

# AT THE MOVIES

## A Spanish Masterpiece



### *The Other Conquest* (\*\*\*\*)

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*La Otra Conquista* tells the story of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, but more importantly, it shows the high price the Aztec culture paid, both spiritually and materialistically, at the hands of the Spanish. Writer/director Salvador Carrasco thought it was time to tell the other side of the story, the ones most of us don't learn about in high school.

The film opens on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1520 following the Spanish conquest. Topiltzin (Damian Delgado), an Aztec picture-writer, is captured by the Spaniards during a raid of a human sacrifice ceremony. Topiltzin, the illegitimate son of Emperor Moctezuma, is deemed a savage who is brought to Hernando Cortez for execution. But because Cortez has taken Emperor Moctezuma's daughter Tecuichpo (Elpidia Carrillo) as mistress, and has subsequently fallen in love with her, he decides to let Topiltzin live.

However, to live means to change his name to Tomas, convert to Christianity, abandon his native language and speak Spanish, and survive a brutal punishment -- 30 lashings with a whip, a chain, and torch set to the bottoms of his feet while a statue of the Virgin Mary looks on.

Tomas/Topiltzin is forced into the

arms of the Virgin Mary at every turn, the strangely sad, judgmental, serene statue has so much screen time that she is as vivid and alive as the characters in the film. Her appearance is perhaps one of the most effective elements of *La Otra Conquista* when considering Mexico today. A culture continually associated with Catholicism has its roots elsewhere. Yet, because the film is ultimately in support of the belief in god (that faith is the universal part) it doesn't matter what face it's wearing, Mexico did not reject the film's ideas, quite the opposite in fact. The film became wildly popular in Mexico during its release in 1999, earning \$2 million at the box office. Of course, that seems a paltry sum by our standards, but for Mexico, it's huge.

Its U.S. release is being closely watched. Much money was invested in the publicity, which didn't target Latino groups specifically, but rather attempted to reach a broader audience, from art houses to the general public. How will it fare with an audience who shells out hundreds of millions for Julia Roberts' smile?

In fact, word of mouth is spreading fast, particularly for Latinos and art house filmgoers. What remains to be seen is whether a mass audience can identify with or embrace this brand of filmmaking -- spare and symbolic, closer to the magic realism than to tradition-

ally historical dramas. The last film that cross-connected many in and out of the Latino community was *Like Water for Chocolate*. Will *La Otra Conquista* enjoy the same worldwide success?

The story is a triumph of the human spirit, though it is not as romantic as *Like Water for Chocolate*, which was the film's draw. It also doesn't have a popular novel backing it up. In fact, it's more along the lines of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* -- at once moving and painful to watch.

However, one thing it does share with *Like Water for Chocolate* is its absolute loveliness. In one of the more astonishing feature film debuts in recent memory, Carrasco has filled every frame with beautiful, agonizing realism reflects both our common knowledge history as well as his vibrant imagination. He gets much help from Samuel Zyman's score and his production designer (and wife) Andrea Sanderson, but clearly, Carrasco is the standout here.

One can only hope he is not sucked up, chewed vigorously and spit out by the Hollywood machine, given silly, badly written films to direct. Carrasco ought to emerge as one of the world's best directors, taking his place alongside such uncompromising giants as Abbas Kiarostami, Martin Scorsese, and Akira Kurosawa, rather than being given far too much reign, like Luc Besson or Robert Rodriguez.

It took Carrasco, and partner Alvaro Domingo (son of executive producer, Plácido) nearly ten years to realize their dream of making *La Otra Conquista*, a devotion that is evident in nearly every well-conceived frame of the film. This clearly wasn't hashed out in five minutes in some Hollywood pitchfest; this is the real deal, one of those films that ends up taking a place in cinema history and remaining there, refusing to be forgotten, dated or ineffectual.

*La Otra Conquista* gives a face and a name to the mysterious world of the Aztecs. Though we now know that the beauty and spirit endure, we must remember, just how high a price the Aztecs paid, and in some ways, how the Mexican people are still paying for their loss.

*La Otra Conquista*, written, directed and edited by Salvador Carrasco, produced by Alvaro Domingo, starring Damián Delgado, José Carlos Rodríguez, Elpidia Carrillo, Iñaki Aierra.

Parents Warning: graphic violence,