

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH TOMMY LEE JONES

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* was movie star Tommy Lee Jones's debut as a theatrical film director. Set in his native Texas, this provocative blend of road movie and western, partly inspired by Sam Peckinpah, is a unique and compelling drama that Jones described as "a study of the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social implications of having an international border running through the middle of a culture." The movie had its New York premiere on a cold December night at a special screening co-hosted by the Museum of the Moving Image and Jones's Harvard roommate, former Vice President Al Gore.

### **A Pinwood Dialogue following a screening of *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (December 12, 2005):**

**SCHWARTZ:** Hi, my name's David Schwartz, and I am the Chief Curator of the Museum of the Moving Image. We're very proud to be co-hosting this screening tonight with Al Gore, who you will meet shortly. And this is an amazing movie; I think whatever you think you're in for, you're going to be surprised. What I want to do is introduce the two heads, co-founders, of Sony Pictures Classics, a remarkable company that gives us so many great independent films—Michael Barker and Tom Bernard. (Applause)

**TOM BERNARD:** Well, we want to thank the Museum of the Moving Image for putting this screening on; this is great. And I'm here to introduce a friend of Tommy Lee Jones's. You know, he made this movie that we saw in Cannes, and which we thought was remarkable. He shot it in his backyard, he directed it, he acted in it; it was sort of a homespun kind of film. And so we asked one of his friends to come up and introduce the film and, you know, host it with Tommy. So I want to bring Tommy's roommate down, from college: Al Gore. (Applause, laughter, cheers)

**AL GORE:** Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much. You all are about to see a terrific movie. Tipper and I are so glad to be here with Tommy Lee and Dawn. I want to just say a few brief words. I met Tommy Lee Jones forty years ago this past September. And we've been close friends all

that time. We both—up in Boston, we both identified with the roots that I had in the South and that he has in the Southwest. And we became good friends early on, partly because of that. But you know, this movie, as you'll see, is partly about the meaning and strength of friendship, and it's something that, I can tell you as somebody that's been on the receiving end of his great friendship, he knows an awful lot about.

The only other thing I want to say is, he has said—maybe you've seen some of the fantastic early reviews of this; it really is great—but he has always said, when asked about it, that he just wants the movie to speak for itself. And people ask him whether it has a political message. Well, I'm under no such constraints. I think it does. (Laughter, applause) He's an artist and really, since—he was that way in college. He played in all the student productions, and did such a fantastic job—but he's always had that deep commitment to creativity and art. But he also has passionate feelings. And he won't say... You know, back when he did *Men in Black*, which was so much fun, he wrote the part of that script where the two men in black encounter immigrants coming across the Mexican-U.S. border, and put that in there. And the attitude that we have toward the "others," divided from us, in this case, by a border—whether it's by culture, by language, or by heritage, or whatever... He is of the border region of Texas. We've spent time on the beautiful ranch, which is one of the stars of, well, the whole—part of it's on the ranch, but part is that whole border region. And it is one of the stars of the film. But here we are in a time when our country has gotten it wrong, in my opinion, on what compassion

is owed by us to those who we define as “others,” on the other side of the artificial lines that we draw. And getting it right involves the humanity and the human feeling that is really at the core of what I think is the message of this film—it will speak for itself. But I want to now claim the privilege and honor of introducing my buddy, Tommy Lee Jones. (Applause)

**JONES:** Thank you, Al. It’s really a good day for all of us, to see Al here. And thank you all for coming. It’s cold out there, and... (Laughs) I’m glad that you’re here. Again, I thank Al for the kind remarks. You will find that alienation is a theme here—by the way, don’t be bashful about laughing, because you’ll have that chance a time or two; please take it (Laughter)—and borders are a theme. And we consider it from different points of view. I think we all know by now, swimming a river is not the only way to achieve alienation. And international borders are not the only borders. Maybe we’ll have a chance, one day, to look across the borders and figure out who’s looking back at us, and come to the right conclusion—that it’s us.

[Screening of *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*]

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, congratulations. It’s a great film, and it takes us in so many different directions, and there’s so much to it. You’ve worked—as an actor, you’ve been directed by about fifty different directors. So, how does it feel to realize that you’re so much more talented than most of them? (Laughter)

**JONES:** I don’t know that I have that feeling.

**SCHWARTZ:** You don’t? Well, you could! The story that this was maybe inspired by—well, you’ll tell me if that was true or not. There was a case of a young immigrant, Esequiel Hernandez Jr., who was shot by a Marine. And that was in the news a bit, back in 1997. Did that spark this?

**JONES:** No, I actually asked [screenwriter] Guillermo Arriaga to familiarize himself with that issue. I had a record of all the congressional reports on the hearings, and I asked him to read that. Esequiel Hernandez’s family had been living in Texas for many generations; he was not an immigrant. He was a United States citizen, a pitcher

on the baseball team who did his homework. He was a good kid. His family was Hispanic. Like all families that lived in the country, in that region, the family had goats. And like all those families, the responsibility for the goats fell to one of the older boys. And Esequiel was the family’s *guedero*, or goat-keeper. He would turn the goats out in the evening, so they could go out and browse, and he would often take a .22 rifle with him, a .22-caliber rifle, to protect the goats from coyotes before he put them up at night. He took a shot one day at what he thought was a coyote. And there happened to be three United States Marines in camouflage. They’d been there a long time, on stakeout, looking for drug dealers. And either in their boredom or paranoia—I don’t know what it was—they decided they were taking fire from dangerous drug dealers. They stalked the kid for thirty minutes, and then shot him and killed him, and then they disappeared; no one was ever brought to trial or held responsible to any degree for that. And that incident was insulting to some of us who live in that region.

I did *not* want to make a movie about that kid. In fact, I wouldn’t even have mentioned his name. And I did not want to make a movie about that incident—certainly didn’t want to do anything to offend the privacy of his family, certainly not his mother and dad. But there were social tensions at work there that I thought might inform the movie. So, we didn’t base it on Esequiel’s death; we based it on a world in which Esequiel’s death, and the manner of it, is possible.

**SCHWARTZ:** You contacted the screenwriter—a remarkable screenwriter, Guillermo Arriaga, who’d done *Amores perros* and *21 Grams*. Could you talk about what you told him originally that you had in mind, and how your relationship, professionally and as a friendship, developed?

**JONES:** Well, I really liked *Amores perros* and I was talking to my friend Michael Fitzgerald (who ultimately became a co-producer on this film) about how much I liked it. It was original and... He’d never seen it before. It was just a wonderful movie. And Fitzgerald said, “Well, if you liked it *that* much, let’s call the guy up.” I said, “No, one doesn’t do that. You don’t call people you don’t know.” He said, “That’s fine.” He picked up the phone and called him. (Laughter) And two or three days later, we

were having dinner in Los Angeles—at a house that I had leased, because we were working there—with Fitzgerald, Arriaga and his wife Maru, Alejandro González Iñárritu, who had directed *Amores perros*, and his wife. And we just had an ordinary dinner, like they do in California—where you talk about movies and politics and kids, and tell jokes, and have a great time. Arriaga and I—our wives all liked each other—we had something in common. He became a hunting buddy. We're responsible for some land, and all the animals on it. We really have to kill a certain number of deer every year to keep them from overpopulating, because it's not good for them. And so, he became a hunting buddy. And, I think a couple years later, I was driving across a rather large piece of property with Arriaga, and I looked over at him and Fitzgerald and said, "You know, guys, there's a lot of talent in this pickup. We ought to make a movie." (Laughter) And they said, "Yeah, sure, let's make a movie." And that's pretty much how it got started.

**SCHWARTZ:** And what were some of the ideas you had in mind? The film evokes certain westerns, it evokes films of Sam Peckinpah, but it's—as I said before, there's a lot of other stuff going on as well.

**JONES:** Yeah, I think it was important to everybody that we make a movie that hadn't been seen before. (Laughter) That was important. We tried to be original.

**SCHWARTZ:** And another important collaborator, of course, is Chris Menges, the cinematographer. This film is an odyssey—the story is an odyssey the character goes through, but it seems like the production must've been [an odyssey] as well.

**JONES:** The production was pretty simple. We did our homework, and we were very well-prepared for everything. There was a flood down on the Rio Grande that ran us off for about ten days; otherwise, we were very well-prepared. Chris Menges is the first guy I thought of, you know? I knew—when we had the script, I knew what movie we were going to make, and I thought, "Who, in my experience of watching movies, has shot the biggest and the most beautiful exteriors, in the wildest, hardest-to-get-to places?" Well, the answer to that is Menges. If it's... Or... That's the answer. (Laughter) And so, we called him and met with him. I understood right away that he was very bright,

well-read; I knew he was very good with the camera. I knew that he was interested. He's very hard—he turns down a lot of work. And he said he was interested in this. And he's a man of very few words—and that was a plus. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** And this is a film that's filled with remarkable performances. I want to mention, we have, I know, one actor in the audience tonight, Melissa Leo, who does a great job. (Applause) And actually, let's talk about—one of the strongest things about the film is some of the women characters, the female characters.

**JONES:** Thank you.

**SCHWARTZ:** You're welcome. So could you talk, maybe, about how some of this—I'm jumping back to sort of how some of the storylines developed? The film has an interesting narrative structure.

**JONES:** Well, speaking of the women characters, personally, I think all the women in the movie are quite strong. They don't all make sense. (Laughter) Some of them are idiots. But they're not weaklings. None of them, from the little girl who fights the border patrolman and then winds up giving the border patrolman an ear of corn and inviting him to join the family, to even the old dog-kissing lady (the Pekingese-dog-kissing lady). They're all quite strong. Melissa, certainly. Not that she makes any sense or is perfectly, entirely respectable. (Laughter) But she's not weak. And I think the weakest female character ultimately winds up doing something quite strong and brave. She gets on a bus and leaves town.

**SCHWARTZ:** And I'm sure part of the idea of the film is that there's no simple heroes and villains that you...

**JONES:** No, absolutely not. We didn't—that's kind of boring.

**SCHWARTZ:** And the performance—Barry Pepper's performance is essential.

**JONES:** Barry did a beautiful job. (Applause) It was a very demanding role for Barry, emotionally and physically. He also had to do some thinking... And he stepped right up.

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you tell us anything about directing that last scene with him that's so essential? That transformation that he has in the last scene...

**JONES:** It was pretty easy. We knew where we were supposed to go by then, and where we wanted to wind up. So, really, that scene is like most of the other scenes in the movie: we planned to get it right on the first take every time, and we usually did.

**SCHWARTZ:** Another performance I just have to ask you about is Levon Helm, because that's just so...

**JONES:** Levon was great.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. That character, which seems to be maybe a reference to *The Odyssey*, but it's...

**JONES:** (Laughs) Well, it's a long journey, and it has... It starts in a bad place and he had to go through a few other places—some of them are dangerous, even life-threatening; some are funny; some are mysterious; and all of them arduous—until you wind up at a good place, where Mr. Hero finally understands who he is and is able to relate more gracefully to the world around him. Usually, somewhere along the way, there's an oracle. And this is an old, old story form, which I thought would serve us rather well.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now, I know that the film is not a simple political statement. But one thing I did want to ask you about is what that last scene... What the ending really evoked for me was that if you look at the situation that we're in in the world right now, the wars that we're fighting, the war in Iraq, if you ever understood the people that we're fighting against, the people that are being killed, if you ever understood one of them as a human being, that things might be different. That's sort of heavy-handed, but I'm just wondering if you could talk about if you see this film as relating to what's going on right now.

**JONES:** Well, it's not something that I would ordinarily talk about. I don't want to stand next to the film and tell people what it means. It was our instinct, our desire, to humanize the differences between people while raising all the important issues—or touching on them, evoking them,

maybe—but at the same time, taking a humanist point of view.

**SCHWARTZ:** You examine the sexual lives of these characters in a very interesting way. That element seems very important in the film.

**JONES:** Well, in terms of Mike Norton and his wife, at the beginning of the movie, he's not a very nice person. He's not caring, he's not giving. He's egocentric, he's ethnocentric. You have to start him someplace, but, of course, he's going to wind up in a better place. And poor Sheriff Belmont is alienated in his own way. He can't get *anything* done. (Laughter) He can't shoot anybody; he can't perform sexually; he's not much of an authority figure, and he knows it; doesn't like himself very well; and he's—he's alienated. And we look at alienation from a lot of different ways. Swimming a river is not the only way to make yourself an alien.

**SCHWARTZ:** Right.

**JONES:** And he has his own struggle, which is solved rather neatly by the decision to go to SeaWorld. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** In terms of the narrative structure, the way it jumps around in time—it's so beautifully done here. I wonder if any of that evolved in the editing process or if that was pretty much there.

**JONES:** The idea was—Arriaga's idea and mine—was that there'd be some kind of confusion about the incident at the core of the movie. You know that your friend is dead, but who killed him? And why? How? Who knows? As I spoke to the cast and crew, I told them, "This is going to be just like real life. In other words, the past and the present and the future all occur simultaneously." You know, that was it. "And you understand?" They said, "No." (Laughter) I said, "Well, you know, let's try to think of it that way." And as the journey progresses, the confusion smoothes out as you reach what I hope is looked upon as a happy ending. The shots become longer and bigger and broader, and things make more sense, as our character, Mike Norton, develops his education.

**SCHWARTZ:** I have to ask you a special-effects question, which is the horse falling off the cliff. How

many horses did you use? Or how was that scene filmed? (Laughter)

**JONES:** Horses are so cheap. Just one after the other. (Laughter) They need to all be buckskins, because it shows up against the red rocks. (Laughter) Really, what we did was—you know, there aren't very many good movie horses around anymore, because not many westerns, so-called westerns, are made; there's not a demand for a good movie horse. And we had one good one. He was the horse that did the falling in the sand. That guy's nineteen years old. His name is Bill. And he's one of the last really good falling horses. The buckskin was actually one of the ranch horses on that ranch, who belonged to me. And Billy Burton and I taught him how to stand up on his hind legs and paw the air on cue. He got to where he really loved it. He's a total hambone. (Laughter) And he got really good at it. It took about two weeks to teach him that; he's a very smart animal. Then all you have to do is show him doing that, and get in the mule kicking, and then go for a very clever insert on his hind legs, dancing backward. Then you cut from a mile away to the wide shot, and you throw an articulated dummy off the edge of the cliff, with five cameras set up all around. "Articulated dummy" means it's a model and it has a little motor inside that'll move its legs and head a little bit so that, in action, you think that it's alive.

**SCHWARTZ:** Didn't a horse land on one of the cameras?

**JONES:** Yes, it did.

**SCHWARTZ:** And also, the rotting corpse was a good effect.

**JONES:** Yeah, [makeup department head] John Blake did a wonderful job on designing that and maintaining it. There's actually a company in the San Fernando Valley that does nothing but build dead bodies out of latex. (Laughter) They make a pretty good living at it. Blake worked very carefully with some doctors and morticians, and we built three of them, to represent various stages of decomposition.

**SCHWARTZ:** I'm going to open it up to the audience. I just want to ask you one more thing, which is if

this was a hard film to get made, in terms of getting financing done.

**JONES:** Oh, it was very easy, once we went through eleven drafts, came up with a shootable script, sent it to one guy, and made a deal. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** You make it sound so easy.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** There are some mysteries that are left unsolved in the film. I'm just wondering if any of that happened in the editing, or if the mysteries that are unanswered were intentional, and were always your intention.

**JONES:** Yeah, there are some unanswered questions. And I think those are good and healthy. The first one that occurs is: Is that his wife or not? Is she lying? Is he lying? And that applies to an important theme in the movie, which is the meaning of and the mechanics of faith. What can believing do? Is there a [town called] Jimenez or is there not a Jimenez? I mean, if you believe in it, you can build, and, okay, there is one; it's there. It's been said so often that seeing is believing. And I think, from my point of view, it could easily be said that, also, believing is seeing.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How was it directing yourself?

**JONES:** It was pretty easy. (Laughter) You know, if you're collaborating with the writer and you're a producer and a director and an actor, having any three of those jobs makes the fourth one a lot easier. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** The last line is masterful. I wondered, did you or the actor decide how to deliver it so that it wouldn't be a gag line, which it easily could've, or gotten the wrong kind of laugh?

**JONES:** That's a good question. On the day that I made the deal to make this movie, which was years ago—it was a few years ago—I was sitting on the stern of a boat with Luc Besson, who runs EuropaCorp. He's a filmmaker and an important figure in French cinema, even in world cinema. We made the deal very quickly. And he never interfered with us *at all*. It was a simple case of me saying, "Here's the script, here's the budget; we're going to stick to both." And he said, "Here's the money. We'll see you at the premiere." Didn't hear from him

again. Before he got off the boat that day, he said (uses a French accent), “Oh, there’s a little thing. You must change the last line.” (Laughter) I said, “Okay, man. As long as we got a deal. What do you want?” He said, “He should simply say, ‘Are you going to be all right?’” (Laughter) And I said, “Okay.” (Laughter)

As we thought about it, as we continued to work on the script, it answered a lot of questions for us. It really made a lot of decisions that appear in the story before that easier. To try to get this insensitive character to somebody who really cares, and to express a humanity—a concern for others, a decency that the fellow has learned—so simply and elegantly was actually Luc’s idea.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What had the line been?

**JONES:** Oh, there were ten, fifteen different versions. Different things happened. We hadn’t really had the idea of being so... concise.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I’m curious about the casting process. Did you hold anything like a formal casting? Did you know all these people personally? Especially, of course, the antagonist.

**JONES:** Well, we went through a conventional casting process—in Austin, and in California, and in Mexico City—with lots of different actors. For the others, it was a different search. With some, you just decided who would be really good for the role, you pick up the phone and call them, and ask them if they’ll read the script, and then call them two days later and say, “Did you like it?” And they usually said, “Yes.” So it was a variety of approaches.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How did you reach your decision on a composer?

**JONES:** I listened to a lot of composers. And I read a lot of resumé. I liked Marco’s [Beltrami] resumé, because he... I knew he was intelligent; he’d gone to an awfully good school. And then he’d become an apprentice of Ennio Morricone, whose music you would recognize instantly from Sergio Leone’s films. And I listened to everything that he had done. I could tell that he knew how to compose. And I could also tell... I thought, This is a young man; this kid is probably starving to death for creative license. Because the movies he had been doing

are... Some of them have made some money, some of them didn’t; he’s been making a lot of money, but the movies weren’t really that good. This is a guy who really needs an opportunity. So I figured, you know, it’d be a long search before I found somebody with that much talent and with that much willingness to work cheap. (Laughter) Because I felt that I had something that I could offer him, some chance at a creativity that had been beyond his grasp so far. I think this is his best work of anything that he’s done. And think his opportunities are going to grow.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You were just speaking about the soundtrack. What about the sound design? Was that all you and your sound designer? You alone?

**JONES:** That was a team. There was the sound editor, there was the dialogue editor, there was the sound mixer, and five or six guys who were really—well, seven guys—really handy with computers and keyboards, working in what is probably the best sound-mixing facility in the world. It’s in Normandy. It belongs to EuropaCorp and Luc Besson. It’s way out in the country, in France, in an old château. And there are places right there, housing for the entire crew. There was nothing to do. (Laughter) Nowhere to go. Certainly no CNN. And you—all you do is work and eat and sleep. So we were pretty well-organized. Get up very early in the morning, have a little bread and cheese, whatever you do in France, and then go work until lunch, have a nice lunch, and then keep on working with the best equipment *in the world*. And then go to dinner, and then come back and work until you fall asleep. Then do it all again the next day, and then the next day, maybe. I let them have Sundays off. (Laughter) Otherwise, it was—some of them thought they were in prison by the time it was over, but we really had a lot of capability there.

I met a woman—I think Linda McCauley was her name. A very well-to-do woman. I had dinner with her one time in Palm Beach. And she had a lot of time on her hands. And what this woman had been doing with her life was traveling the world and recording birdsongs. She told me she’d been all over North America. She’s building a library of birdsongs for Cornell University. And I said, “Well, by the way, have you recorded any of the birds of the Northern Chihuahuan Desert?” She said, “I’ve

got them all.” (Laughter) And I said, “Look, would you mind if I use that CD? Could I avail myself of that?” She said, “Yeah, I’ll send them to you tomorrow. Where do you want...?” So I took that with me when I went to France. And so, you’re talking about the sound mix; I really had the capability—there were six or eight guys down there with a little computer... And, really, it was very easy to say, “I would, right there, like to have a canyon wren. There, and there, and there. And then later on, then about five mourning doves. Here.” And (snaps fingers) it was done. So the reason that you’re impressed with the sound mix is essentially

the very highest quality of equipment that we had to work with, that Luc Besson made available to us.

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to congratulate you. You’ve mastered so many aspects of filmmaking on your first film. (Applause)

**JONES:** Thank you very much.

**SCHWARTZ:** Good luck.

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