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**NOW SHOWING**

**At the movies**

**'Ballad' isn't a typical western**



A misunderstanding, a tragic killing, and a 450-mile chase on horseback across Texas: it sounds like a typical western, but "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" is anything but typical. It's a story which reflects upon the American-Mexican tensions in Texas at the turn of the century, based on a true story and a story of racism.

Edward James Olmos stars as Gregorio Cortez, a Spanish-speaking Mexican who runs a poor farm in Texas. The film opens during a manhunt as Cortez skillfully eludes a small posse; the background soon unfolds in flashbacks, however, as a newspaperman by the name of Blakely (Bruce McGill) rides with the Texas Rangers and delves for the whole story.

The story goes that Cortez shot and killed a sheriff while resisting arrest, and then murdered two other men in a posse formed to hunt him down. But then ambiguities emerge: people don't agree on the facts, certain facts are omitted, others are exaggerated.

Obviously, Cortez's crime isn't as cut and dried as originally portrayed. In the meantime, Cortez manages to elude a 600-man posse for 11 days and trek 450 miles before finally being caught in a manner that seems to suggest resignation.

Unfortunately, none of the inconsistencies Blake uncovers reach the general public. He appears to be as caught up in racism as the posse, the Texas Rangers leading the manhunt, and the two men — Sheriff Glover and Boone Choate — who started the trouble.

This is where the film starts to explore racism, though it does so subtly. Rather than approach it in a literal manner, director and co-writer Robert M. Young exposes prejudice through the distortion of events as seen by the Anglos — through the pitched emotions of the avenging posse, the abrupt, brutal treatment of any Mexicans they meet along the way,

Edward James Olmos plays the role of a proud and wronged man in the movie "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez", based on a true story.

and the senseless jailing of Cortez's wife and young children.

Young directs in a manner that accentuates character and theme, and plays down plot. His intentions become clear as the true story of the killing is revealed in successive flashbacks by different characters, each with his own interpretation. His style is to suggest more than to tell. For example, when two more men are killed after the posse storms a hideout of Cortez's, Boone Choate asks "What are we going to do about all these senseless killings?" Young immediately cuts hard, riding posse storming off into the desert, and the answer is clear.

At the center of all this is Cortez, played with compassion and strength by Edward Olmos. His performance is all the more impressive because he speaks no English in the film. What he conveys is skillfully brought about by tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. He makes Cortez a simple, proud man caught up in a situation he doesn't understand but refuses to give in to.

There's a heroic quality about Cortez, and that quality has made him legend in song as well as in history.

The movie is now playing at the Mayflower, with shows at 7:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.

Sean Axmaker

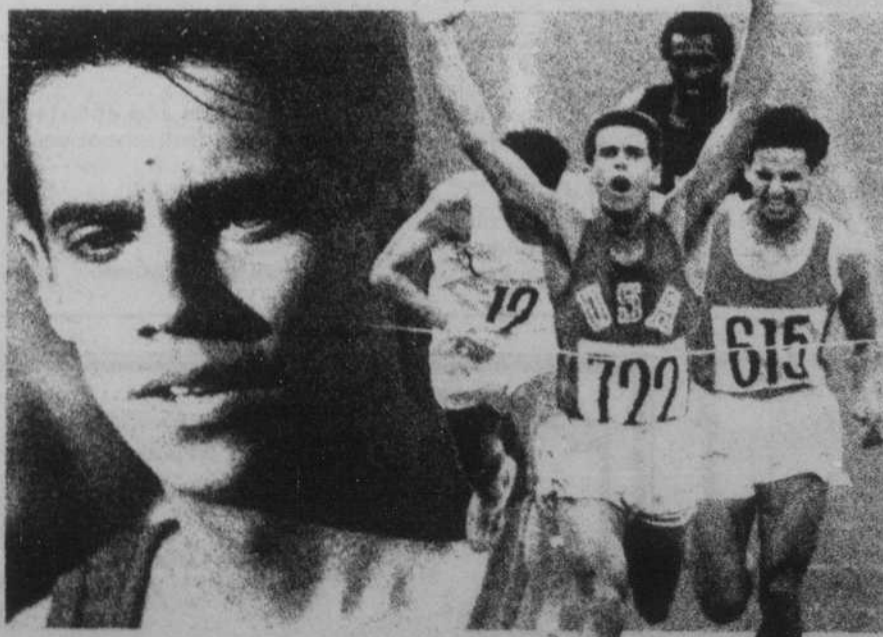
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