

STAND AND DELIVER

AN EXTRAORDINARY TEACHER

The students call the teacher Kimosabe. The teacher often karate-chops the students, wields a butcher knife and makes kids who haven't done their homework sit on the floor. Though this sounds like something out of a movie, it is based totally on fact. Jaime Escalante, math teacher extraordinaire, is alive and well and teaching at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. **Stand and Deliver** is his continuing story.

When Jaime (pronounced Hymie) Escalante, a Bolivian immigrant, reported for his first day at Garfield to teach computer science, he was informed that the school had no computers. Having already resigned from his well-paying electronic engineering job, he decided to stay. The inner-city school had a 50% drop-out rate, over 3,000 students from predominantly Hispanic lower-income backgrounds and was on the verge of losing its educational accreditation. Escalante would either dominate and succeed or be dominated and perish.

Stand and Deliver recounts how Escalante (Edward James Olmos) taught calculus to a group of Latinos. His teaching methods were and are unorthodox. He required students in his classes to sign a contract, agreeing to do no less than 30 hours homework a week, to come to class before and after regular school hours and to attend special sessions on Saturdays and holidays. He utilizes pop, funk, music and jokes to teach. His room is adorned with posters of Galileo, Einstein and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar making a sky hook. "The kids are drawn in because there's an application to math they can relate to," Escalante says. "The only thing the kids need to bring to class is *ganas* (desire)."

The results of these revolutionary classes are staggering. **Stand and Deliver** focuses on 1982. After completing the course, 18 students took the Advanced Placement calculus examination from a testing service in Princeton. The exam, which qualifies for one college credit, is so demanding that less than 2% of all high school students in the US even attempted it. All of Escalante's students passed, six with perfect scores.

The initial triumph was short-lived. Because of the school's poor reputation, the testing service



questioned how and why so many students could suddenly pass the exam. On reviewing the exams themselves, it was discovered that there was a distinct similarity in incorrect answers. The students scores were invalidated and contrary to the tenets of the judicial system, were considered guilty until proven innocent. And innocence could only be proven by rewriting the exam in a controlled environment!

Jaime Escalante and his students' story appeared in a local newspaper. This is how **Stand and Deliver's** writer/director Ramon Menendez and writer/producer Tony Musca first learned of the situation. "The idea of being truly innocent — and having to prove it — seemed like an interesting premise for a film" recalls Musca. "There was an enormous probability that the students' scores would never have been questioned had they not all come from Garfield High, with predominantly Hispanic surnames. In other words, there was the distinct possibility of institutional racism."

Menendez and Musca ended up hanging around Garfield High, attending Jaime's classes and talking to students, while they wrote their film script. They finally received support from Lindsay Law, the executive producer for PBS's American Playhouse. "What I saw was an underdog story about a teacher and a group of kids who strive for scholastic excellence," says Law.

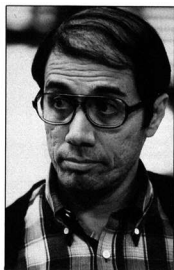
But who was going to play the teacher — the man whose students

call him Kimosabe, meaning a true friend? Edward James Olmos was contacted. Olmos received a 1985 Emmy award for his portrayal of the brooding and mysterious Lt. Martin Castillo on *Miami Vice*. He was keen to do a film and was so enthusiastic about **Stand and Deliver** that he joined Menendez and Musca in a production capacity.

"The concept of false accusation was a theme I had dealt with in my earlier film roles, both in *Zoot Suit*, as well as in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*," Olmos says.

Olmos and Escalante spent extensive amounts of time together, for a month of up to 18 hour days. They have become friends. Shaving his moustache, thinning his hair and putting on 40 pounds transformed Olmos. Students visiting the set were amazed at the resemblance between the actor and their teacher — some said they looked like brothers. Escalante himself was particularly impressed "I always thought he was just going to be Eddie Olmos playing the part, but the man I saw was 100% Escalante."

Another key role in **Stand and Deliver** is Angel, a cholo (gang member) torn between his loyalty to the gang and the possibility of a future beyond the barrio. Lou Diamond Phillips, hot from last year's *La Bamba* auditioned for the part. "Angel is the class cut-up," says Phillips. "It's a paradox to have an East LA cholo who looks like one and talks like one, but he knows he doesn't fit in with cholos, even though he tries. It's the teacher that turns him on."



Most of the kids who play Escalante's other students had little or no acting experience. Casting notices were printed in various magazines and attracted youths throughout the Southern California area. Rosana de Soto, cast as Ritchie Valens' mother in *La Bamba*, plays Escalante's wife Fabiola. Andy Garcia, seen recently as Treasury Agent George Stone in *The Untouchables* is cast as Dr. Ramirez, a busybody bureaucrat from the academic testing service.

Stand and Deliver is a remarkable story about a remarkable man. Those involved in the making of the picture worked closely with Escalante to bridge the potential gap between real life incident and the screen version. "What separates this film from others like it is its sense of humor" says Olmos. "Because, through humor, Escalante has been able to take one of the hardest academic subjects and make it understandable. His students not only excel in it, they become over-achievers beyond anybody's expectations."

Jaime Escalante still teaches at Garfield. In 1987, 87 students passed the complicated AP calculus test. This year, more than 160 students will take the exam. Kimosabe is still plugging along, a workaholic who expects an equal commitment from his students. But the ganas man has dreams of his own. "I'm a little anxious to have 200 students take the test" he says "maybe more. Once I've accomplished that, I'll feel I did what I had in mind." The chances are he'll never be satisfied — if it's 200 next year, it will be 300 the year after. "The door is open for any kid who has the desire to learn," Escalante says. "I do not look for gifted kids. I want ones who will do the work, follow the instructions of the coach."

—Nicole-marie Squires