



Tuesday 10th July *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005)

at 7.15 pm

Eden Court

Directed by Tommy Lee Jones. Screenplay by Guillermo Arriaga. Starring: Tommy Lee Jones, Barry Pepper, Julio Cedillo, January Jones, Dwight Yoakam, Melissa Leo. 121 minutes. Rated 15

In 2005 Tommy Lee Jones acted in and directed *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, set in the area of West Texas and Northern Chihuahua where Jones was born and now has a ranch. This is one of the great pictures of the 21st century, about a Texan who has a friendship with a Mexican. And one day someone shoots the Mexican. So Jones gets the corpse and the killer and drags them both back to the little town in Mexico where Melquiades came from. The meaning of the title reveals itself as we journey with the threesome.

It could have been made by Howard Hawks, or a Sam Peckinpah who resisted the lure of alcohol and stayed sober while making a film. It is like some little old story out of Faulkner, or maybe Cormac McCarthy - and I mention the latter because Jones had met up with him. Well, I'll just say that if you like Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, *Melquiades Estrada* is twice the value and as calm as a still pond. I love it and I hope that each of everyone of you does too. Of course, when it was released it didn't do much in the way of business. When I saw it at Eden Court a dozen years ago, the audience too was just a threesome.

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada is a study of true friendship in an unfathomably solitary world. The friendship happens between West Texas rancher Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones) and the Mexican ranch hand named Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cesar Cedillo) who just shows up one day looking for work. The two men don't ask many questions of each other — they're not really the questioning, talkative kind — yet over time they come to see that they are but two cowboys riding the remnants of a vanishing



era, mirror images reflected across the unforgiving border that divides their two countries. “If I die over here,” Melquiades tells Pete in a moment of uncanny prescience, “I don’t want to be buried on this side, with all the fucking billboards.” So Pete promises to see that Mel is buried in his hometown of Jimenez. Melquiades’ badly decomposed body turns up at the beginning of the film when two hunters out in the scrubland in a four-wheel-drive vehicle take a pot shot at a coyote and discover that their prey had uncovered the shallow grave of our eponymous anti-hero, killed by a rifle bullet. Pete’s journey will be about honouring that pledge. But as the title implies, Melquiades’ journey to his final resting place will not be a peaceful one, and as he is successively exhumed and re-interred, *Three Burials* — which was written by Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*) — takes on some of the macabre absurdity of Sam Peckinpah’s *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, in which the ham-fisted piano player in a two-bit Mexican brothel escorts a decapitated head across highways and byways not out of friendship, but rather greed.

The spirit of Peckinpah hangs over the film in other respects too — in Jones’ and Arriaga’s affection for tequila and loose women and hard-driving men, and most of all in its funerary tone, in the way that by escorting Melquiades back to Jimenez, Pete too seems to be coming home. In comparison with the Peckinpah film however, this is a far more humane one, with genuine friendship, not greed, as the driving force.



Making an impressive big-screen directing debut, Jones exhibited a quiet control over this full-bodied Western. He obviously took pleasure in the measured pacing, mixing sombre authority with flashes of surrealist wit, and luxuriated in the magnificent, vanishing vistas of his home state, which have been photographed in widescreen, in brilliant ochres and blues, by the British cinematographer Chris Menges. No elegiac sunsets to be seen either, and the film remains free of any picture-postcard sentimentalism.



Like his earlier work, Arriaga's script progresses in nonlinear fashion, splintering off into multiple intersecting storylines that form a frieze of loneliness and human suffering: A border patrolman (Barry Pepper) newly arrived from Cincinnati plays out a loveless marriage with his stay-at-home wife (January Jones); Pete and a good-ole-boy sheriff (Dwight Yoakam) vie for the affections of a married truck-stop waitress (Melissa Leo); and a blind old man (Levon Helm) sits out his days in the desert, a portrait of grizzled self-reliance at odds with his total despair, praying for death to come easy.

Over time, we see both how Melquiades Estrada is the common thread running through these stories and how he met with his grisly end. *Three Burials* is certainly not a whodunnit ; its real mystery begins only after the identity of Mel's killer has been revealed early on, when we're on the road to Jimenez and given reason to wonder whether we are en route to a physical place or merely a state of mind. As it closes in on that destination, the movie grows large with a sense of Mexico as the real last frontier, and of the lengths to which one man, a Man of the West, might go to honour the only thing of any value that remains in his life: his word. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is not a love story like the other modern

Western Brokeback Mountain, made in the same year, but it is one of the most deeply affecting portraits of cowboy camaraderie ever made and a wonderful conclusion to InFiFa's season of Westerns.

Tommy Lee Jones on *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* :

The Idea's Origins

Guillermo Arriaga and I are good friends and hunting buddies. I met him three or four years ago in California and he started joining in on our deer hunts on the WD ranch in Texas. Michael Fitzgerald, the producer, is also part of those hunting parties. The three of us were driving around in a truck one day and we said: 'We have a lot of talent in this truck. Let's make a movie.' Like a bunch of kids we set about it. But unlike a bunch of kids, we were able to bring it to reality.

The Movie's Subject :

All the thematic matters that I wanted to touch on were embodied in the true story of a young man who was killed by the US government, stupidly and partially by mistake. It was an outrageous incident and the events that followed were objectionable to the people who live along the border between North Mexico and South Texas. That pretty much opened the floodgates for me.

Collaborating with Arriaga

Guillermo wrote the screenplay in Spanish and had it translated by somebody he often works with. I hatched a plan to hire two other translators so I would have three English translations before I began to put together my own. Several drafts later, we had language that felt like it belonged in SouthTexas and sounded right, with the right rhythm and the

right poetry, and we had the Northern Texas Spanish in the movie well polished. Guillermo has a very poetic ear for dialogue in Spanish and I tried to have the English dialogue match that poetic quality.

The Look of the Film

My approach was based on loving the colours to death, and on being very bold. My sense of colour comes from Mexico, Mondrian, Matisse, Jean-Luc Godard, Kurosawa. That's just the way I look at colour.

Pete Perkins as a Character

He's the foreman of a big ranch in West Texas. He's part of a bi-cultural society. He speaks both Spanish and English. Mexican culture has been integral to him all his life, from the food he eats to the words he uses to name his work tools. When one of his ranch hands is killed, and he finds out that no further action is going to be taken, and that nobody is going to be brought to justice, he's outraged at the disrespect to his friend whom he respects for lots of good reasons and whom he does not disrespect simply because he's from Mexico and has no passport. Pete decided to remedy the situation by finding the killer and give his friend Mel the burial that is the least he deserves.

Melquiades Estrada as the Last Western Gentleman

There's a lot of desire in Melquiades Estrada as most of it is expressed in terms of fantasy. He would love to have a simple agrarian life. It's a dream that he has. Circumstances have separated him from that dream, maybe even put it out of reach, but not killed it, as long as he can dream it. He's a bit nostalgic too. He would like to be buried at home and he makes his pal promise, if he dies on this side, to take him and bury him at home. Melquiades is an insightful character worthy of respect, not of being shot down like a dog. When he gives Pete his horse, he says, "Sometimes you carry things around with you that you think are yours, but they really belong to someone else." Melquiades is an angelic character. There's honesty there that I could only call glorious. He brings a blessing to people wherever he goes.

Film essay by by Tony Janssens, Inverness Film Fans. For more info go to :

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