



Tommy Lee Jones in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

## COW POKE

### *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

review by M. Faust

The border. It's a place that separates men from boys, men from women, and even men from themselves. And it's a place that has to be crossed before a man can ...

Uuummmmmmmmm.....

Oh hell, I don't know. I've never been much of one for mythology, and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, which is set on the border between Texas and Mexico, is nothing if not self-consciously mythic. Not counting a cable film he made in 1995 (and I don't know why we shouldn't; guess I'm just having an ignorant day), this is the first theatrical feature directed by Tommy Lee Jones.

I might snipe that the result is what might be expected from a Texas boy who went to Harvard where—stop me if you've heard this before—he was Al Gore's roommate, but that would be to ignore the input of the script, which Jones helped shape but did not write. That task was handled by Guillermo Arriaga, the Mexican screenwriter of *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*.

Like the latter, *Three Burials* has a needlessly fractured structure that causes a lot of unnecessary confusion in its first half, as we witness a jumble of events that seem chronological but in fact are not. Despite this, we manage to sort out the dramatis personae: Pete Perkins (Jones), the owner of a small ranch; Mike Norton (Barry Pepper), a newly hired border patrol officer who has moved to town with his young wife Lou Ann (January Jones, apparently no relation to le auteur); Rachel (Melissa Leo), café waitress and local roundheels; and Sheriff Belmont (Dwight Yoakam), who is as unconcerned with the rights of the local "wetbacks" as he is unable to sexually satisfy Rachel.

(I'm not at all sure what the sheriff's erectile dysfunction has to do with anything; I can only note that all of the bad guys here are sexual Neanderthals, while the good guys are lusty whoremongers and adulterers. And I can only hope that all of this dick-measuring isn't merely a stereotypical example of Latino machismo, because

if it is it's kinda embarrassing, particularly in one scene that rates as both the briefest and least prurient sex scene in recent memory.)

All of this eventually shapes up after the death of Melquiades, an illegal immigrant who worked on Pete's ranch and became his friend. Pete promised that if Mel died he would make sure he was given a proper burial in his Mexican hometown, and Pete is determined to do just that, even if he has to kidnap the killer, force him to dig up the body and set off for Mexico on horseback through territory so rugged that the border patrol will never be able to catch up to them.

Jones has named as influences for this film Kabuki theater and the films of Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Luc Godard and Sam Peckinpah. If some of those seem a little vague, one certainly doesn't: the spirit of Peckinpah is all over this, along with a dose of John Huston (whom Jones somehow forgot to acknowledge). In its best moments, *Three Burials* glides from mordant humor (the script shies away from no aspect of what it might be like to transport a corpse that has already been dead for a week across the desert) to an animistic spirituality with remarkable ease. Jones shot the film in areas known to him (some of it on his own ranch), and cinematographer Chris Menges (*The Killing Fields*) imparts what must be precisely the sense of awe that Jones wants us to have as we look on this roughly beautiful terrain. I regret that I only got to see the film's widescreen images on a preview tape rather than in a theater.

But that's a loss I'll live with, because *Three Burials* isn't a film I would want to sit through again. For every good moment in the film you have to slog through two or three that go nowhere. You may note that both Jones' performance and Arriaga's script were awarded at last year's Cannes film festival. To which I respond, no one loves mythologizing in the cinema more than the French. Caveat emptor. **av**

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