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[Interview with Cástulo Guerra](#)



Read my interview with Cástulo Guerra, who portrayed *General Manuel Fernandez Castrillon* in *The Alamo* (2004)!

Conducted on August 7th, 2007.



AS: When were you first approached to portray General Manuel Fernandez Castrillon in *The Alamo*?

CG: In early December of 2002 I had read on camera for the role of Castrillon. I did not have a full script yet and based on what I saw in a few side pages, I went on instinct. I sensed Castrillon as noble, loyal, a military man of principle, out of the books. In mid-December, I was called back to meet with the director in one of the buildings at Buena Vista in Burbank. I had finished a recording in Santa Monica and as I started the long difficult rush hour road to Burbank, huge wind and rain changed Los Angeles into sheer chaos. I was supposed to be there at 4:30, but I barely made it by 6:30! Trees had fallen down, lights were out and the city was a nightmare. I am never late for an appointment, but instead of getting upset I resigned myself to the present difficulty and kept on going. At the entrance to the building I met a tall, slim man who smiled and said, "Cástulo? Relax. It's OK. There's no one left but we'll have fun." Inside, John Lee Hancock, the director with the pleasant smile, started to talk of new revelations on *The Alamo* and how he wanted to balance the story according to the new material. He was interested in showing both sides and to seek the truth as he retold the story. It was an unusual and most excellent beginning. After that, I took my family to Salta, Argentina, where I come from. My children and I rode horses on the same hills where I had witnessed Taras Bulba being made back in 1961. I was sixteen, then, and the making of the film in my hometown injected in me a lifelong passion for film and acting. We returned to Los Angeles by January 6th, on Three Kings' Day, and I got the news that I had been selected for the role of Castrillon. I noticed the similarity between Cástulo, my name, and that of Castrillón. I felt an affinity with the role.

AS: Did you have any prior knowledge about the Alamo before being part of the film?

CG: Other than the 1960 John Wayne version, I had no knowledge of The Alamo. I didn't have a good opinion of that film and I wondered how I could be of value to the new version. But my meeting with John Lee Hancock had made a good impression in me and had stirred a desire to learn all I could about it.

AS: How much research did you do to prepare yourself for the role? What were your references and how did you apply them to the General?

CG: There was a wealth of material and I had to be selective. But soon I had word from Dr. Arnaldo Vento, the Spanish Consultant at the University of Texas at Austin, who opened up the coffers of information on The Alamo in Spanish. He had articles and books on Castrillon and records of the Santa Anna campaigns that became essential to my view of the role.

AS : Most of the cast and extras had to train before walking onto the magnificent set. What type of training were you assigned to do? Weaponry? Horseback riding? What exactly?

CG: While I researched the history of the period, I started training with a wrangler in Riverside, California, who taught me the secrets of riding a horse on difficult terrain. As I became one with the horse, Castrillon started to show himself more clearly to me. Word came from production that they wanted me to intensify my training so as to be ready by my arrival in Austin. Every morning, I rode the hour out to horse country in Riverside. I was on a horse by six am and I trained till ten am. I practiced galloping, racing, crossing creeks, mud, going uphill, downhill and riding through the dense forest. Man and horse and a mission were the core for a soldier like Castrillón. My Mother had given me an antique crop with a silver handle while I visited her in Argentina. So I started using it during my training. Eventually, the prop master fell in love with the piece and it became Castrillón's trademark.

AS: I also noticed that a lot of work was done by Arnaldo Carlos Vento to use the accurate Spanish speaking dialect from 1836. Was it easy for you to work with, seeing as you had many dramatic speaking parts in the film?

CG: I flew into Austin on February 3, 2003, as the US prepared to launch an attack in the Middle East. There was a mood of nervousness and anticipation throughout the country. The minute I arrived I was taken to the location, where I tried on my costume, met the actors in my camp, and discussed the Spanish script with Dr. Vento. My meeting with Emilio Echevarría, who played Santa Anna, was electrical. His knowledge of Santa Anna and his campaigns was phenomenal. I knew that Castrillon was of Spanish origin and had spent some time in Cuba before joining Santa Anna in Veracruz. His speech was possibly a bit more polished than the common soldier, and perhaps had less "Mexican" elements. That would set him apart. For the next eleven weeks, Emilio, the other actors and

myself started to recreate along with Arnaldo Vento a balance within the dialogue, as it may have happened in 1836.

AS: How was it to work along side Emilio Echevarria and your fellow co-stars? I remember the scene when Emilio bursts into anger after your character's concern for the taking of prisoners and your reaction as well as his worked so well together!

CG: To me Emilio Echevarría is an actor's actor, both in talent and as a human being. It soon became important to us that we should constitute a strong and determined camp within the film. We didn't even have to say it. We became "the men of Santa Anna." Both on and off the set. The learning process was invaluable to me. We were not illegally invading foreign soil. We were defending Mexico. There was a natural camaraderie, a sense of respect, loyalty and nobility, which were to play up against the explosive temper of Santa Anna. The fine line between giving my honest and truthful military opinion as Castrillón, while remembering whom I was talking to, was an exercise in diplomacy. This was the case of our scene where Santa Anna loses his temper and bangs on the table. We did the scene many times and Echevarría became more incensed as Santa Anna; the scene was riveting, but his hand was red and swollen from banging on the silver covered table. The replica of the period, the heaviness of cloth and the drip of the candles was something to remember in this scene. The candles had been made in Massachusetts with a bee's wax method from the 1800s. Santa Anna, who admired Napoleon, liked to bring along his elements of comfort: glasses, crockery, and silverware.

AS: Can you describe a typical day on set? Any interesting stories you'd care to share?

CG: A typical day would be to get picked up at the hotel between four and five in the morning; to arrive on the set amidst hundreds of cast and crew; and to prepare for what the weather would bring us all by way of fate. A true feat of organization, stamina and Zen like patience. Costumes, props, weapons, and horses galore gave the fields a strange sense of reality. Blue bells gently decorated the side of roads that were trodden by beasts and carriages. Not to speak of the awesome veracity of the fort itself, the very Alamo. But my first day on the set was not typical at all. The temperature had dropped severely during the night. We were to shoot the arrival of General Cos' sad and beaten troops after a long march. Barefoot soldiers had to walk in the cold and frozen mud. Our breath could be seen against a gray landscape of defeat. Santa Anna, in a very bad mood, is ready to reprimand Cos. The camera is behind Santa Anna and Castrillon. Cos can be seen over our shoulders, in the distance. Mounted on magnificent horses, we are dressed to kill. But the horses are restless and they keep shifting from one side to the other and the cameraman is having a tough time focusing. Finally, the director approached us in embarrassment and said, "You guys look beautiful! But

I hate to say, we're gonna have to place you two on a couple of ladders to be able to focus, and maybe you can shift lightly to give the feeling that you are mounted on real horses. That's the movies for you! The scene where I parlay with Jason Patric as Jim Bowie –whom Castrillon calls “Santiago”–on the bridge was started “weather permitting” but couldn't be finished until a month later before we could match the light.

AS: One of the most heart-racing scenes is when Crockett is about to be executed and you approach General Santa Anna to spare his life. May you describe how it was to shoot those scenes?

CG: Each little scene added a new dimension to my role as Castrillon. The one where I attempt to spare the life of Crockett was one. Not only had Billy Bob Thornton been a gentleman and a great ally of the “Mexican” camp, always inquiring, “Are they treating you guys well?” As a character he was fun, and noble, and like the rest of us had been caught in an unfortunate crossfire of power and enmity. It also showed that not all shared the cruelty of Santa Anna. Crockett the man and the actor had to stoically suffer the gravel under his knees, take after take. He was deeply moving and realistic.

AS: Through the rest of the film, it seems as though your character has lost a lot of respect for General Santa Anna. Especially when you two share that look when he rides off during the Battle of San Jacinto. What are your thoughts on General Manuel Castrillon? A lot of Alamo historians admire him for his honor, courage, and sacrifice.

CG: The scene of the Battle of San Jacinto was one of those you keep in the book of your heart for life. Above all, a sense of deep respect for Castrillon and his honorable fate became like a crystal within me. Disillusionment and honor are two hard elements to coexist. Before Castrillon gets shot, Emilio Echevarría, being the exemplary human being he is, came to me and gave me a hug and a look of profound understanding. Even though a minute later he was to mount a horse and escape in his role as Santa Anna. Alan Huffines, the military advisor, also approached me and said, “Are you aware that Castrillón is the only Mexican military buried at San Jacinto? They had such respect for the man!” A wave of compassion invaded me towards Manuel Fernández de Castrillón and his valor. It takes a man of integrity to cross his arms and await his destiny while looking his enemy in the eye. It is perhaps the most moving experience I have had as an actor in a film. It is what makes our craft something exceptional at times.

AS: Describe the day that your death scene was shot. It seems a lot had to have been coordinated, since the shot you took to the face seemed so real!



CG: The detailed preparations, the hidden microphone, the rigging of my costume for the bullets, the timing along with the hand held camera; everything involving hundreds gave us a strong idea of what may have been the real battle. At a more mundane level, there were two complete identical outfits for Castrillón, each costing \$10,000. They had been embroidered in gold thread in India, which has kept the craft from the times of the British Empire. The specialists had rigged cables through my boots and breeches into my chest. At the surprise sound of battle, our troops carelessly caught while at rest, I advanced in front of a handheld camera. When I reached my mark, I turned to look at Santa Anna as he eloped leaving his men without a head. Unseen to the camera, a specialist connected hot wires to the cables in my boots. I crossed my arms, and someone detonated the two “bullets” hidden in my jacket. As is always the case, we were running late and losing the light. The AD became restless. No, neurotic. “We don’t have time to fix his jacket! Just get the other one ready!” The costume man almost fainted! He had meant to save the spare unit. That Monday, June 2, it was humid and 115 degrees on the battlefield.

AS: After audiences watched the film after it’s release, what did you hope they would walk away with?

CG: Historian Howard Zinn says that you can’t understand the present unless you understand the past. The fast pace of our present day has made us detached from a sense of history. I hoped that the audience would be able to learn something new and to understand such a crucial moment in the making of the United States as a country. We tend to take too many things for granted. The Alamo was not about the good guys versus the bad guys. The Alamo, in my view, was a cauldron of diverse and confusing elements. And a lot of innocents died in the crossfire. The Alamo is a capsule of events that have repeated themselves throughout history, again and again. On a personal note, I was thrilled by what reviewer Manohla Dargis said of my role as Castrillon for the Los Angeles Times: “As the president’s principled, often-appalled aide-de-camp, Castulo Guerra carves out his own corner of the film. “

AS: And finally, what have you done since The Alamo?

CG: Since The Alamo, on film, I have played a grandfather in a romantic comedy called Meet Me In Miami, and a mystical monk, Father José, in James Redfield's The Celestine Prophecy.

I have also appeared in various TV shows like CSI: Miami, opposite Sonia Braga, and The West Wing, opposite Jimmy Smits. For five years in a row I have played the Bishop in the giant annual production of The Virgen of Guadalupe at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Los Angeles. I recently played a military inquisitor in a play by Thomas Gibbons called A Private Act and performed at the New Los Angeles Theater Center. This piece is set in Argentina during the military Dirty War of the 1970s, and will become a film within the coming year. For my biography and filmography, people may visit my page at:

<http://www.castuloguerra.com>

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