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A Spaniard (Honorato Magaloni) flogs an unrepenting Aztec (Damián Delgado) in "The Other Conquest."

'Conquest' Reveals Clash, Fusion of Spirit

Movie Review

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Salvador Carrasco's "The Other Conquest," or "La Otra Conquista," is a boldly imaginative and enthralling evocation of the bloody aftermath of the 1521 Spanish conquest of Mexico that has become the highest-grossing drama ever in Mexico.

In his bravura feature debut, Carrasco has created nothing less than a dazzling vision of the birth of a uniquely Mexican religion born of the searing fusion of Catholic and Aztec deities. This epic film is an impassioned assertion that the proud Aztec spirit lives on in Mexico's culture despite the horrific efforts of the conquistadors and their priests to eradicate every vestige of the Aztec heritage of the vanquished natives.

When Hernando Cortés and his small army arrived in 1519, they were welcomed by the Emperor Moctezuma, who thought the Spaniard might be the white-skinned god Quetzalcoatl, whose return had been prophesied. Such imperial hospitality allowed Cortés, who was greedy for gold, the opportunity to take Moctezuma captive, ransack and destroy his country and all but wipe out his people. It is believed that, in the century after the conquest, 90% of the native population, estimated between 12 million and 25 million, perished. In central Mexico alone,



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Delgado, as Moctezuma's son, holds a codex tracing Aztec history. some 8 million people died within the conquest's first decade, the vast majority succumbing to disease transmitted by the Spaniards.

As the movie's story unfolds, by June 1526 the Spanish conquest was virtually complete when the brutal, sadistic Captain Cristóbal Quijano (Honorato Magaloni) comes upon a sacred human sacrifice ceremony underway within the ruins of the Great Temple. Conducting the ceremony is Topiltzin (Damián Delgado), son of Moctezuma and his favorite mistress, both already dead at the hands of the Spaniards.

Participating in the ritual are Topiltzin's grandmother (Josefeina

Echánove) and his treacherous brother (Guillermo Ríos). Being sacrificed is a beautiful princess (Luisa Avila) whose desire to be with the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin in spirit is greater than her desire to be with Topiltzin, who with his grandmother's encouragement, has created a codex recording the history of the Aztecs.

When Quijano launches a deadly attack on the small group, the priest, Fray Diego (José Carlos Rodríguez), protests, saying, "You're behaving like them." Precisely: As repugnant as ritual human sacrifice is to the European mentality, the conquistadors would prove themselves far more savage than the Aztecs. And while Fray Diego might protest man's inhumanity to man, he would swiftly become obsessed with converting Topiltzin, whom he renamed Tomás, to Christianity.

Topiltzin most likely would have faced execution upon his capture had not Cortés (Iñaki Aierra) taken as his mistress Topiltzin's half-sister Tecuichpo (Elpidia Carrillo). As the eldest daughter of Moctezuma, she had become the wife of her father's short-lived successor to the Aztec throne and persuades Cortés to spare her half-brother. After beatings from Quijano, Topiltzin is sent to a monastery and turned over to Fray Diego for conversion, which Cortés insists must be authentic and not just a matter of appearances.

Carrasco opens his film with a

fevered and intense as to draw comparisons with heady silent epics. Aierra's Cortés couldn't be more dashing, arrogant—or humorless. All these florid histrionics, staged amid much grandeur, create a vital and tempestuous prologue for the protracted struggle of wills between the proud, intellectual Topiltzin and the compassionate but relentless Fray Diego.

Small, sinewy and dark, and with a profile lifted from a pyramid hieroglyph, Delgado—a dancer as well as actor—has a galvanic presence and tremendous physical grace and discipline that enable him to bring Topiltzin alive in all his fierce pride, brilliance and iron will; "The Other Conquest" would be unthinkable without him, and he and Rodríguez, whose Fray Diego has the pained expression of countless religious martyrs, create the dramatic tension that sustains this most ambitious, stylized film.

"The Other Conquest" (whose title refers to the attempt to conquer the realm of the spirit along with the conquest of territory) has much visual splendor and haunting images and emotions, expressed further in Samuel Zyman's symphonic score, counterpointed with Jorge Reyes' indigenous compositions. The production design of Andrea Sanderson (who is also Carrasco's wife) and Rocio Ramirez's Aztec costumes and Angela Dodson's Spanish attire complete the film's aura of magnificence, which in turn is captured in all its beauty and elegance by Arturo de la Rosa's rich, glowing camera work.

From all this emerges an element of magic realism in Carrasco's profound vision of suffering and redemption, one that illuminates the film's glowing, transcendent spirituality. Alvaro Domingo, Carrasco's producing partner, served as the producer of the film, and the executive producer is opera star Plácido Domingo, Alvaro's father.

Carrasco suggests that spiritual longing is as universal as it is deep, and Topiltzin does in fact come to see in a statue of the Virgin Mary the embodiment of Tonantzin, whom he worships. He can accept the Virgin but not surrender either his strength of will or his spirit to her, a stance that will set in motion Topiltzin's ultimate gesture—the beginning of the Christian-Aztec religious fusion that would soon culminate in an apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe. A Virgin Mary with Aztec features, the Virgin of Guadalupe would become the supreme expression of Mexican cultural identity and the patron saint of the continent.