

Hollywood stardust brings glitter to Zapatista rebellion in La Realidad, Chiapas

by John Ross, March, 1996

"Wow, I said to Marcos, you made the most dramatic entrance I've ever seen in my life," Hollywood's premiere director Oliver Stone gushed to La Jornada interviewer Blanche Petrich, after meeting with Zapatista comandantes near here March 26th. Stone arrived in this remote Lacandon jungle hamlet on the night his latest film "Nixon" was up for four Oscars, far away in Hollywood. Instead, at nightfall, Marcos and a handful of his horsemen rode in from the surrounding jungle and presented the director of "JFK," "Salvador" and "Natural Born Killers" with one of the Subcomandante's well-chewed pipes as a memento of his brief stay in the EZLN lair.

Oliver Stone reportedly traveled into the rain forest with a satellite phone in order to communicate his acceptance of the coveted Oscar - but "Nixon" drew a blank at the Academy Awards. Curiously, soon after the director's controversial huddle with Marcos, "Nixon" was withdrawn from release in Mexico City.

Stone came to Chiapas on what he termed a "human rights" mission and repeatedly denied that he was scouting locations for a Zapatista movie. Nonetheless, the director told Petrich that his film career has been much shaped by another Zapatista film: "Viva Zapata," the 1952 Elia Kazan-John Steinbeck Oscar-winner starring Marlon Brando as the martyred revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, from whom the neo-Zapatistas draw their inspiration.

Stone's jungle adventure was helpful to the Zapatista cause, ventured Mexico's leading actress Ofelia Medina, a very visible rebel supporter - but Medina was critical of the director's nostalgia for the original Zapata. "Oliver made a beeline straight for Marcos but he missed what this rebellion is all about - community and land," the actress commented during a break at a Holy Week anti-neo-liberal forum here. Medina and ex-Televisa soap opera queen Ana Colchero were two prominent Mexican film faces at the forum.

Although invitees Jodie Foster ("The Silence of The Lambs") and Kevin Costner ("Robin Hood") were no shows at the forum, Hollywood's most significant Chicano actor, Edward James Olmos, hiked in for the event. Olmos ("Zoot Suit," "American Me," "The Ballad of Gregory Cortez") was accompanied by director Robert Young, whose socially-conscious films ("Nothing But A Man," "Gregorio Cortez") enjoy success on the U.S. repertory circuit. Subcomandante Marcos paid tribute to Gregorio Cortez's battle against the Texas "Rinches" ("Rangers") in his forum-opening address, and Olmos later revealed that he had twice met Marcos in Los Angeles during the 1970s. The Chicano idol, an apostle of non-violence, expressed stiff opposition to the EZLN's

armed stance, arguing that "violence begets violence."

Despite the Foster-Costner snub, Hollywood personalities are flocking to the Zapatistas' defense. Martin Sheen, perhaps Tinseltown's most socially committed personality, is the voice of Subcomandante Marcos in Saul Landau's soon-to-be-released public television documentary. Other Hollywood headliners who have lent their names to the Zapatista cause include Antonio Banderas and his companera, Melanie Griffith, and this year's Oscar-winner Susan Sarandon and her mate, Tim Robbins.

Although Oliver Stone is projecting a film on the assassination of Mexican politician Luis Donaldo Colosio, he insists he has no plans to bring the Zapatista saga to the silver screen - "the only way Hollywood will want to make this movie is if Marcos is dead," he tells reporters. Nonetheless, a handful of screenplays featuring ski-masked Mexican rebels have been making the rounds of adventurous Hollywood producers for the past year - Young, who along with Latin directors Luis Mandoki and Alfonso Arau is mentioned as a possible director, has seen three distinct scripts. Competition between rival screenwriters has reached fever pitch with charges of plagiarism and break-ins flying. Last year, a proposed scenario, faxed from Los Angeles to San Cristobal, Chiapas, was copied by Zapatista opponents and published as an EZLN document in two right-wing Mexican magazines.

Stars of the Political Left were as much in evidence as their cinematic counterparts at the Forum On Behalf of Humanity and Against Neo-Liberalism. Among the luminaries: Bill Means and Vernon Bellancourt of the American Indian Movement (AIM), legendary peace activist Brian Wilson, who lost his legs when crushed by a California train carrying supplies to U.S. troops in Central America; a representative of the venerable Venezuelan guerrillero Douglas Bravo; Argentine rebel poet Juan Gelman; and, of course, "Superbarrio Gomez," the Mexican superhero and defender of Mexico City tenants whose life story Mexican-American movie whiz Luis Valdez once contemplated filming. Messages of solidarity with the Zapatistas were tendered by such stars of the international political firmament as Nobelist Rigoberta Menchu, Noam Chomsky, Leonardo Boff (who was booked into Mexico City during the forum for a series of neo-liberal bashing conferences), and Uruguayan stellar writers Eduardo Galeano and Mario Benedetti. Although he missed the anti-neo-liberal fiesta, Regis Debray, the French intellectual and Renaissance man who accompanied Che Guevara on his doomed Bolivian adventure, was scheduled to arrive in the heart of the Lacandon jungle April 13th to present Subcomandante Marcos with recently-revised editions of his work and discuss plans for the July "Intergalactic" Forum On Behalf of Humanity.