



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA

2006 USA 121 MINUTES

Directed by Tommy Lee Jones

Starring Tommy Lee Jones, Julion Cedillo, Barry Pepper

There's something about border country that brings out the best in filmmakers. From *Touch Of Evil* to *The Wild Bunch*, from *Lone Star* to *Kill Bill*, directors at the height of their powers are drawn to the inherently dramatic, culture-clash-heavy location. Welles, Peckinpah, Sayles and Tarantino might make for illustrious company but, judging by this stunning film, Tommy Lee Jones deserves his place alongside them. Indeed, comparisons have been made with Peckinpah's *Bring Me The Head Of Alfredo Garcia*, but if anything, *The Three Burials Of Melquiades Estrada* is the more humane, emotionally engaging work.

As anyone familiar with the career of screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*) would expect, the initial 'modern revenge Western' premise is merely the framework for a subtle, involving exploration of friendship, loyalty, sex, death and forgiveness — all the good stuff. Arriaga's fragmented style allows the audience to experience Melquiades' (Julio Cedillo) life when he's already dead, flavouring the warmth and charm of his scenes alongside best pal Pete (Jones himself, marvellous) with an underlying sadness and sense of fate. Similarly, we know Officer Norton is a killer-to-be when we witness his callous attitude both to his wife and the "wetbacks" he brutalises at every opportunity.

Great writing is, of course, a gift to actors, and every member of the cast excels. January Jones deserves special praise for making a neglected young woman credible despite her luminous good looks, while Barry Pepper outperforms every expectation you could have as the weak, mean Norton. A sex scene between the two manages to be heartbreaking, soulless and bleakly funny, as husband interrupts toenail-cutting to improve wife's self-esteem by bending her over the kitchen worktop for all of 30 seconds. It's behaviour like this which sees Norton dismissed as "a sonofabitch beyond redemption". However, it gradually becomes apparent that the film is as much about saving his soul as it is laying Melquiades' to rest.

Once Pete has abducted Norton and disinterred his late, lamented amigo, the movie becomes a meandering,

picaresque series of mini-adventures involving rattlesnakes, hungry ants, vengeful healers, a rapidly disintegrating body and — perhaps most memorably — a blind hermit. Levon Helm, once of '70s rock legends *The Band*, delivers an impactful cameo as the visually challenged lonely old man, in a sequence which eloquently conveys the harsh realities of an isolated frontier existence.

Everything from craggy ravine to sterile, stifling trailer park is expertly framed by master cinematographer Chris Menges in a style which manages to be both subtle and breathtaking. With only a TV movie — 1995 Western *The Good Old Boys* — to his credit as director, it was a smart move on Jones' part to secure the services of the veteran in bringing his vision to the screen. The man who shot *The Killing Fields*, *Local Hero* and *The Mission* knows a thing or two about making landscape a character in itself.

You might expect the journey to be over once the bizarre trio reaches Melquiades' home town, but in fact when this occurs, audience and protagonists alike must take a leap of faith in order to see the story through to a satisfying conclusion. It's a bold gamble, but one which pays off handsomely and makes for a rich, rewarding experience.

Verdict

Grizzled Texan Tommy Lee Jones has made an exceptionally moving, surprisingly funny, often beautiful film, packed with unforgettable moments and note-perfect performances.

Rob Fraser, *Empire Magazine*

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