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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Kandel G. Eaton  J.D. is ex-officio newsletter editor for the ABA Committee on International Arms and National Security     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0285823/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:260396)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |       This Tamale Western's roots show how modern times and borders have changed the Western genre. As is implied in the subtitles, freedom is not a simple wish. It is a complicated, violent process. | |  | | --- | | **The Tamale Western has Spurs that Jingle-Jangle-Jingle Against Drug Cartel Terrorism**  by Kandel G. Eaton  *Once Upon A Time in Mexico* is the latest Mariachi "flick" from writer/director Robert Rodriguez. El Mariachi is an outlaw legend, similar to Clint Eastwood's "spaghetti westerns" made in Italy during the sixties. The "Tamale Western" is the latest mythological incarnation of the cowboy tradition and its heroic sense of justice.  More so than its prequels, *El Mariachi* and *Desperado*, Rodriguez has created this new genre to great box office success, with others likely to follow. The film is easy to relate to because its Western genre, which has been a favorite audience topic for decades.  This Wild West is not filled with a band of disgusting outlaws, but a drug cartel, led by Barillo, (played by Willem Dafoe) who has planned a coup against the Mexican El Presidente (played by Pedro Armendariz, Jr.) and wants to install El Mariachi's nemesis General Marquez (played by Gerardo Vigil), to protect his cartel. He leaves him to find a $20 million payment to seal the deal when El Presidente is killed. As is the cowboy hero tradition, no judges or lawyers are players, El Mariachi is the only justice around.  The town good guy sheriff is CIA agent Sands (played by Johnny Depp), and our outlaw hero is musician El Mariachi (played by Antonio Banderas). El Mariachi walks everywhere with his guitar, which doubles as a holster for automatic weapons. No cowboy ever loved his horse as much as El Mariachi loves his guitar. He is hired by Sands to kill General Marquez, so the CIA can have a coup of their own, to install their guy as the new El Presidente and payoff El Mariachi and his men with Barillo's $20 million, cash.  The reminisces of El Mariachi vs. General Marquez include awesome stunts and terrific photography. The tone is modern day with cell phones, traffic and heavy artillery. The dirt roads and town frontages remain. Though the saloon shoot outs involve killing the cook over a pork dinner, the street shoot 'em ups are as confrontational as any Western can get. The vivid colors bespeak cowboys, Indians, cavalry, and the open range rescues which are everywhere implied.  Being set in modern Mexico, though, there are no skyscrapers, helicopters, or computers clicking to further confuse things, either. Our cowboy hero is bilingual, and the subtitles serve as well as any stagecoach or train, moving the film along.  Evolving through all this angst and turmoil the movie finds a higher purpose: LIBRE. Freedom for the people from corruption and drug cartels, and, again implied, from the U.S.A. via CIA agent Sands and a retired Mexican FBI agent (played by Ruben Blades). El Mariachi and his partners have their own agendas, which evolve from greed and revenge.  These encounters give humor and interest, along with terror and gore, which balances the film nicely. El Mariachi has a personal score to settle with General Marquez, which was the initial reason he agreed to help the CIA.Both purposes are resolved when El Mariachi retrieves his dead wife's necklace from the dead General Marquez.  This Tamale Western's roots show how modern times and borders have changed the Western genre. As is implied in the subtitles, freedom is not a simple wish. It is a complicated, violent process. The betrayals portrayed are more themes of miscalculation. El Mariachi kills the General selfishly and ardently, but only becomes a hero when he sees fighting against the army in the streets by the people, and saves El Presidente, along with his country.  True to form El Mariachi can walk away, his men taking some of the money and the rest being showered on the people, the cartel, the general and his army, and the CIA, all but defeated. As traditions yons, El Mariachi is without injury. And at the end, El Mariachi doesn't turn his back on us. His guitar destroyed, his spurs jingle-jangle down the road alone, facing us, kissing the Mexican flag he wears as his reward, for having won simple freedom.  Posted September 24, 2003 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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