

The Patriarch

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY



Esai Morales has quietly become one of the most powerful people in the Latino film community, and his new flick, “Gun Hill Road,” proves just how poignant that power can be.



When actor Esai Morales launched the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts (hispanicarts.org) in 1997 with fellow actors

Jimmy Smits, Sonia Braga and Merel Julia, plus attorney Felix Sanchez, the idea was to foster a Latino creative community that took care of its own. The organization, which is headquartered right here in Washington, nurtures young talent while providing all-important access to the entertainment industry.

“The Foundation increases the perception of Latinos in the media,” Morales tells *Washington Flyer*. “It also promotes connectivity. [In Hollywood], half of it is who you know, who’s available and who you can think of quickly. You can support someone’s thesis projects with cash, but if you don’t have a community that’s willing to help you, it’s much more difficult to break in.”

What Morales, 49, didn’t expect through his efforts with NHFA was to advance his own career, which has been burning steadily with meaty roles since he broke out opposite Sean Penn in 1983’s “Bad Boys.” Since then, during an impressive 30-year acting run, he’s appeared in countless TV fan favorites, including “NYPD Blue,” “CSI: Miami” and the current SyFy cable hit “Caprica,” plus successful films such as “La Bamba” and “Fast Food Nation.”

He views himself as a mentor, someone who’s seen it all. And, perhaps most important, as a member of the Latino community, raised in the South Bronx. So when young filmmaker Rashaad Ernesto Green—an up-and-comer from Morales’ old neighborhood who had won a film scholarship three years running from NHFA—handed Morales a tailor-made script in 2009, the actor smiled and agreed to read it, but imagined he’d have to let the kid down gently.

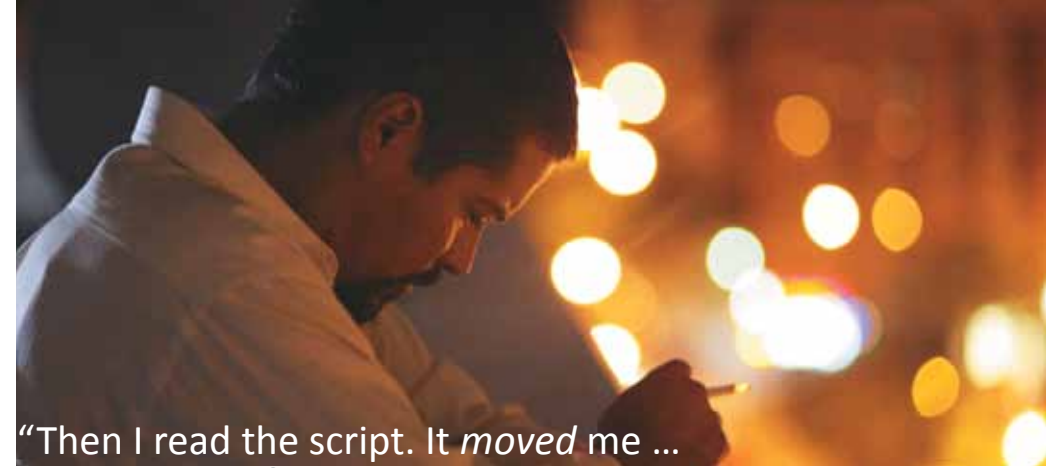
“I read the script. It *moved* me ... he had a specific vision. He was so clear with what he wanted and what he didn’t want, and I thought: OK. He’s got something here. Let’s take a chance.”

That script was “Gun Hill Road”—the same film that earned standing ovations last January after each of its screenings at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, featuring none other than Morales in the starring role.

Behind the Scenes

Perhaps the real story lies in this unlikely movie ever getting made. In making the leap from NYU grad student to director helming an independent production starring Morales and “Scrubs” alum Judy Reyes, Green credits his big break to the help he received from NHFA—plus landing his mentor as the leading man.

The execution of the film is fresh, even if its premise is evergreen. Imagine “Boys Don’t



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Cry” in a mashup with another indie gem, “The Crying Game.” Now set the story in the South Bronx. Filter an age-old plot—teenage son bucking against the expectations of an unyielding father—through a Latino lens. Then cast Morales as the tough, prison-primed papa playing opposite an unknown ingénue, the trans-gendered actress Harmony Santana, as a boy who dreams of becoming a girl in a performance so touching it stings. Finally, make sure the young director and screenwriter brings his undeniable street cred to the project; the tale is siphoned from the true-life family dynamics of Green’s extended clan.

“Gun Hill Road” is named for a real street in the Bronx; it’s the little movie that could.

“I wrote the part of the father with Esai in mind,” Green tells *Flyer*. “His character is the thrust of the film and represents traditional Latino male ideals—then turns around and questions them. The notion of *machismo* isn’t depicted as right or wrong; it’s what we’ve been taught by our parents. It’s in our environment. But if you love your child, the film shows how there is another way.”

“The role allowed Morales to elevate a hardened man of the ‘hood to rise to the occasion and simply love his son, no matter what,” Green says. Even if that same son is determined to dress and live as a woman in a rough-and-tumble *barrio* that often values strength.

“There’s a universal quality in [the film] that makes you feel for all the characters in the story,” Morales says. “It’s a movie without any clear-cut bad guys, with a wonderful analogy for the rest of society.”

The film opened in D.C., New York City and Los Angeles in late August, with a rollout nationwide this fall.

Green credits Morales with delivering the performance of his career, one that grounds the movie and provides a pivot point for Latino audiences. But he hopes the movie’s allure will transcend boundaries of culture and ethnicity.

In September, Morales will be in town to attend NHFA’s 15th Annual Noche de Gala. Expect to find Green in attendance, too, at the glamorous black-tie benefit, along with NHFA co-founders Smits, Braga, Julia and Sanchez, plus select members of Congress and Hollywood’s glitterati.

Previous award recipients include Oscar-winning actress Sandra Bullock, TV stars Eva Longoria and Wilmer Valderrama, film directors John Singleton and Robert Rodriguez, and television journalist Elizabeth Vargas.

The benefit is held each year to help fund the group’s scholarship program. Over the past 15 years, the foundation has given roughly \$1 million in scholarships to more than 350 Hispanic students enrolled in graduate degree programs for the arts.

“After the economic downturn of the last few years, it’s been hard to get the proper support out there,” says Morales. “One of the ways they can do that is to come out and support a gem like ‘Gun Hill Road.’”

Busy as he is, Morales can’t linger long in town after the event, despite his love for Washington. He’s juggling two demanding projects: The first is “Caprica,” a prequel to “Battlestar Galactica.” In it he plays criminal defense attorney Joseph Adama (opposite Eric Stoltz as his nemesis), a character that regularly grapples with race relations in some future setting.

Then there’s the Web series “Los Americans,” director Robert Townsend’s online answer to “Parenthood.” The show focuses on an L.A.-based multigenerational, middle-income family dealing with issues of cultural identity.

Before flying home, Morales does intend to hit a few D.C. attractions. A favorite locale? “Adams Morgan has every nationality and represents every ethnicity,” he says. “And I love the [cigar and martini] lounge **Ozio** [1813 M St., NW], near the Mayflower. I always go. If it’s within walking distance of the Mayflower, you know I’m there.” ☺

ADAM HENDERSHOT