

# Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



ANNIE WELLS / Los Angeles Times

"The Other Conquest's" producer Alvaro Domingo, left, and director Salvador Carrasco took a chance pitching a 500-year-old story with no stars.

## Preparing a 'Conquest'

By LORENZA MUÑOZ  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**T**he Spanish conquest of the Americas is usually told as a quick and easy story: They came, they conquered, they converted the Indians into Christians.

Indeed, "history is written for the victors and what they leave out are the losers," as academic historian Arthur Drexler noted.

But Mexican director Salvador Carrasco wanted to tell the losers' story. He wanted to write about the culture that wasn't totally conquered as evidenced by the strong indigenous heartbeat that remains an integral part of Mexico. Surely, Carrasco contemplated, the Spaniards must have learned something from the richly complex and sophisticated civilizations they attempted to obliterate.

And thus "The Other Conquest," or "La Otra Conquista," Carrasco's first feature film, was born.



ANDREA SANDERSON

### A Conflict of Beliefs

"The Other Conquest" ("La Otra Conquista"), Mexico's highest-grossing drama, stars José Carlos Rodríguez as a Spanish priest, left, and Damián Delgado as an Aztec he tries to convert. Reviewed by Kevin Thomas. **F4**

The movie, released in Mexico in April 1999 by 20th Century Fox's international branch, was a phenomenal success, grossing more than \$2 million in theaters. A measly sum by Hollywood standards, perhaps, but it broke Mexican box-office records.

Never in his wildest dreams did Carrasco think his movie—an intense colonial-era picture in Spanish and Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs)—would ever strike a populist chord.

One year after its release in Mexico, Southern California audiences can see the picture. Although epic foreign films like "The Other Conquest" are usually released in one or two art-house theaters, the distributor is venturing that the film could have a broader appeal. Carrasco's film, in Spanish with English subtitles, opens today in 70 theaters, both art house and mainstream, throughout Los Angeles County and outlying areas like Orange County, Santa Barbara and Palm Springs.

At the premiere last week, nearly 200

Please see 'Conquest,' F4

# 'Conquest': Opening in Southern California

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people were turned away from the packed Academy of Arts and Sciences' Samuel Goldwyn Theater. Distributor Mitch Goldman, former president of marketing and distribution for New Line Cinema, says he is betting the film will play broadly to Latino audiences here as well as the non-Latino art-house crowd. The Spanish and English marketing campaign cost nearly \$2 million, a significant amount for a one-region release.

"I was interested in pushing the limits on what the Latino audience could go for," Goldman said. "I was not interested in getting this out to only a couple of art theaters. While I don't see this as a picture that would work in every theater in America, I do believe that it has a very strong viability and commerciality for a Los Angeles audience."

## Film Intriguing Many in the Area

So far, through word of mouth, the film seems to be intriguing many in the Southland, from the hierarchy of the Catholic archdiocese to radio personalities like KCRW-FM's Tom Schnabel, who presented a show on the film's music, to students filling up auditoriums at screenings in Orange County to KCET-TV's "Life & Times" doing a segment on the film.

To be sure, the film is not light entertainment.

"This film is not about somebody becoming famous, getting rich or getting the girl," said Carrasco, a 32-year-old Mexico City native. "It's about a spiritual quest and about something nobody can take away."

The story, which Carrasco began writing in 1990 during his last two years at New York University's film school, begins in 1521, the year the Spaniards conquered the Aztec empire. The conquest is seen through the eyes of Topiltzin, an Aztec codex painter played by Mexican actor Damián Delgado, as the Spaniards kill his relatives, destroy the capital of Tenochtitlan and torture him and attempt to convert him to Christianity.

But Topiltzin rages against a Catholic priest's efforts to change his spiritual beliefs. The priest learns a profound lesson in tolerance and the true meaning of Christianity as he watches Topiltzin struggle with the forced conversion.

Initially, however, the film had many strikes going against it. Carrasco and his producer, Alvaro Domingo, were first-timers, pitching a 500-year-old story with no stars.

"We would hear things like, 'People don't like period films, people don't like to think when they go to movies,'" Carrasco said. "At one point they said, 'Do you realize the risk involved in having an Indian protagonist?' And we said, 'What risk? That is one of the greatest assets of the film.'"

## The Movie Took Six Years to Shoot

Finding money to finance the film, which cost \$3.9 million, was a slow process that forced the filmmakers to scatter 50 days of shooting through six years. Some scenes were shot in 1992 and finished years later. The actors literally got older as the filming progressed, with some growing gray hair, a few more wrinkles and pounds added to their frames in the final scenes.

The movie is nearly 100% independently financed, a rarity in Mexico, where the government's film institute usually pitches in with half of a film's budget. Domingo got money from sources ranging from Jesuit priests to entrepreneurs to musicians.

"With the seed money we shot three sequences—20 minutes worth—in 1992," said Alvaro, whose father, Plácido Domingo, pitched in as executive producer. "I went out with that tape and showed it to people who had turned me away. I would show them and say, 'Look, we are serious and this is what we can do.' Then they got excited about it."

Following its success in Mexico, the filmmakers screened their movie for Fox executives here. But Fox was not interested in releasing the film to a wider audience. So Carrasco was referred to Goldman, whose company, Hombre D' Oro, is distributing the movie. Both the filmmakers and Goldman agreed from the outset that the film should be released to both the art-house and broader Latino audience in Southern California. Depending on how well the film does, the movie could expand to Texas, Northern California and possibly New York, Goldman said. The film thus far has only been seen in Mexico, where it is already available on video.

## Filmmakers Avoided Good vs. Bad Story Line

From the beginning, the filmmakers set out to make a movie that explored the conquest with as few clichés as possible.

"We were not going to make a film about the goodies and the baddies," Carrasco said. "You end up having a racist approach by doing that. We were never interested in the idea that the Indians were so innocent and pure, and showing them in a mystical trance playing the flute. I think that is disrespectful. These were complex cultures with inner contradictions."

Although the Aztecs were very sophisticated and enlightened people on many levels, they were also ruthless warriors who killed and enslaved many other Indian tribes in the quest to expand their own empire. In fact, the Spaniards did not win without assistance. They were allied with several tribes, eager to reap revenge on the Aztecs.

"Why did the Tlaxcaltecan Indians ally themselves with the Spaniards?" Carrasco said. "With our 21st century eyes we say, 'Traitors!' But the Aztecs were a warlike, tremendous empire in expansion. They had met their match. All of a sudden what they had been doing to other people was being done to them."

By the same token, Carrasco and Domingo (born of a Spanish father and a Mexican mother) did not sugarcoat the massacre of Indians at the hands of the Spaniards. It is estimated that more than 8 million Indians died between 1521 and 1531, and the Catholic hierarchy stood by as witnesses, if not facilitators, as it happened.

"This was a genocide," Carrasco said. "The face of the American continent changed forever. . . . Many of the things that happened back then are still unresolved five centuries later. We are still seeking our identity."

## Plácido Domingo Gets Assist on Musical Score

The filmmakers played with this notion of identity and melding of different cultures with the film's musical score as well. Taking advantage of Plácido Domingo's support and friends around the world, the filmmakers put together an original score. Carrasco's wife, Andrea Sanderson, a Juilliard-trained violinist, oversaw the musical production. They hired noted composers Jorge Reyes and Samuel Zyman to create original indigenous and Western pieces, respectively. The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields performs the music and Plácido Domingo sings a final aria, composed by Zyman with lyrics by Carrasco, that deals with tolerance and acceptance.

"This story is a universal subject," Carrasco said. "What culture in the world has not undergone a process of colonization, conquest or attempted conversion? We had someone from Poland telling us, 'God, this is us with the Russians!' That is the magic of cinema!"



ANDREA SANDERSON

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

## 'Conquest' Reveals Clash, Fusion of Spirit

### Movie Review

By KEVIN THOMAS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

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 Rios). 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

grand flourish of melodrama, so 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.