realistic and substantive historical sagas. Having already parted the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* and to witness Christ's crucifixion in *Ben Hur*, star Charlton Heston donned the mantle of Spanish national hero Rodrigo Diaz de

Cruickshank), the King's champion and father of Rodrigo's true love Chimene (Loren), accuse him of treason. Attempting to salvage the situation after his father (Michael Hordern) is grievously insulted, Rodrigo appeals to Gormaz, but ends up killing him in a swordfight spurred by inflexible positions and honor. Implored by her dying father to seek revenge, Chimene joins the ranks of those who revile Rodrigo.

The unfulfilled longing of at-odds lovers is the primary hook of *El Cid*'s meandering



Heston and Loren

Bivar in Anthony Mann's leisurely, lyrical, and ultimately invigorating film, which was first released in 1961.

Paired with Italian screen siren Sophia Loren, Heston delivers one of his better performances, never overwhelmed by the thousands of extras and awe-inspiring sets or forced to deliver wooden dialogue. While adhering to historical fact was never a strong point in this genre, there's an integrity to Frederic M. Frank and Philip Yordan's screenplay that is matched by the accurate costumes and locales insisted upon by Mann and producer Samuel Bronston.

Focusing on the efforts of Rodrigo to unite Christian and Muslim Spaniards against an impending invasion by ruthless North African Moors, the story has contemporary relevance. Though it must be noted that the film perpetuates myths of heartless infidels using treachery and expendable warriors to overrun idyllic, humane enclaves of budding Western civilization.

Rodrigo earns the name "El Cid" for his refusal to execute Spanish Moor prisoners at a time when all Muslims were feared by Christians, who also warred among themselves in feudal conflicts. His compassion and wisdom cause serious problems with his countrymen. His rivals, Count Ordonez (Raf Vallone) and Count Gormaz (Andrew

first two-thirds (for a battle epic, there's surprisingly little action in *El Cid*). The film picks up the pace in its last third, centering on Rodrigo's defense of the seaside fortress-city of Valencia. The film's spectacular payoff occurs with the arrival of Ben Yussuf (Herbert Lom) and his legions of black-cowled warriors (The sequence of the troops amassing on the battlefield to the pounding of drums is breathtaking). Mortally wounded in an inconclusive battle, Rodrigo makes a final, legendary sacrifice that Mann is able to pull off with exemplary skill.

Nominated for three Academy Awards and a box-office success, *El Cid* is a bit of a marathon at three hours but it is never boring. A personal favorite of Martin Scorsese, who urged Miramax to take on the task of restoring a theatrical print complete with overture and intermission tracks, *El Cid* was splendidly photographed by Robert Krasker in Super Technirama, a 70mm process that provided more depth and detail than 35mm CinemaScope and its relatives. The only shortcoming of the current re-release is the

choice to not strike a new 70mm print, which would add additional clarity to the imagery. Nonetheless, for sheer size and ambition, there is no current film in release or on the horizon that can rival this 32-year-old warhorse. ■

EL CID

starring
Charlton Heston, Sophia
Loren, Raf Vallone &
Genevieve Page

directed by
Anthony Mann

screenplay by
Frederick M. Frank &
Philip Yordan

Miramax
(selected)