

THE CURSE OF ZAPATA

BY JESSE KATZ

THE HERO OF THE MOVIE IS MEXICAN. A REAL Mexican. Not the buffoonish, servile, talk-like-dees invention. Not even the exoticized, *rico/suave*, bonbon-shaking version. But a righteous and defiant Mexican. A short, brown, Indian-featured, cowboy-attired Mexican. With a paintbrush mustache, and a bullet-laden bandolier, and a thumb half lost to the rodeo. A badass Mexican.

His name is Zapata. He was a revolutionary—not an intellectual or an ideologue but a horseman, a campesino, a man of the earth—the first true populist warrior of the 20th century. His fight was over the cornfields of indigenous Mexico: a bloody, quixotic, agrarian revolt. He could not be defeated. He refused to be bought. He toppled a decade's worth of presidents but wanted only to reclaim the land of his people, not to rule over them. The government finally resorted to betrayal; Zapata was tricked into an ambush.

A century later, Emiliano Zapata shares a pedestal with saints and virgins and plumed Aztec serpents, an almost celestial symbol of pride and resistance. A symbol for Los Angeles. This is, underneath the glitz, a Zapata city. He runs through L.A.'s veins, through its language, its rhythms, its history, its food. He is a validation of everything Mexican

here, of a culture overshadowed not just by mainstream America but by sexier and hipper Latin images—the J.Los, the Ricky Martins. With his smoldering eyes and rakish smirk, Zapata is a mural, a shrine, a statue, a T-shirt, and a prison tattoo, the namesake of Mi General Zapata Bakery in East L.A. and the Viva Zapata Lock and Key Service in Pico-Union. His credo is recited like biblical verse: “It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.”

Now Hollywood is embracing Zapata. He might even become a blockbuster. But only if the Industry can break free of his curse. The

dream belongs to Gregory Nava, the torchbearer of Mexican American cinema. He wants to turn his lifelong idol into an action-adventure epic, one so inspiring that crowds

from Canoga Park to Abu Dhabi will flock to see it, no matter what they know or care about the subject. Some of America's finest storytellers have tried to do the same—Steinbeck, Kazan, Brando—only to be humbled by the task. Few stories, in fact, have so haunted Hollywood for so long; time and again Zapata has proved too mythic—too Mexican—for a business in which formula and expedience often trump art. Nava is different, a Latino filmmaker, bilingual, bicultural, raised on the border. From his poetic, Oscar-nominated breakout *El Norte* to his sugarcoated commercial triumph *Selena*, he has for two

HE WOULD BE A GREAT MOVIE.
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IF ONLY HOLLYWOOD COULD GET OVER
THE FACT HE WAS MEXICAN

ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA KUNZ

decades fought to make Latinos the stars of their own stories. Earlier this year on PBS, he broke new ground with *American Family*, the first dramatic series on broadcast TV with an all-Latino cast.

Nothing that Nava has done before, however, can compare to his ambitions for *Zapata*, a movie that he speaks of, in hopeful terms, as “my masterpiece.” He has trekked to Mexico, to Zapata’s birthplace, to Zapata’s tomb. He has spent weeks, months, years now, trolling for his hero’s spirit. Still, the movie remains just a wish, not yet approved for production—and indeed, it may never get made; his development deal is with Walt Disney Studios, a company as allergic to risk as any. Just to get in the door Nava needed a star, a leading man with looks and charisma, one bankable enough to guarantee bodies in seats. Before writing his script, before even making his pitch, he had found a name to assuage Disney: Hollywood’s favorite Latin lover, Antonio Banderas.

Banderas is perfect—handsome, passionate, magnetic, comfortable in his own skin. Except for one thing: Banderas is not Mexican. He is not, for that matter, Latino, at least not in the strictest sense of the word. He is a Spaniard—from Europe, the Old World, the land of Mexico’s conquerors.

MEXICANS AND MEXICAN AMERICANS FORM THE LARGEST segment of the Latino population in the United States. There are 20 million of them, more than all other Latinos combined. In Los Angeles they are even harder to ignore. Not only is the county nearly half Latino, but 72 percent of those Latinos are of Mexican descent. The Latino experience in America, in other words, is largely the Mexican experience in America, and the Mexican experience in America is played out in no place more obvious than Hollywood’s backyard. Yet when faces and voices are chosen to define that experience, they almost always belong to performers whose heritage is rooted in nations other than Mexico: in the Caribbean and South America, Iberia and the Mediterranean, lands with an aura of romance and sophistication. Mexicans bear the stigma of somehow being second-class Latinos, too rustic, too pedestrian—too Indian—to represent their own culture.

The distinction may sound like an impossibly narrow one, the sort of ethnic hairsplitting that can be both spiteful and self-defeating. The Zapata of today is, after all, just a movie; Banderas, like every actor, is in the business of creating illusion, not of replicating DNA. But that hierarchy—with lighter-skinned, European-featured Latinos generally up top—is no less real, nor is the resentment of it. This is one of the secret pangs of Mexican L.A., a community that rarely sees itself reflected in the entertainment industry’s great Latin boom: not in the look of Cameron Diaz and Andy Garcia, not in the sound of Enrique Iglesias and Christina Aguilera, not in the commercial pitches of Daisy Fuentes and Alex Rodriguez. (The satiric Chicano theater troupe Culture Clash once created a poster of its members dressed as Mexican revolutionaries lined up before a firing squad. The caption came right from Zapata: “It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees, in *Hollywood*.”)

The omissions may not be as glaring as they once were, back when only non-Latinos were considered suitable for playing heroic Mexicans: Tyrone Power as Zorro, Paul Muni as Benito Juarez, Charlton Heston as Tijuana narcotics detective Miguel Vargas in *Touch of Evil*. Still, now that Latinos have knocked down many of



LIFE AND ART: *The real Zapata (top, holding sombrero), with Pancho Villa at his side; Marlon Brando (above left) in *Viva Zapata!*; writer-director Gregory Nava; and Hollywood’s favorite Latin lover, Antonio Banderas*

those doors, Mexicans remain on the outside; even when the stories are explicitly Mexican, Mexicans almost never play themselves. Lou Diamond Phillips (born in the Philippines to parents of Hawaiian, Chinese, Spanish, Filipino, Cherokee, and Scotch Irish ancestry) starred as Mexican American rock idol Ritchie Valens in *La Bamba*; Elizabeth Peña (Cuban) landed the role of a Rio Grande Valley schoolteacher in *Lone Star*; Rubén Blades (Panamanian) and Penélope Cruz (Spanish) were cast as Mexican aristocrats in *All the Pretty Horses*; Benicio Del Toro (Puerto Rican) played a Tijuana cop in *Traffic* and Chicano rebel Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; even a movie called *The Mexican* (starring Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts) was conspicuously devoid of the real thing.

Despite his commitment to Latino casting, Nava himself has been a contributor of such slights, most notably with *Selena*, his 1997 tribute to the slain queen of Tejano music. A series of open casting calls—in Los Angeles, San Antonio, Chicago, and Miami—drew more than 20,000 hopefuls. In the end, though, Nava selected a name he already knew: Jennifer Lopez, a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent. The implication, intentional or not, was that even after an exhaustive search of the nation’s largest Latino cities, there was not a single Mexican American actress capable of playing the most beloved Mexican American singer.

It would be unfair to say that any of those films necessarily suffered as a result—Lopez’s performance, for one, catapulted her to stardom—or that they would have been automatically enhanced if their casts had borne different pedigrees. It would be naive to think, too, that Hollywood cares one way or another; what the studios want are leading men and women who can open a picture, not a medal for cultural sensitivity. It is, however, difficult to assess Nava’s plans for *Zapata* without grasping this history of exclusion,

to consider the casting of Banderas and not fathom the degree to which Mexican actors hunger for such an opportunity. "It's a slap in the face," says Jacob Vargas, born in Michoacán and raised in Pa-coima, who has appeared in two of Nava's movies, *Mi Familia/My Family* and *Selena*. In each case Vargas auditioned for a starring role but had to settle for a supporting part. "The casting directors always tell me I'm 'too ethnic,'" he says. "Even Greg once told me, 'I don't see you as a leading man.' What does that mean? Because I'm darker? If you look at Zapata, he was short and dark and indigenous-looking. I guess Hollywood just doesn't find that attractive."

On occasion, Hollywood does get it right: The story of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, which was first going to star Laura San Giacomo, then Madonna, then J.Lo, finally premiered this fall—with a Mexican, Salma Hayek, in the lead. (Banderas makes a cameo; Nava helped with the script.) Yet with a shoestring budget and a distribution schedule more art house than cineplex, *Frida* is hardly the spectacle that *Zapata* promises to be. Nava is thinking more along the lines of *Braveheart* or *Lawrence of Arabia*, of a sweeping historical drama with raucous battle scenes, daring horsemanship, and a cast of thousands. A very expensive movie. If the goal is to popularize Zapata's struggle—to turn a Mexican peasant into a worldwide icon—a Spaniard may be the only way to get it done. "If you want to make a big Hollywood movie, just be honest about it," says Jose Luis Valenzuela, director of the Los Angeles Theater Center's Latino Theater Lab. But that is not Nava's only goal. He also wants his movie to be authentic.

IN THE REMOTE MEXICAN VILLAGE OF AMATLAN DE QUETZALCOÁTL, Greg Nava stripped himself naked and squeezed into a sweat lodge made of mud and thatch. It was 3 a.m., a starry May night, 2001, and the 53-year-old writer and director was a long way from his Venice Beach home, from his black Mercedes-Benz, from his cell phone, from his publicist, from his white-tablecloth lunches at the Conga Room. He eased his frame onto the dirt floor. Indian men half his size pressed in against him, chanting native prayers. Rocks smoldered in a bonfire. With shovels and pitchforks, his hosts rolled the glowing stones into a pit at the center of the hut. A shaman doused them with water. Billows of steam, suffocating, stupefying, rose from the earth. Nava gasped. The air was like broth. Hollywood's Great Brown Hope—the winner of ALMA Awards, Imagen Awards, Bravo Awards, Nopal Awards, Golden Eagle Awards—felt himself drowning. A few minutes more and he was sure he would die.

Nava had come all this way, 1,500 miles from LAX to Mexico City, over the Ajusco Mountains, through the southern state of Morelos, and into a cramped and sweltering *temazcal*, to find the ghost of Mexico's most sacred revolutionary, a movie he has been making in his dreams since he was a boy. "There's so much noise in your head—all the contemporary political and social significance of Zapata, all the various versions and ideas—that I thought, 'I got to go to Mexico and just erase everything and reduce it down to zero,'" he says. Preparing for his previous films, Nava had gone off on similar expeditions, "to find the seed and regrow the tree," as he puts it. "When you come back, you're going to be hit by a million things, and what you learn on your journey—the secrets, the Holy Grail—must be strong enough to sustain you."

Packing a camera, a tape recorder, and a Spanish-English dictionary, Nava began his journey in Anenecuilco, a cradle of pre-Columbian culture where the earth is still tilled with mules and machetes. Anenecuilco's native people, the Tlahuican Indians, began growing corn on this land nearly a millennium ago. They were growing it when the Spanish soldier of fortune Hernán Cortés bullied his way across Mexico in 1519, a rampage that would lead to the decimation of millions of Zapata's forebears. They continued growing it for hundreds of years after that; as long as their cornfields survived, so would the Tlahuicans. By the end of the 19th century, however, a different kind of conquest had begun to threaten Mexico's Indians. The nation was industrializing. Giant sugarcane plantations were cannibalizing the countryside. The Tlahuicans did not have deeds or titles. Their cornfields were communal. To protest was to be arrested or killed.

It was here in a two-room, dirt-floor hovel—now a moldering government monument—that Emiliano Zapata Salazar was born in 1879. A subsistence rancher and weekend dandy in the equestrian ring, Zapata had only a few years of schooling. He liked to drink tequila and fight cocks, exhibiting a roguishness that left at least eight or nine il-

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legitimate children scattered across Mexico. But what Zapata lacked in refinement he made up for in nerve. Stubbornly clinging to the principle that liberty without land was a fraud, he became the village watchdog, unwilling to bow to the encroaching haciendas or the rural police squads that functioned as their goons. In 1909, when Anenecuilco's elders elected him their town chieftain—or *calpuleque*—they were doing more than choosing a figurehead; they were extending 700 years of calpuleques, protectors of the ground on which Anenecuilco's very existence was staked. "That word, 'calpuleque,' really hit me," says Nava, who saw it carved next to Zapata's name on a crude stone memorial. "If you're talking about fighting for the land, you're talking about people's identity, about people fighting for their sense of self, for who they are. The land is not just a plot of earth. It's their mother, their essence."

Those who have sought to promote a unified Mexican culture usually have defined Zapata as a mestizo, a blend of Indian and Spanish. That is what most Mexicans are, and to see Zapata as one is to smooth over some of the racial and class antagonisms that have long plagued Mexican society. During its 71-year reign, for instance, the Institutional Revolutionary Party routinely quelled dissent by wrapping itself in Zapata's image; Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the disgraced former president, even christened his official jet the *Emiliano Zapata*. (When the Zapatista rebels burst from the jungles on New Year's Day 1994, it was to declare that they—and not some venal bureaucracy—were the true heirs to Zapata's name.) Zapata did have Spanish ancestors, a grandparent or two, yet in the rigid caste system of

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his day such a distinction would have been meaningless; the dictator Porfirio Díaz was so obsessed with European ideals that he used rice powder to whiten his complexion. As a native son of Anenecuilco, Zapata was—in cultural terms—unambiguously Indian. To the extent that he was of mixed race, scholars now believe he was probably a “triple mestizo,” partly descended from African slaves imported to harvest Anenecuilco’s sugarcane. “Basically, he was seen as a gypsy nigger, to use the language of the time,” says Harvard historian John Womack Jr., whose authoritative book *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* was on Nava’s reading list. “Almost beneath contempt.”

Without money or weapons, Zapata transformed himself from calpuleque of Anenecuilco into the supreme chief of the Liberation Army of the South. He amassed a fighting force of 25,000 peasants, most clad in little more than pantaloons and huaraches, their tactics limited to sabotage and surprise. For the nation’s aristocracy it was an unending nightmare, ten years of civil war that shattered Mexico City’s pretensions to being the “Paris of Latin America.” But for the rural masses it was the purest of uprisings, the revenge of the poor and the powerless. With help from his northern counterpart, Pancho Villa, Zapata would topple three regimes; twice he stormed the presidential palace. Each new leader tried to buy him off: cash, an estate, a governorship. Each time Zapata refused, taking up arms again as soon as the promise of land—his sole demand—proved hollow.

From Anenecuilco, Nava continued on to Chinameca, where federal troops posing as defectors lured Zapata to his death in 1919, and then to Cuautla, where his 39-year-old body was flaunted in the town square. In the folklore of the Mexican Revolution, Zapata’s birth is said to have been foretold by a local witch doctor, the infant’s destiny confirmed by a birthmark, on his chest, in the shape of a tiny hand. When Zapata’s corpse was being paraded, that splotch was supposedly absent, spawning tales that Zapata was still alive and hiding in the hills. Nava heard that story and many others from the dozens of people he interviewed and photographed.

They told him of secret trails and magical powers, of how outgunned guerrillas slipped through government lines by transmuting into coyotes. In time they guided him to Amatlán de Quetzalcóatl, where Nava went groping for his hero in the fire and mist.

It was a ritual that Zapata himself was said to have partaken of before battle, a cleansing of body and soul that Mexico’s Indians have practiced for centuries. Nava survived, naturally. He even managed to get over the torment, relishing several hours of purifying fever. But he likes the drama of the story. To endure the sweat lodge was for Nava to reaffirm his cultural credentials, to get his barrio pass stamped anew. “I wanted to feel the rhythms of the people—how they speak, how they relate, how they move, how they react,” he says. “But of course, I also felt how strongly that rhythm resonates within me, how quickly the patina of being born in the United States and raised in Southern California and listening to the Beatles and Beach Boys and going to UCLA dissolves away. I am Mexican.”

BEFORE HOLLYWOOD PURSUED him, Zapata had been known to the American public, if at all, as a rapacious bogeyman, the “Attila of the South.” A sympathetic account did not appear here until 1941, when Edgcomb Pinchon, a British historian with Marxist leanings, published a biographical novel, *Zapata, the Unconquerable*, based on years of research in Mexico. It was a florid work, full of preachy, fictionalized dialogue, but it caught the eye of MGM, which had already turned another of Pinchon’s books—*Viva Villa!*—into a cheeseball biopic starring Wallace Beery. Given that Hollywood’s conception of Mexicans had, until then, rarely extended beyond greasers and harlots, the portrayal of a Mexican as valiant, even by a white actor, was offered as proof of the industry’s enlightenment.

MGM assigned the project to Lester Cole, a founder of the screenwriters guild, whose own politics jibed with Zapata’s. Like Pinchon before him—and Nava half a century later—Cole set off for Mexico. He sought out Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, a retired law professor who had helped Zapata draft *El Plan de Ayala*, a radical call for land redistribution. He also won the blessing of

President Miguel Alemán, who pledged \$1.5 million in services (about half the film’s budget) if MGM would shoot in Mexico. There was even talk—remarkable for the time—of a young Mexican actor, Ricardo Montalban, in the title role. “This was truly, I felt, the climax of my writing career,” Cole recounted in his memoirs. “How could such things happen? And at MGM? Talk about capitalist contradictions!”

By 1947, Cole had produced a 70-page treatment, one promising enough for the studio to award him a \$1,250-a-week contract. Before he could expand it into a script, however, Cole received a subpoena from the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He had been identified as a Communist sympathizer. MGM’s chief, Louis B. Mayer, urged Cole to cooperate, offering to double his salary if he renounced his affiliations. Cole refused, an act of principle that led to his imprisonment and ostracism as one of the “Hollywood Ten.” Twentieth Century Fox picked up the rights to *Zapata*, delivering the project to Elia Kazan, the innovative director, who later did what Cole would not—name names to congressional investigators.

First Pinchon, then Cole, and now Kazan: The journey to postrevolutionary Mexico was fast becoming a rite of passage, a crucible for World War II-era artists, much the way Nicaragua of the 1980s or Cuba today would lure American progressives. Kazan had already made the trip several times; he had retraced Zapata’s footsteps, “knew every stone in the province of Morelos.” But his years of research had borne little more than frustration and doubt. “What the hell did I really know about Mexico and Mexicans?” Kazan confessed in his autobiography. He needed a well-versed writer who saw in Zapata what he did—a martyr for democracy. He mentioned the idea to his friend and neighbor, the future Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck, who was fluent in Spanish and intimate with Mexico. For years Steinbeck, too, had been consumed by Zapata, conducting interviews, observing customs, chasing legends. “We are dealing with a man so deeply beloved by the Mexican people,” Steinbeck would caution in an elaborate introduction to his screenplay, “that any hint that he was being run down, or in any way made ridiculous, would cause a riot, and you

would probably have the picture destroyed.”

Instead of finding Zapata, though, Steinbeck lost himself in the journey. He was drinking heavily. His second marriage was crumbling. At one point the Twentieth Century Fox boss, Darryl F. Zanuck, reeled him back to Los Angeles and put him up at the Beverly Hills Hotel, but Steinbeck soon returned to Mexico, where he continued to battle his demons, acting as if “completion of the script was somehow connected to his personal and artistic survival,” as one biographer put it. Finally, up against deadline, Steinbeck produced a manuscript three to four inches thick. “A master’s degree is what he had, together with a Ph.D.,” Zanuck’s assistant reported. “Except it wasn’t a screenplay.”

Steinbeck may have been vexed by the story, but he had a clear vision of how it should be cast. “I know only one actor who could play the part of Emiliano Zapata with veracity and integrity and believableness, and that is Pedro Armendáriz,” Steinbeck wrote. The Mexican-born Armendáriz, who had made his U.S. debut in *The Fugitive* a few years earlier, not only had “the same face” as Zapata, Steinbeck noted, but “his race is the same.” Kazan, though, had his own favorite for the part, a Midwestern farm boy whom he had just directed in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Marlon Brando. To prove he could pass for a Mexican, Brando hired his own make-up man, undergoing contortions that now seem laughable. He flared his nostrils with plastic tubing. He slanted his eyes with latex glue. He painted his face brown. Brando even made the obligatory Mexican pilgrimage, hoping to inflect his English with just the right south-of-the-border cadence; it was an odd move, given that nobody else in the film—including his sole Mexican costar, Anthony Quinn—spoke with the slightest hint of an accent.

One thing that Steinbeck and Kazan did agree on, for the movie to be both genuine and respectful, was the necessity of filming on location. To ensure their welcome, they turned to Mexico’s most revered cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa, who also was president of the film technicians union. On the *terrazza* of the Hotel Marik in Cuernavaca, over bottles of beer and shots of tequila, Steinbeck and Kazan made their pitch. “When John said the word *Zapata*,

Figueroa’s face altered,” Kazan recalled in his memoirs. “‘Yes,’ John went on, ‘we propose to make a film about the life of your great hero Zapata.’ ‘Emiliano Zapata?’ Figueroa asked, as if there were another. Then he looked at me, and his expression was incredulous. ‘And you, Señor Kazan?’ he asked, and I felt the hostility.” Steinbeck left a copy of the script. Figueroa called back a few days later. “On any other subject,” the cameraman told Steinbeck, “there would be no limit to what we could do to help you here. But Emiliano is the hero of every forward-looking patriot here. Imagine if we went to the state of Illinois with a Mexican actor and director and made the story of Abraham Lincoln, what would you think?”

Kazan smelled a conspiracy; he saw Figueroa’s reticence as proof that the Communist Party wanted to claim Zapata for itself. “They were going to tell us how our story should be rewritten to suit them,” wrote Kazan, who was forced to shoot most of the film in the borderlands of Starr County, Texas. “The gall!” fired back Figueroa in a memoir of his own. From their first meeting, he said, it was painfully apparent that Kazan “knew nothing about Zapata or Zapatismo.” As for Steinbeck, whom Figueroa considered a good friend, his script was based on “a deformed vision of Mexico,” with most of his characters behaving not as turn-of-the-century campesinos but as “bourgeois gringos from the ’50s.”

After opening to tepid reviews, *Viva Zapata!* fizzled at the box office. “I made a mistake in subject matter,” Zanuck later told columnist Hedda Hopper. “It was alien to American audiences.”

BORN IN SAN DIEGO’S NORTH Park neighborhood, the youngest son of a Mexican American father and a mother of Basque descent, Nava began his own quest for Zapata before he even knew he was searching. By the time he was five or six, he had become a regular at his grandfather’s Baja ranch, traveling for hours down rutted dirt roads, “my head bouncing, hitting the roof of the truck,” until he arrived at a sun-scorched adobe that looked as if it had not changed since the 19th century. There was no electricity, no phone, no plumbing. Bullet holes pocked the walls. “It was Zapata

land,” Nava says. “I mean, really. There were Indians coming down from the hills, vaqueros riding on horseback. I still have a lariat, a reata, that one of them made for me out of buckskin—a handmade buckskin lariat—and when I would be out there, riding around, holding that lariat, I knew that Zapata had a lariat just like that, made the same way. For a kid it was incredible.”

Mexico may have offered an enchanting glimpse of the past, but for a boy of his generation America was the future. Nava’s father spent 27 years working as an engineer for the same aerospace company. His mother stayed home to raise Gregory and his older brother, the artist John Nava (who designed the colossal tapestries hanging inside L.A.’s new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels). The emphasis was on assimilation: unaccented English, upward mobility. The politics of identity—of being Chicano—was not a welcome topic at the dinner table. “His dad and I just hated that word,” says Betty Nava, who is 79. “In our day, that was a derogatory expression. We weren’t very sophisticated people. We weren’t into any problems. We just lived such middle-class lives.” After attending an all-boys Catholic school, Greg went on to college, the first generation of his family to do so. “I was like the straight-A student,” he says, “the golden one.” Even at UCLA in the early ’70s, a time of militant nationalism for many Mexican American students, Nava remained on the sidelines of *el movimiento*. While others marched with the Brown Berets, he worked on his thesis film, *The Confessions of Amans*, the story of a wandering scholar in medieval Spain.

“I’m interested in telling universal stories,” Nava says. “They may happen to be about Latinos, because that’s my background, but I never think, ‘Oh, gee, I’m telling a Latino story.’ No, I’m just making a good story about people. Okay? I feel if I continue to do that, regardless of all the things that get imposed on it, eventually the ‘Latino’ label will be erased.” Nava speaks in long, billowing verses. He flails his arms and flaps his wrists. His eyes bulge, his graying curls flop across his forehead, and his beakish nose scrunches in delight. “I love the whole dance of the human experience,” he says. “I’m totally stimulated by it and have been ever since I was a child. What’s the ex-

pression? *Humani nil a me alienum puto.* 'Nothing human is alien to me.' I believe that with my whole heart and my whole soul, and that is the basis of every single thing I've done. I love archaeology—pre-Columbian archaeology, but also ancient Roman and Greek. I love Japanese history. I read mythology from all over the world—Greek mythology, the Popul Vuh, African, Icelandic, the Mahabharata. I love Homer. I love Shakespeare. I love all these things. I love theater. I love opera. I love symphonic music. I love being alive."

The irony, of course, is that the movie that would put Nava on the map—his 1983 saga of two Central American refugees and their illegal trek north—was so boldly Latino, so free of Hollywood gimmickry, that he has been defined by it ever since. *El Norte* broke just about every rule. The topic was controversial. The cast was foreign and unknown. The dialogue required extensive subtitles, not just for Spanish but for the dialects of indigenous Guatemala. More than a hundred potential financiers rejected the film. One studio expressed interest, but only if the starring roles went to Brooke Shields and Robby Benson. "I believe casting needs to be culturally sensitive—not for political reasons but because it's creatively right," says Nava, who would later resist similar pressure to feature Marisa Tomei or Annabella Sciorra in *Mi Familia/My Family*. "I've had to fight for Latino actors over and over and over again. My whole career has been based on putting the right people in the right parts." The price of creative freedom ended up being \$800,000, a sum that Nava managed to piece together from independent sources, including the equity in his house. "Everything I owned was tied up in that dream," he says. "If people hadn't liked it, I would have been ruined."

A seven-minute standing ovation greeted *El Norte's* debut at the Telluride Film Festival. Critics hailed it as a new American classic. More affirmation came in the form of an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay—he cowrote the script with then-wife Anna Thomas—followed by *El Norte's* inclusion among the first 150 movies in the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. Rather than free Nava of the "Latino" label, the film stamped it across his forehead. "I suddenly find myself a pioneer," he says, "without setting out to be

one." The label has sometimes been a boon, sometimes a burden. It both advances Nava and limits him, opening doors while slamming them shut. He has boxes full of awards and honors, most bearing Latino designations. But he still bristles at the notion that his work might be categorized that way, that he is a Mexican American filmmaker any more than Francis Ford Coppola is an Italian American director or *The Godfather* an ethnic film. "I don't want to be a role model," Nava says. "I don't want to be a spokesman for my community. My stories just happen to be about people from my world. That's my experience. I'm not doing it to make a statement."

He was delivering that message a few years back to a class of mostly Latino film students at San Diego State University. "Don't look to me," Nava was telling them, "I'll just disappoint you." It was then that a burly, head-shaved homeboy—"a big *cholo* guy"—got up from his chair and squared off with Nava. "And he said, 'You know what? I don't care what you say,'" recalls Nava, laughing at the memory of his own squeamishness. "He said, 'You went out there and did it, and I need that. I need to know that it can be done. You're a role model, whether you like it or not.' And when he said it, I realized it was true—valid and very, very true. I was just seeing it from my perspective, but it's about something bigger."

TO GET SOMETHING MADE in Hollywood—to get *anything* made in Hollywood—requires an extraordinary confluence of people, money, and luck. To get a movie as provocative as *Zapata* made—a project still not green-lighted—already has taken almost 15 years.

Before it landed in Nava's hands, *Zapata* was the brainchild of screenwriter Gary Ross, who took a vacation to Morelos in the late 1980s not long after the release of his first hit movie, *Big*. Ross—now also a director and producer—became enamored of "the simplicity of Zapata's story, of a campesino who just wanted his land back," and after returning to L.A. he discussed it over lunch with his friend Lauren Shuler-Donner, whose producing credits range from *Free Willy* to *You've Got Mail*. At the time, both thought the scale and scope of *Zapata* was so grand that it

would work best as an opera or a musical. "We went to New York, and for one brief moment in time, we had E.L. Doctorow writing the script and Paul Simon doing the music," Shuler-Donner says. (If that seems a little bizarre, the late TV game-show host Bert Convy spent much of the '70s trying to develop his own Broadway version of *Zapata*; he wanted Neil Diamond or Harry Chapin to do the score.) Deciding to stick with what they knew best, the two Hollywood producers sold their idea to Disney. "At that point, quite frankly, Gregory Nava expressed interest in it, and both Gary and I were fans of his, but the studio was not," Shuler-Donner says. "He was not well enough known, and even though we all agreed that we wanted a, you know, Latino, a Hispanic director, the 'Latin director problem' was more of an issue then than it obviously is now."

Instead of going to Nava, screenplay duties fell to Austin writer Bill Wittliff, who had just finished work on the acclaimed TV miniseries *Lonesome Dove*. Like everyone else who has dreamed of telling Zapata's story, Wittliff set off for Mexico; he combed through Morelos, interviewing one of Zapata's granddaughters. But his script—which leaned toward magical realism, complete with weeping cacti—failed to gain Disney's approval. "I'm sure that from a commercial standpoint it was a little frightening," Wittliff concedes. "And when fear sets in, there's not more risk taken but less. It becomes, How do we moderate this? How do we make it more suitable for the lowest common denominator?" Unsure about Wittliff, Disney turned to Mexican director Alfonso Arau, whose 1992 film *Like Water for Chocolate* had just set a U.S. box office record for a foreign-language movie. Arau knew Morelos better than any of his predecessors, having owned a ranch there for nearly 20 years. But before Arau got too far, Disney backed out. "Movies are all about—unfortunately, to the people who finance them—it's all about, you know, money," Shuler-Donner says. "Financially, they couldn't justify it."

Unwilling to give up on *Zapata*, Arau decided to put the movie together on his own terms, a Mexican film. He spent the next several years rewriting the script and scrounging for financing, and in 1997, he announced that he had signed Vincent Perez, a Swiss-born actor of Spanish and

German parentage. When production delays caused the deal to unravel, Arau gave the role to former *Law & Order* star Benjamin Bratt, whose mother is a Peruvian Indian. When that deal fell through, Arau turned to Mexican pop idol Alejandro Fernández—a more patriotic choice yet also a gamble, as the heartthrob crooner had no acting experience. “In the film business, as in life, you don’t always do what you should but what you can,” says Arau, who hopes to release his low-budget version of *Zapata*—filmed entirely in Spanish and Náhuatl—sometime next year.

A decade had passed since Nava was first rejected by Disney. In that time he directed three more movies, the most successful, *Selena*, costing \$12 million and grossing more than \$35 million domestically. As his budgets had grown, though, so had his sentimentality; the raw eloquence of *El Norte* often replaced by feel-good hokum. He had become a bigger name but a less adventurous filmmaker—a combination that made him a lot more like any other Hollywood player. The same could be said of Antonio Banderas, whose early work with avant-garde Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar had won him critical raves. Now he was selling himself to America, playing to Don Juan stereotypes—a more or less positive shtick but one that still translated to lightweight, if profitable, entertainment. “We started talking about *Zapata* and didn’t stop for a year,” recalls Banderas, who met Nava at the 2000 Hispanic Heritage Awards in Washington, D.C. “He said to me, ‘Antonio, we have to put this movie together.’” Banderas was thrilled by the idea, by the chance to show a sober, political side of himself, especially to “my dear Mexicanos,” whose country he has come to think of as a “second home.” If he did not look exactly like Zapata, Banderas saw that as a superficial matter, something that could be corrected with “makeup, a mustache, some tint.” What mattered to him was the interior man: “What was in his soul? What was in his heart?”

When Nava approached Disney this time, Banderas was at his side. “We offered them as a package—Gregory and Antonio,” says Shuler-Donner. “It’s just perfect casting. It allows the studio to say, ‘Oh, okay, I see that movie now.’”

Their collaboration did one other thing:

It sparked an uncomfortable debate within L.A.’s Mexican and Mexican American communities, a controversy that has remained largely invisible to non-Latinos but that continues to provoke throes of self-reflection. The most strident objections have been raised by the Mexica Movement, a Boyle Heights-based organization that seeks to preserve and promote all things indigenous. Picketing on weekends outside Disneyland, its leaders have branded Nava a “sellout,” his movie “racist.” To permit a fair-skinned European to portray a native revolutionary, they insist, is “like Brad Pitt playing Malcolm X in black face.” The Mexicas may be far enough on the fringe to be safely ignored, but they also have the freedom to say what others sometimes dare not. For the city’s Chicano intelligentsia—artists, journalists, actors, poets, musicians, academics—this is a heated yet awkward discussion. They tend to be friends of Nava and fans of Banderas, the sort of people who have been prodding Hollywood for years to, at last, acknowledge their world. But as much as they would love to see a Zapata movie, the prospect of a Spaniard in the title role is just too hard to stomach. It cuts too close to the heart of their Mexican-ness. It makes too light of the Indian still raging inside. “Greg,” says Moctesuma Esparza, Hollywood’s leading Mexican American producer, “has a real challenge in front of him.”

None of this can be a surprise to Nava. He knows the battlefield. He considers himself a supporter of the Zapatista cause. In his PBS series, *American Family*, he has even turned these arguments to his creative advantage:

“I’m not a Mexican, I’m Spanish!” the curmudgeonly East L.A. patriarch protests in one episode.

“Stop that,” his daughter scolds. “It is so embarrassing...”

LATINO. HISPANIC. MESTIZO. Creole. Mulatto. Chicano. *La raza cósmica*—the cosmic race. So many ways to define a culture that resists definition, a blended culture, a hybrid culture, a culture born of miscegenation. It is spread across multiple countries, composed of multiple races, expressed in multiple languages—a culture

neither completely Indian nor completely Spanish, African nor European, Mexican nor American, native nor foreign—a culture that after 500 years is still sometimes at war with itself.

With terms this elusive, this encompassing and imprecise, what are the rules for casting a movie like *Zapata*? Should the goal be resemblance? Sensitivity? Common ancestry? What about an actor who looks the part—who has the eyes, the hair, the skin—but feels no connection to the culture? How about an actor steeped in the culture but whose physical appearance fails to conform? Is it the passport that counts? The surname? The ability to speak Spanish? Or is it about something more deliberate, a self-image that must be claimed and defended? “You’re simply pointing out the fact that we, as a culture, have a tremendous identity problem,” Nava says. “What are we? Who are we? Which part do you want to identify with? We’re a mixture. To try to separate things off and find the pure *whatever*—it’s an absurd quest. Nothing is pure.”

This is the great beauty of Latino culture and yet its deepest wound. Under the right circumstances the label can be a joyously expansive one, accommodating every color, every combination. But Latin America has never celebrated all its components equally, a truth familiar to anyone who has ever marveled at the blond, blue-eyed world of Spanish-language soap opera. From the conquest of Mexico to present-day Chiapas, indigenous populations have been at the bottom of the heap, plundered, enslaved, exterminated. They are the people Zapata fought for, the people he died for. To have a Spanish actor play him—and presume a commonality—is to convert Zapata from a Mexican into a generic Latino, to de-Indianize his identity.

If there is still a doubt about Hollywood’s preferences, about the complexions and accents and features that make for the most palatable brand of Latino, consider the story of Zapata’s revolutionary cohort, the brazen and grandiose Pancho Villa. Like Zapata, Villa is synonymous with Mexico. The real Mexico. Mexico at its most obdurate and unadulterated. HBO is doing the movie. Filming began in October. The star? The one and only: Antonio Banderas.

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