

# Antonio Banderas

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A SON OF SPAIN RISES.



by William C. Reynolds

**O**n February 27 of this year, the stage of the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood went dark for a few moments. The network had cut away to a commercial, briefly interrupting the broadcast of the film world's yearly moment in the sun, the 77th Annual Academy Awards. The next part of the show had been highly anticipated, not only by the audience in the theater but by millions of viewers around the world. As the lights came up, the scene onstage caused a thunder of applause. There stood Rock and Roll Hall of Fame musician and 10-time Grammy® winner Carlos Santana, guitar in hand. Standing next to Santana was a white-shirted Antonio Banderas.

With the audience on their feet, the duo launched into their take of the Academy Award-nominated song from *The Motorcycle Diaries*, "Al Otro Lado Del Río." The song won an Oscar that night, and Santana and Banderas won the hearts of an ecstatic global audience. It marked the first time either Santana or Banderas had performed on an Oscar show or broadcast, but its effect and the statement it made were apparent and obvious, partly because of the film they celebrated. *The Motorcycle Diaries* is based on the journals of Che Guevara, leader of the Cuban Revolution. In his memoirs, Guevara recounts adventures that he and his best friend, Alberto Granado, had while crossing South America by motorcycle in the early 1950s. The two friends start off with the same goals and aspirations, but by the time the film is over, it's clear that each man's destiny has taken a different road. The film world and the entertainment industry, always a bit ahead of society's curve, were witnessing another level of perception and demographic shift demonstrating the importance of the Spanish language side of the business. And standing center stage, having his moment, was a perfect example: Antonio Banderas, a son of Spain on the rise.

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Banderas says of Zorro, "I don't see him as an ordinary hero."



Antonio Banderas and Carlos Santana perform the nominated song "Al Otro Lado del Río" from *The Motorcycle Diaries*, on stage at the 77th Annual Academy Awards® held at Hollywood's Kodak Theatre.

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Typical "Latin lover" press comments are seemingly everywhere around him. "Internationally known for his charisma and smoldering good looks, Antonio Banderas is the ultimate manifestation of the Latin heartthrob . . ." Get past those comments, and you will find someone quite centered and fiercely loyal to his Spanish heritage.

Banderas was born José Antonio Domínguez Bandera (with no *S*) in Málaga, an area of southern Spain, on August 10, 1960. His father was a policeman and his mother a schoolteacher. "I had a wonderfully uncomplicated childhood," he has said of his upbringing. "We were a very stable, happy, and typical middle-class family in the '60s." His principal talent at school was playing soccer, and as a boy he dreamed of becoming a professional football star. But his mother wanted him to follow a more traditional career path and become a teacher, and he actually spent some time studying at a Málaga seminary. The dream of a life in football ended with a badly broken foot during his early teens.

A boy of wide interests, Banderas at 14 saw a performance of the musical *Hair* at Málaga's local theater, and its effect on him would change the course of his young life. He was so entranced by the performance that he became determined to become an actor. Much to the distress of his family, he enrolled in a local drama school and put together a group of other young struggling actors and formed his own performing troupe. The group traveled to little towns all over Spain performing on the streets for change. In 1980, a week before his 20th birthday and with a little more than \$100 in his pocket, he packed his bag and moved to Madrid to pursue a serious acting career. "The idea of leaving came to me in a flash," he said of the move, "and the decision, like everything I've done in my life, was made in a matter of seconds."

Upon arriving in the Spanish capital, he lived the life of a starving artist, staying

with friends as he tried to make a living as an actor. Weary of sleeping on friends' couches and with acting parts hard to come by, he eventually joined the National Drama Center in Madrid, a move that he says was a change for the better. It was at that time, working as a waiter and taking small modeling jobs to provide for himself—making a fast \$10 a day—he was offered a role by a young radical film director and future Oscar winner, Pedro Almodóvar. Banderas' screen debut was a part in Almodóvar's comedy *Laberinto de Pasiones* (1982). It was Almodóvar who

suggested he use Antonio Banderas ("Add the *S*, señor") as his stage name. He went on to play minor roles in a handful of Spanish movies, but Almodóvar was one of the most outrageous and talented of an emerging breed of European cinematic pioneers and saw in the young actor a talent that could help him forge a new direction in the film industry. The actor and the director joined forces and made several respectable though controversial movies. Banderas' big moment came in Almodóvar's 1988 hit comedy *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. The zany



Hollywood hot couple Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith arrive at the 77th Annual Academy Awards® at the Kodak Theatre.



Antonio Banderas returns as Zorro to audience—and this crowd's—applause.

film brought Banderas international attention. That recognition increased two years later when he starred in Almodóvar's controversial *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* as—now here's a premise—a mental patient who kidnaps a porn star and keeps her tied up until she returns his love.

By the early 1990s, Banderas, loyal to a fault, realized it was time to break out on his own. It was a hard decision, as his time with Almodóvar had been fruitful beyond his career. Trying to forge a new direction, Banderas was ironically best known to moviegoers outside of Spain for his resistance—not political resistance, but resistance to the advances of one of his biggest fans, Madonna, in *Truth or Dare* (retitled *In Bed with Madonna*), a documentary of the singer's 1990 world tour. In that film, the actor catches the audience's attention as the sexy Spaniard who deftly deflects the advances of the world's hottest pop star.

After his Madonna moment, Banderas' first appearance in a major international production was alongside Armand Assante in *The Mambo Kings* (1992); though it wasn't a big hit, it did provide Banderas with a firm foothold in the United States. American director Arne Glimcher had cast Banderas in *The Mambo Kings* even though he couldn't speak English. A problem? Well, maybe not. Banderas was determined to conquer the language barrier and learned all his lines phonetically. He combined this with intensive English lessons at a Berlitz school and a frantic desire to learn and to succeed. "It was something that had to be done, and it had to be done well," he said of the experience. The outcome was a performance with a stunningly deep rendering of his lines that won him international praise. It proved something about the value of hard work, "something to tell the grandchildren: When one tries, really tries, one can succeed."

More roles came along with Hollywood A-list attention, and Banderas delivered more landmark performances. He played

opposite Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*. He starred in the dark *Desperado* directed by Robert Rodriguez (whom he worked with again in the blockbuster *Spy Kids* and sequels *Spy Kids 2* and *Spy Kids 3-D*). He donned a mask in Steven Spielberg's *The Mask of Zorro*. He even portrayed Che Guevara in the musical *Evita* opposite previous "co-star" Madonna.

Though he gained fame catching Madonna's eye, it was another actress who really caught his. The moment he first saw Melanie Griffith in person is etched in his mind. "It was at the 1994 Oscars. I remember she was dressed in white with pearls—I will always remember that. I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my life." At the time both were married, he to Ana Leza, whom he had met in on the set of *Women on the Verge* and wed in 1987, and Griffith to actor Don Johnson. Both would divorce. Banderas and Griffith married in 1996 and welcomed the birth of their daughter, Stella del Carmen, the following September. "Melanie and I have two lives, a professional one that we developed in Los Angeles—apart from which it's the city where Melanie was raised—and the other, more familial, in our house in Spain where we live when we don't work." It's a lifestyle with two worlds, and he wants to impart the best of both to his daughter. "I wanted that she have a marked Spanish character and that she speak the two languages very well. And clearly that she will respect her Anglo-Saxon side."

*His loyalty to his Spanish homeland, to its values and traditions, is significant and leveling for him. It shows in his portrayals of many Spanish figures in the history of the West.*

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His loyalty to his Spanish homeland, to its values and traditions, is significant and leveling for him. It shows in his portrayals of many Spanish figures in the history of the West. This interest in tradition and respect for the old ways have enabled him to portray the classic Western character Zorro with great authenticity, first in 1998's *The Mask of Zorro* with Academy Award winners Catherine Zeta-Jones and Anthony Hopkins and next in this fall's *The Legend of Zorro*. The new movie is not so much a sequel as it is another chapter in Zorro's life.

The history of the character Zorro—a perfect fit for Banderas—traces back to the beginning of the last century. In 1919, the pulp fiction magazine craze was in full gallop, and a retired police reporter by the name of Johnston McCulley wrote a story called "The Curse of Capistrano" for the magazine *All-Story Weekly*. Set in the early 19th century, the story told of one Don Diego Vega (Disney added "de la"), the son of a wealthy land-owning *ranchero* during the days prior to California's statehood. McCulley's character was a quiet, peace-loving patron who would rather read poetry than engage in violent undertakings. Ah, but it was only an act. For when night fell, Don Diego became Zorro ("The Fox"). Dressed as the night itself and riding a mighty black stallion, Zorro was a fighter of evil and a righter of wrongs. Sort of a Robin Hood of the West, he defended the weak and the downtrodden. McCulley



Catherine Zeta-Jones reprises her role as Elena, now Zorro's wife and new sword-wielding partner.

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may have had several models for his character, including the mystical *bandido* and California legend Joaquin Murieta. From that early incarnation, Zorro went on to be one of the West's most beloved fictional characters made famous during the 1950s by Walt Disney. The film and television series made a star of Guy Williams. And who can forget the rousingly romantic 1940 *The Mark of Zorro* with Tyrone Power as the Caped One meting out swashbuckling justice in Old California.

For Banderas, there is obvious attraction to a larger-than-life character such as Zorro. In the 2003 HBO film *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself*, Banderas plays the legendary bandit Pancho Villa. Finding himself without enough money to finance his war against the military-run government in Mexico, Villa also finds himself at odds with the Americans because of the Hearst media empire's emotional press campaign against him. To counter both of his problems, Banderas' Villa sends emissaries to a number of Hollywood movie producers to convince them to pay to film his progress and the actual battles. The beauty of this is that it's a true story and actually a pretty novel idea—sort

of a prequel to today's reality programs. Banderas loved the idea, as he said before the film aired. "This story itself is just unbelievable. Unbelievable. Many people who we talked to about this story, we say, You know, there was an American crew filming Pancho Villa in 1915 in Mexico, they say, That's not true, that was a fantasy, a legend. But it's true. It happened. So we're telling that story. And it's a portrait at the beginning of the century, a portrait of a very strong personality, a man who was an angel and evil all at the same time. The people of Mexico love him very much. Why? Because at the time of Pancho Villa there was incredible poverty. People didn't have anything, so Pancho Villa gave them something. They could belong to something, believe in something."

That romance and honor run through Banderas' portrayal of Zorro. It's as much about that romantic Spanish era in California as it is about the character. In his classic 1926 book, *Dawn and the Dons*, Terey Ford describes in gushing prose the temperament of Spanish California, specifically the area around Monterey where the Zorro films are supposed to be based. "...That festive spirit—so possible

in California, where all nature lends itself to every outdoor form of amusement—was the particular heritage of Spanish Monterey. A joyous temperament led the people to seek amusement in the open in the form of fiestas, picnics, rodeos, horse racing, and dancing. In the scale of social entertainments, the fandango, or general dance, ranked second only to the rodeo. It was such a frequent occurrence that all of Spanish Monterey seemed to spend most of their time riding horseback or dancing."

The character of that early California shows in Banderas' first effort, *The Mask of Zorro*, when an aging Don Diego decides he must hand his mask and sword on to another generation of Zorro (Banderas). "Following my character through the movie, you learn a lot," Banderas said. "He is showing how a childish, uneducated version of an 1800s hoodlum is transformed into a hero under Don Diego's tutelage and learns about discipline, honor, and responsibility in the process. The film maintains a romantic view of love in a variety of circumstances—the love of a father who doesn't see his son for 30 years and the love of two young people for a country, for a land."

The new *The Legend of Zorro* revisits Banderas' Zorro and his now wife, Elena (Catherine Zeta-Jones reprising her role). According to advance plot summaries, "Despite trying to start a new life in San Francisco and keep his swashbuckling to a minimum, a threat to California's pending statehood causes the adventure-loving Alejandro de la Vega (Banderas)—and his wife, Elena (Zeta-Jones)—Zorro's new partner—to take action against a new nemesis." While Zorro is far-fetched fun, Banderas plays the character filled with a rich and romantic Spanish heritage—and just a touch of a signature Banderas sense of humor—a throwback character to a time in Hollywood of strong-willed adventurers.

In Banderas, there's something reminiscent of those strong-willed adventurers.

**Family fun and looney adventure arrived in the three *Spy Kids* features with Banderas at the helm as Gregorio Cortez.**



It's a quality that allows him to see the essence and heart of his characters and play them like he really means it—with a smolder that's more in his mind and soul than in his sex appeal. Not your typical Latin lover leading man. Consider what he mined from working on the role of Pancho Villa: "[He] was very witty and very sharp. He loved his men—told jokes with them every night. He danced. He laughed. He was a character of many levels, of many elements, yet from a dramatic point of view, Pancho Villa is a dream. He's flexible. You can stretch him as much as you want. You can do practically anything that comes to your mind and put it in this king, this king Pancho Villa who was so mystical and important to his people. For him, everything is acceptable. Everything is acceptable."

That might as well describe the diverse talent of Antonio Banderas. Everything is acceptable. And everything is possible. From *Zorro* to *Shrek 2*, from *Desperado* to the upcoming *Puss in Boots*, this son of Spain shows no sign of dodging the possible. An actor tied to his own traditions, he has beaten the odds of stereotyping in a town that prefers to force actors into "types." Considered open, personable, and a delight to work with, Antonio Banderas has worked his own way into Hollywood and managed to stay there and in the hearts of his fans, still holding fast to his roots of home.

**TOP: The million-dollar voices behind the success of *Shrek 2*—from left, Antonio Banderas, Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, and Eddie Murphy. BOTTOM: The success of the two *Shrek* films created a spinoff opportunity for Banderas in *Puss in Boots* (scheduled for 2008 release).**