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Film Leaves a Legacy of Fear

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In a discreet corner booth of the Colima Restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, while armed marshals stood watch outside, a former Mexican Mafia hit man confirmed what actor Edward James Olmos feared.

Since the release of the movie *American Me*, his harsh tale of Chicano prison gangs, Olmos had been shaken by rumblings that the Mexican Mafia wanted him killed. Seeking an insider's assessment of the danger, he bought breakfast last November for Ramon (Mundo) Mendoza, a convicted assassin who has been living under government protection after testifying against the organization.

Over steaming bowls of menudo and pozole, Mendoza explained that the movie had insulted his ex-comrades' sense of honor, depicting one of their most revered leaders as being sodomized in jail, impotent with a woman and knifed by his own gang brothers—sacrilege to a secret society that equates disrespect with death.

"Don't underestimate these people," Mendoza warned Olmos. "If they're obsessed with getting to you, there's nothing you can do to stop it."

Today, more than a year after the premiere of *American Me*, its legacy continues to haunt a man who hoped to scare youngsters straight with the most dreadful images of gang culture.

Although the movie lost money at the box office and received mostly tepid reviews, it has triggered a wave of unexpected aftershocks, drawing Olmos into a real-life drama that echoes the treachery he portrayed on screen.

Shortly after the movie opened in March, 1992, two of Olmos' consultants were slain execution-style, though it is uncertain whether anger over the film was a motive in the attacks. Olmos, troubled by rumors and threatening letters, told police this year that he feared the prison gang had a contract on his life. He has tried to obtain a permit for a concealed weapon.

"Eddie," said one close friend, "is living with this 24 hours a day."

Because the Mexican Mafia is a clandestine operation whose members do not even acknowledge its existence, there is no way to confirm firsthand whether such suspicions are justified. But at least one sign of the gang's displeasure with Olmos has entered the

public record. A lawsuit has been filed by the Mafia's reputed godfather, who contends that a character based on his life appeared in the film without permission.

The perception of danger is so pervasive that the mere mention of the Mexican Mafia—known on the streets as La Eme, Spanish for the letter *M*—has left many people reluctant to talk. Olmos, who continues to make frequent public appearances, will say only that the movie's positive aspects outweigh any negative fallout.

But interviews with others involved in the making of *American Me*, as well as law enforcement officials and sources knowledgeable about the Chicano underworld, tell of an odd collision between art and life. Hollywood, forever fascinated with gangsterism, took on a merciless prison gang that does not enjoy the limelight.

"It may be just a movie, but not to the Mexican Mafia's way of thinking," said Lt. Leo Duarte, who is in charge of monitoring gang activity at Chino state prison, where several scenes were filmed. "This is their world, their environment. If they think you did something disrespectful, even if they're wrong, there's going to be repercussions."

As the film was originally conceived, the Mexican Mafia might even have liked *American Me*.

Drafted in the mid-1970s by screenwriter Floyd Mutrux, it was to be a Latino version of *The Godfather* epic—a romantic saga of the honor and corruption of the Eme's founding fathers.

Among the Mafia leaders who inspired the script was Rudolfo (Cheyenne) Cadena, a slight man with a fierce sense of pride, whose heart and wit impressed even prison officials. Slain by rival Latino inmates in 1972 while trying to forge a peace pact, he became an instant martyr—a warrior who allowed himself to become a target in the name of cultural unity.

The other legendary Eme figure was Joe (Pegleg) Morgan, an Anglo man from East Los Angeles with a mastery of Spanish slang. He first went to prison when he was 16, for murdering the husband of his 30-year-old lover. Now 63 and serving a life sentence for another killing, Morgan is regarded as a wily businessman and the de facto kingpin of the organization.

"Whatever these guys may have become, they joined together out of a need for dignity and respect," said Mutrux, who used Cadena and Morgan as models for the movie's primary characters, who were later named Santana and J.D. "If it wasn't for them—and what they stood for—I wouldn't have written the story."

For 15 years, as it bounced from one studio to another, Mutrux's script was widely regarded as one of the most interesting films never made. Then Olmos, who had kept his eye on the screenplay since his *Miami Vice* days, hit it big in 1988 with an Oscar-nominated performance in *Stand and Deliver* and a portrait on the cover of *Time* magazine.

It seemed, finally, that a Latino movie star had emerged with the artistic and cultural credentials to bring such a tale to life. But Olmos had a different vision.

The steely-eyed, craggy-faced actor who, broom in hand, came to symbolize Los Angeles' redemptive spirit after last year's riots, saw *American Me* as a chance to strip away all illusions about the romance of barrio warfare.

"I want to show that there's a cancer in this subculture of the gangs," the 46-year-old Olmos told *The Times* in a 1991 interview. "They'll say: 'You've taken away our manhood with this movie.' I say to them: 'Either you treat the cancer or it'll eat you alive.' "

Although he was warned by friends not to make the film, for fear even the best-intentioned effort could expose him to danger, Olmos rewrote large sections of Mutrux's script and transformed the lead role of Santana, which he played, into a vicious antihero.

In what was also his directorial debut, Olmos stocked the movie full of stomach-churning acts, including a virtual compendium of violent deaths. Those who crossed the Eme were stabbed with a tattoo needle, shot in the genitals, torched with gasoline, strangled with rope and sodomized with a large, serrated dagger.

Mutrux, upset over the changes Olmos had made, never set foot on the movie set.

"I gave up one of my best pieces of work to someone who disrespected it," said Mutrux, 51, who is credited as one of the film's executive producers. "Eddie missed the heart, the dignity, the passion—he missed the movie. He just didn't get it."

It is possible that any film about the Mexican Mafia might have sparked the wrath of its estimated 800 to 1,000 members and sympathizers. The Eme, founded in the late 1950s by a group of Eastside gang members, is fundamentally a criminal enterprise, prison officials note, whose leaders would prefer to conduct their business—drug smuggling, gambling, prostitution, extortion—in the shadows.

But *American Me* went a step further, tearing down the mythology of some of the state's hardest-core inmates, most of them convicted killers, who exist in a degrading environment stripped of material pleasure. Respect, in their world, means survival. Poetic license is not appreciated, especially when wielded by a man with a $16-million movie budget and a home in the San Fernando Valley.

The most offensive scenes, according to sources, were those that took liberty with the storied legacy of Cheyenne Cadena, the Mexican Mafia icon whose life is mirrored in the fictional Santana.

Early in the film, a young Santana is sodomized by another youth in juvenile hall, a violation that never occurred, at least not in Eme folklore. Although homosexual rape is a fact of prison life, a crucial distinction is made between the aggressor and the victim.

“He could have picked anybody else, but Cheyenne, that was a real no-no,” said Mendoza, the ex-Mafioso, who left the gang in the late 1970s after embracing Christianity. “If it had ever happened, he never would have become a Mexican Mafia member. And if he had become a Mexican Mafia member and they learned about it later, they would have killed him.”

Reinforcing the theme of sexual ambiguity, Santana begins making love to a woman for the first time while on probabtion, only to discover that he cannot complete the act without attempting a prison-style rape.

The final insult comes at the end of the film, sources said, when Santana is stabbed to death by his own *carnales* after expressing doubts about their brutal business. In real life, a politicized Cadena, steeped in the radical texts of his time, did try to end the cycle of bloodshed by forging a truce with another Latino prison gang. But it was members of that gang, not the Eme, who stabbed him 70 times.

“I wondered how these scenes could have been put in the movie without anybody warning him about the possible repercussions,” said Mendoza, 43, who is drafting an autobiography titled *Mexican Mafia: From Altar Boy to Hitman*.

Olmos, in fact, hired somebody just for that task. His technical adviser was Tony Casas, the retired associate warden of San Quentin, who has been connected to the film for two decades, beginning as a consultant to screenwriter Mutrux.

It was Casas who helped develop the original script by sharing his knowledge of Cadena’s life and, even now, speaks fondly of his former ward: “The guy was a criminal, no doubt about it, but he had a lot of class.”

Casas, however, said the rape scenes and the final murder sequence had not been filmed when he finished work on the set. He first saw them at a screening shortly before the film opened.

“I asked Ed: ‘Why was that done? That would never have happened to a guy like this,’ ” Casas recalled. “He said it was kind of a philosophical thing to show the kids what could happen.”

Figuring it was too late to make any changes, Casas said he did not push the point. But had he been consulted, “I would have said: ‘Hey man, you hired me to provide realism—and that ain’t.’ ”

The world Olmos depicted on celluloid soon took a very real turn. Two of his consultants were gunned down, sending ripples of fear through almost everyone connected with the film.

The first killing occurred 12 days after the movie’s premiere, when a gunman fired three shots into the back of Charles (Charlie Brown) Manriquez, a 53-year-old IV-drug user with *Eme* tattooed on his chest.

Manriquez was slain in Ramona Gardens, the city's oldest public housing project and a stronghold, officials say, of Mexican Mafia support. Though he never formally served on the film's technical staff, Manriquez was one of several Ramona Gardens *veteranos* whose creative input Olmos sought.

No suspects have been identified and detectives have no evidence to indicate that the killing was related to Manriquez's work on the movie, which featured scenes filmed at the housing project. Because he was a heroin addict who had resorted to petty street crimes, police say, he had probably already fallen from the Eme's graces.

But if Manriquez's murder could be chalked up to the vicissitudes of the streets, a more ominous sign of the Mafia's hand surfaced two months later, when masked gunmen ambushed 49-year-old Ana Lizarraga, one of Ramona Gardens' most respected matriarchs, known simply as "The Gang Lady."

Lizarraga, a paid consultant on *American Me* with a small acting role, had grown up in the project's Hazard gang and lost her husband and two nephews in gang shootings. For 10 years, she had been a top counselor for Community Youth Gang Services, using her credibility on the streets to help steer youngsters away from gang life.

Lizarraga had also earned a reputation among some as a snitch who took advantage of her status to feed information to police. Detectives, describing her as a "concerned citizen" who offered them occasional assistance, determined that the Mexican Mafia had put a contract on her life sometime in the late 1980s.

"During the movie, there were a few people who were upset with her," Los Angeles Police Detective John Spreitzer said. "But they were upset with her going back five years."

Jose Gilbert Gonzales, a Hazard gang member who had been paroled from Folsom prison two weeks before the attack, was convicted of first-degree murder and last week was sentenced to life in prison for shooting Lizarraga as she stood in her driveway.

Police have identified a second suspect, but say they have been unable to make an arrest because fear of retribution within the insular community has kept witnesses from coming forth.

Whatever the motive for the killing, those who track the Mexican Mafia's movements believe the timing was more than coincidental. They have little doubt that it was executed with the knowledge that Olmos would feel the shock waves.

"It was a message. Period," said Duarte, the Chino prison official, who has a photo on his office wall of him and Olmos taken during a break in the filming.

In May, 1992—the same month Lizarraga was killed—Olmos received another message. It came in a letter from a known Mexican Mafia member who had just been convicted of murder and was starting a life sentence.

In an almost syrupy tone, the inmate said he had heard many interesting things about *American Me*, but doubted he would get to see it. He wondered if Olmos would be so kind as to send him a copy of the script. Then, in a passage that prison officials consider a thinly veiled threat, he wished Olmos "health, happiness and box-office success."

Olmos had no trouble interpreting the message. In November, shortly after a correctional official helped arrange his meeting with Mendoza, he applied to the Los Angeles Police Commission for a permit to carry a concealed weapon. But the commission is famous for its stinginess; in 20 years, only one gun permit has been awarded—to Chief Willie L. Williams.

While his application was pending, Olmos also reported his fears to LAPD officers, who met with him early this year. Homicide Detective Adalberto Luper took the report, but was unable to corroborate any of the threats and did not pursue his investigation.

"He believes a contract has been placed on him," Luper said. "Unfortunately, we have nothing to substantiate the fact. It doesn't mean it's less real or any less likely to happen, but the Eme is not a very easy organization to penetrate."

The Police Commission, concluding that Olmos had not demonstrated that he was in "serious and immediate danger," denied his request at an April meeting. Two days later, Olmos contacted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which gave him an application. As of last week it had not been returned.

"It is unfortunate that someone who is a man of peace feels it necessary to apply for a permit," said Olmos' attorney, James Schreiber. "But these are troubled times."

Olmos' troubles continued to mount in April, when Morgan, the reputed godfather, filed his lawsuit in Los Angeles Superior Court, seeking at least $500,000 in punitive damages from Olmos, Universal Studios and several others connected to the film. Morgan contends that the character of J.D. bore cultural and physical attributes unique to him—an Anglo male from East Los Angeles, fluent in Spanish, shaved head, prosthetic leg and a founder of the Mexican Mafia.

Morgan, who is in a maximum-security wing of Pelican Bay State Prison, also argued that the film portrayed him as responsible for crimes for which he has never been charged, which he alleges could jeopardize his chances for parole. He was denied parole in 1989, his first year of eligibility, and has another hearing scheduled for December.

"It certainly doesn't portray him as having a very good image in the movie," said his attorney, Shirley J. MacDonald, adding that Morgan was especially embarrassed for his two teen-age children. "Even if these things had occurred, they still don't have the right to appropriate his likeness or his story without permission."

It is unclear what kind of arrangement, if any, Olmos had struck with the Eme.

While filming at Ramona Gardens, Olmos told a Housing Authority police officer that he had visited Morgan in prison and that Morgan had approved the script.

"He said he actually sat there and watched Joe Morgan read the script," recalled Officer Kent Keyfauver, who was hired by Olmos as a security guard. "And that Joe Morgan's only reply was, 'Please don't portray me with a limp.' "

Lizarraga also told Olmos' team that she had visited Morgan in County Jail and that he had approved the script. Jail officials said they cannot confirm whether such a visit took place. Officials at Pelican Bay say they are unaware of Morgan being visited by Olmos or any of his representatives.

"Some of Eddie's staff were saying, like, 'We got the blessing,' and I was just horrified when I heard that," said one source close to the film who asked not be identified. "I told them: 'You don't make pacts with the devil.' The moment they sense you're bending to them, they never let you go."

Whatever indication Olmos might have had that he was working with the Eme's approval, it became clear that something was amiss once filming began at the Chino prison. Olmos learned that Morgan was being housed there for a brief time and asked if an interview could be arranged.

The warden went to Morgan's cell and explained that Olmos "wanted to speak with him and pay his respects," said Lt. Kevin Peters, the prison spokesman. "Joe Morgan didn't want to have anything to do with him."

In many ways, Olmos' run-in with the Mexican Mafia has become a strange minuet between illusion and reality, traversing a shadowy terrain where perceptions are more certain than fact.

Olmos has no way of knowing what the Eme is up to, what they want from him or what he can do about it. The Eme, on the other hand, has only a vague conception of the film, since most of its members are behind bars and may have to wait years to view it.

The one undisputed factor in the equation is the Mexican Mafia's capacity to victimize—a potential threat, authorities say, that can never be taken too seriously.

"Those people don't tell you they're going to do it to you, man," Olmos recently told a reporter who was visiting the set of his latest movie, *Roosters*, being filmed in Arizona. "They just murder. Trust me."