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THE BALLAD OF GREGORIO CORTEZ

Director: Robert Young

U.S.A. 1982

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez offers us a familiar landscape with the perspective subtly altered. The changing West (1901) uncompromisingly re-created with close attention to period detail and beautifully filmed. A violent death under confused, contested circumstances, a chase, a trial.

But in *Gregorio Cortez*, played by Edward James Olmos, we have a hero who is neither victim nor avenger - the two easiest Third World types to portray. If he is a victim it is of a cruel misunderstanding, a sick linguistic joke, the spark which ignites revengeful prejudice. Gregorio Cortez is not articulate, nor is he particularly assertive, for the most positive thing he does is run away.

But his endurance and dignity in the face of injustice and the pain of separation, offer us a picture of a simpler, nobler, more accessible form of heroism than the cinema customarily places before us.

By many standards, *Gregorio Cortez* is a remarkable film. Perhaps it is remarkable that it was made at all and it is noteworthy for the talent and integrity that went into it. Certainly the sincerity and sense of mission in promoting something that was worth making for reasons other than dollars shines out of the stars, Olmos and Tom Bower, as they 'walk' their product round the world.

ALEXANDER JOHNSTON.

THE conversation leapt from topic to topic — high finance, the balance of power between nations, books and bannings, poverty, black-white relations... but always came back to movies and movie makers.

Not surprising as the three men talking were Edward James Olmos, star of *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, his co-star Tom Bower, and documentary film-maker Frederick Wiseman, all guests of the Durban Film Festival and Tribune Today.

Taking time off from their duties at the festival, they asked to see as much of Durban as could be squeezed into one day, especially Mahatma Gandhi's ashram at Phoenix.

After a radio interview, a photographic session and a brief wander through Grey Street, it was on to the Gandhi museum where they were met with a little uncertainty. Were they moviemakers involved with Gandhi? They weren't? Good. The doors opened. We inspected a clinic and schools where the children were entranced with the easy-going American who took over classes for a few minutes. "Hi, I'm Ed. I'm from America and I'm an actor..."

A squatter camp met with: "This is just like Tijuana."

By 4.30 pm (when I finally managed to corner Ed for an interview), a picture of a totally concerned man had emerged. Perhaps a little too concerned... the sort who gets involved and ends up hurt?

"Well, I think perhaps you're right. My father always said I wore my heart on my sleeve. That I gave too much of myself. But I think it's as much my asset as my downfall. Total involvement gives a better understanding of humanity. It also makes you a good entertainer, and that's what I hope I am."

Ed Olmos is a good and certainly a versatile entertainer. He sings, dances, plays comedy and drama with equal ability. All the movie roles he accepts have something to say about 'being a human'.

"Take *Blade Runner* (on our screens last year). What a marvellous opportunity for developing a character. I played Gaff (the blade runner who was pushed into the background for the recalled Harrison Ford), a multi-hybrid being with Japanese slanted German blue eyes, Chinese complexion, French moustache and Italian punk hairstyle and I spoke 10 different languages.

"Talking 10 different languages is some-

thing we're all going to have to learn to do soon. The cities in America are full of pockets of different nationalities and it's growing. Policemen are going to have to talk the language of the area they patrol and if we're going to wander from area to area and talk to other people we're going to have to learn more languages."

Perhaps this strong feeling about languages and understanding stems from the fact that Ed grew up in a "barrio" in east Los Angeles, where the people he mixed with were blacks, Chinese, Mexican Americans and Japanese.

Being Mexican American (and a fine actor) helped land Ed a starring role in *Zoot Suit* — the true story of 22 hispanic American youths convicted of the murder of a young boy and sentenced to life in Alcatraz. The play went on Broadway and all the main stages in America. The role won Ed a Tony award and international acclaim.

His latest role, *Gregorio Cortez*, deals with a Mexican American hero who outwitted 1000 Texas Rangers for 11 days until taken in 50 m short of the Mexican border.

His concern for people not only shows itself in the movie roles he accepts but also in the fact that he voluntarily talks to 3000 children a week on cultural understanding through the arts, anti-gang warfare, and the strength of family unity. He is also national spokesman for Voter Registration.

"I encourage people to vote, to take an interest in the country's politics and to vote for what they want. It's very important for a true democracy."

"A strong family unit is also important. We have a big family, my father had 13 brothers and sisters and I have 7. The youngest, Brian James, is three weeks old. Just recently my mother telephoned to say I had a new baby brother. 'Mother,' I said, 'How?'

"I mean it's ridiculous, she's 58. But it turned out that a young girl who was about to give birth to an illegitimate baby asked her for a lift to hospital. The baby was to be given away. So my mother told the hospital authorities she would take him and that was that. Isn't that beautiful?"

For a man with so many strong convictions, desires and emotions, his greatest wish came as a bit of a surprise.

"I want to be the longest living Olmos ever. I have a target age of 87 to beat and I'm determined to do it."



EDDIE OLMOS: sensitive and caring



TOM BOWER

The film chosen to launch the 1983 Durban Film Festival was *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*. TRIBUNE Today flew the star Edward Olmos to Durban for the occasion. With him was co-star Tom Bower, also hosted around town by Today Magazine. Phillida Secombe showed them around and spoke to them...

A FEAST OF FILM IN DURBAN