

# 499 and *Summertime* at the 10th annual GuadaLajara Film Festival

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The 10th edition of the GuadaLajara Film Festival was held virtually from December 17 through December 19, 2020. The festival aims to highlight outstanding Latin American films and foster an artistic exchange between Hollywood and Latin America. This year, the organizers sought to present the experience of people who have lived on both sides of the border between the United States and Mexico. The three films screened at the festival were *No Man's Land*, *499* and *Summertime*. The first will be the subject of a future comment.

## 499

The organizers referred to *499* (2020), directed by Rodrigo Reyes, as the centerpiece of the festival. The film opens on a sandy beach where a conquistador (Eduardo San Juan Breña) swims ashore. Under the leadership of Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), the soldier had taken part in the Spanish subjugation of the Aztec Empire. As the conquistador was sailing home to Spain, his ship was wrecked, and he was the only survivor. Through the intervention of mysterious forces, he finds himself back in Mexico 499 years after his departure.

Retracing his steps, the conquistador arrives at a school playground where students and teachers are holding a parade. He strides calmly to the middle of the playground, interrupting the proceedings, and absurdly begins to claim the land for Spain and to threaten war on anyone who resists. But before he can finish his speech, he begins to choke and finds that he has lost his voice.

So begins the conquistador's strange journey. He retraces the path he had taken with Cortés from Veracruz to Tenochtitlan, which is now Mexico City. His travels take him through forests and fields, past rude cinderblock houses and through a huge garbage dump. The unfamiliar Mexico in which the conquistador finds himself contains natural beauty alongside pollution and poverty.

Unable to speak, the conquistador finds himself listening to the stories of the "Indians" he meets. These people are not actors, but ordinary individuals who recount the violence that

they and their loved ones have suffered. One man describes how his father, a journalist and activist, was murdered. Another tells about how he fled from his hometown after gang members killed his brothers. A woman relates how her daughter was beaten, raped and killed on her way to school. One man, who wears a ski mask, is not a victim but a gang member and perpetrator of violence. A recurring element of these stories is the corruption of the state and the police, who take bribes, murder with impunity and ensure that killers walk free.

The conquistador sees people working, socializing and going about their daily business. He shares a bunk in a shelter one night and eats a communal breakfast. His initial contempt for the "Indians" gradually changes to understanding. "These miserable men chasing after the promise of glory—they remind me of us," he writes in his notebook.

The conquistador's incongruous presence jolts us into seeing contemporary Mexico with fresh eyes. Breña performs with great subtlety. The conquistador's outward determination imperfectly masks his inner uncertainty, which only grows throughout his journey. He is at once dignified and ridiculous. Breña brings us not a caricature, but a living, vulnerable human being. This acknowledgment of the conquistador's contradictions is a measure of the movie's seriousness.

To evoke (and subvert) the tradition of Hollywood epics, Reyes shot *499* in the widescreen format. He and cinematographer Alejandro Mejía establish a leisurely pace that encourages contemplation. The camera occasionally lingers on quiet, incidental scenes of striking beauty such as waves breaking on the beach, a breeze gently bending the grass or traffic passing along a faraway street. These dreamlike shots create an atmosphere of stillness and capture the beauty that persists amid violence and pollution.

The significance of the Spanish conquest for Mexico cannot be overstated or ignored. In *499*, Reyes reminds us that the repercussions of this event are still felt today. Yet Mexico's history did not end with the conquest. One must analyze subsequent phenomena such as the development of Mexican capitalism and the Mexican Revolution to understand the poverty, brutality and oppression that Mexican workers face. Nor can contemporary Mexico be understood apart from the country's position in the global economy (i.e., as a source of

cheap labor for the international bourgeoisie). Reyes has made a thoughtful and moving contribution to the debate the quincentenary of the conquest will provoke.

### *Summertime*

The festival closed with *Summertime* (2020), directed by Carlos López Estrada, which follows a succession of twentysomethings over the course of a summer day in Los Angeles. The film's loose narrative is woven from a series of vignettes, each one anchored by its protagonist's recitation of a spoken-word poem. Many of the performers have backgrounds in poetry slams, and the themes and delivery of their poems tend to reflect the negative influence of this environment.

A poetry slam is a competition of spoken-word poets before an audience. The focus is on performance, provocation and emotion; the poems themselves are not judged solely on their own merits. Slams cultivate a "radical" aesthetic frequently based at present on themes of race and gender. Audiences often participate in the performances, and winners are chosen by judges selected from the audience or by audience response. Although slams feature an ethnically and sexually diverse array of poets, critics have complained of a lack of stylistic diversity. They note the poems' complacency and reliance on emotional manipulation.

In *Summertime*, the predictable harvest includes the hectoring and self-centered "Hey, I'm Gay" by Mila Cuda and the self-pity masquerading as self-empowerment of "Shallow" by Marquesha Babers. In "Ode to Yelp," Tyris Winter delivers what he presumably takes for a righteous and witty broadside. What injustice inspired it? An unpleasant waitress told him her overpriced restaurant no longer serves cheeseburgers.

The film closes as all the poets gather on a hill at nightfall. As everyone gazes at the L.A. skyline, Raul Herrera delivers the gauzy and complacent "Clouds." Its heartwarming platitudes recall graduation speeches, greeting cards and encouragements from well-meaning grandmothers.

Fortunately, other poems are a cut above the aforementioned offerings. One woman (Maia Mayor) happens to see her ex-boyfriend with a woman who seems to be his new girlfriend. Amusingly, she follows them into a bookstore and tries to spy on them from behind the shelves. Here, she recites "I Want to Be Good at Something," which expresses insecurities common to adolescents and adults alike. Unlike many of the other poets, Mayor does not recite as if she is putting someone in his place. She offers, rather, an honest expression of her feelings that, although lacking analysis, nevertheless resonates.

Several poets find success with the theme of home. They include Amaya Blankenship and Bene't Benton ("Home Is ..."), Madyson Park ("To Korea, with Love") and Xochitl

Morales ("Las Canciones de Nuestras Vidas"). Notably, these poems result from their authors' decision to direct their attention outward. They are the products of observation and they (particularly "Home Is ...") include concrete images. It is telling that during the recitation of the former two poems, the poets are not on screen. The latter two perhaps err on the side of nostalgia.

Some of the movie's positive aspects are not necessarily related to poetry. Bryce Banks and Austin Antoine appear as aspiring rappers who quickly progress from the street corner to the recording studio to Hollywood fame. The two have an appealing chemistry and a refreshing lack of pretension. Their meteoric rise and their response to their newfound fame are entertaining.

The kitchen of a Korean restaurant is the setting for another memorable moment. A young woman walks in glumly and prepares to work. She and another young woman start grousing about each other. A middle-aged woman, perhaps the head chef, scolds them for being so irritable. She tells them to enjoy their youth and laments having wasted time when she was young. Curious about what the first young woman is listening to on her earbuds, she convinces her, with difficulty, to play it on the kitchen stereo. The middle-aged woman likes the electronic music that she hears and urges everyone to dance. "You're so stiff!" she laughs. Soon, they are all enjoying themselves. The scene parlays the moody teenager trope into a salutary reminder to seize the moment.

It is not surprising that a movie based on a collection of young poets is a mixed bag. Egocentrism and triviality characterize the worst poems. Some give the impression of a therapy session held in public. The better poems are not pretexts for their authors to rant or strut, but honest attempts to describe their experience or environment. The fact that some of the concerns addressed seem adolescent can be ascribed to the poets' youth (their average age is 21). Further experience and, above all, a turn toward broader realities will benefit these poets and their work.



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