

# **Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player Study Guide**

**Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player by Robert Rodríguez**

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# Plot Summary

*Rebel Without a Crew* tells the story of how Robert Rodriguez wrote and directed the movie *El Mariachi*, which is now considered a Hollywood classic, when he was only 23 years old and had a limited budget of \$7,000. This is an excerpt from the filmmaker's diary, so the story is told in the first person and gives a detailed and almost daily account of what Rodriguez has to go through to achieve his dream of making a feature film.

Rodriguez is from a large, Texas-based family with Latino origins. His fascination with movies and filmmaking starts when he is a just child. He is a patient child who uses his siblings as actors in his home movies, and as years go by he perfects his editing techniques, thanks to the family's two VCRs. All these years of practicing his craft using only elementary equipment pay off because he becomes better at directing and editing. This is why, with no formal directing training, Rodriguez starts winning awards for one of his home movies, "Bedhead," starring his younger sibling.

In school, Rodriguez meets Carlos Gallardo, an aspiring Mexican filmmaker, and their friendship continues even when Carlos returns home to Ciudad Acusa and Rodriguez enters University of Texas at Austin. After visiting a movie set in Ciudad Acusa in the spring of 1991, Rodriguez decides to write and direct his own feature movie. It will be called *El Mariachi*, and because Rodriguez expects it to not be very good, it will serve as a practice movie. He also plans to sell it to the straight-to-video Spanish film market.

The problem is that Rodriguez has no money for this film, so he decides to raise part of it by being a rat lab at Pharmaco, a pharmaceutical research institute, for thirty days. Once the script is written and money is raised, Rodriguez goes to Ciudad Acusa in the summer of 1991, where he and Gallardo hire actors on the spot, improvise several scenes, use makeshift costumes, and after a few weeks, wrap up the production of *El Mariachi*. Rodriguez returns home to start the long process of editing, but first he creates a very effective trailer for his movie.

When *El Mariachi* is ready to be sold, Rodriguez and Gallardo go to Los Angeles armed with a video that contains the trailer for *El Mariachi* and Rodriguez's home movie "Bedhead," which by now has won several awards. Although some of the Spanish language video companies seem interested in the movie, none follows through; consequently, Rodriguez turns to ICM, one of the biggest talent agencies in the country. Although the movie is in Spanish, its trailer gets the attention Rodriguez was hoping for and he gets signed by ICM. After this, an unlikely Hollywood version of a fairy tale begins for Rodriguez. He signs a contract with Columbia Pictures and although Rodriguez originally did not want *El Mariachi* to be released—it was only supposed to be his "practice movie"—he relents, and the movie is an instant hit at film festivals. *El Mariachi* even wins the prestigious Sundance Film Festival Audience Award. The movie receives the same enthusiasm once it is released nationally, and it even receives international acclaim a couple of years later. Because of his talent, his young age, but especially his story of selling his body to science to finance his movie, Rodriguez

becomes a media darling. What he seems to be happiest about, however, is that his story has inspired aspiring filmmakers to believe in themselves.



# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

*Rebel Without a Crew* tells the story of how Robert Rodriguez wrote and directed the movie *El Mariachi*, which is now considered a Hollywood classic, when he was only 23 years old and had a limited budget of \$7,000. This is an excerpt from the filmmaker's diary, so the story is told in the first person and gives a detailed and almost daily account of what Rodriguez has to go through to achieve his dream of making a feature film.

The book opens with Rodriguez's childhood memories as he recollects with nostalgia the times when his mother would take him and his siblings to the movies. The classic Hollywood movies that the author saw every week left a lasting impression on the young child; this is how his passion for images was born. In 5th grade, he started to draw and create animated movies, and while in 8th grade he decided to make real movies with his father's Super 8 camera, though the equipment was inadequate and the results disappointing. Thanks to Rodriguez's father's love for gadgets, the family eventually acquired a VCR. Rodriguez calls this "a miracle" because it finally gave him the tools he needed for his moviemaking. Rodriguez went from making clay-mation movies to making live action short movies. He shot everything he could, and because he grew up with nine siblings, he has his family to thank for the endless supply of actors.

It is when his father decided to buy another VCR that Rodriguez's filmmaking skills really took off. He was now able to edit his short films using both VCRs. Because this was a complicated process that had to be done in only one sitting, it forced Rodriguez to shoot as little raw footage as possible. He is thankful for this because the two-VCR system, which he used between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three, sharpened his pre-visualization skills and taught him how to edit quickly; these are the precise skills that helped him later in his career.

His mother's love of movies and his father's fascination with electronics exposed Rodriguez not only to movies but also to filmmaking, so he was able to choose his career path at a very young age. Although he encountered technical problems with his father's old equipment, Rodriguez was not one to give up. In an almost obsessive manner, Rodriguez is able to sit for hours and work on his movie projects; these years of trial and error experience, combined with his determination, created his filmmaking style—fast and effective.

While in private school, Rodriguez met Carlos Gallardo, another budding filmmaker, who was originally from Ciudad Acusa, a small town in Mexico. In the summer Rodriguez would often visit Gallardo in Acusa, and together they would shoot short "action comedies." These movies were played on Acusa's local television channel and in dance clubs.



Although Rodriguez's grades were never good, he managed to make the honor roll by his junior year in high school. He explains that being able to follow his passion for filmmaking probably boosted his self-esteem and his grades, as well.

He went to University of Texas at Austin on a scholarship and applied to the Film Department, but he found out that first he needed to take prerequisite classes such as math and English for two years. Those were the kind of classes he hated, so after two years his grades were so low that he was refused admission to the Film Department.

While working on improving his grades, Rodriguez started working as a cartoonist for his university's newspaper. He created a comic strip based on his little sister, entitled "Los Hooligans." He won a few video festival awards for his short home movies, but when one of his movies won first place in a national film festival, he took it to a film professor at UT, who then agreed to let him into the class. Instead of working to improve his grades to be admitted, he convinced a professor to let him in; however, in reality, his talent did all of the talking, because his award-winning short film "Bedhead" was what impressed the professor so much.

Being admitted into the film program gave Rodriguez access to the equipment he needed to create higher quality material. Using one of the school's 16mm cameras and a very limited budget, he shot the eight-minute "Bedhead," once again using his siblings as actors. By editing his film on video he was able to lower the cost. One of Rodriguez's traits is that he does not like to waste money, which is likely because of his humble background and his large family. This near obsession for saving money ultimately proves crucial in the making of *El Mariachi*.

"Bedhead" went on to win several festival awards, and this encouraged Rodriguez to make a feature film his next project. The experience he gained by supervising all aspects of making a total of thirty short films by himself proved invaluable, and he was now ready to enter the feature film arena. Rodriguez criticizes film students who spend too much time learning the theory while never actually shooting anything. He strongly believes that only experience can make a filmmaker, and he tells budding filmmakers that they do not really need to go to film school because it only teaches how to make a big budget movie or how to make contacts. Telling a story, Rodriguez adds, is unique and cannot be taught.

His goal with *El Mariachi* was to write two scripts that he would direct with no crew, meaning with a minimal budget, and then sell the movie to the Spanish market. This way he would practice writing scripts as well as making feature films; he would make many mistakes and learn from them. Then, armed with this experience, he would write and direct the third and best installment of his *El Mariachi* series. After this he would break into the American independent movie market. An excited and inspired Rodriguez wrote the first *Mariachi* script in only three weeks.

In March of 1991, Rodriguez writes, his friend Gallardo invited him to his hometown to see how the movie *Like Water for Chocolate* was being filmed. Gallardo was working with the production team. Rodriguez, who was on spring break, decided to go.



# Chapter One, "The Idea"

## Chapter One, "The Idea" Summary and Analysis

The body of *Rebel Without a Crew* consists of Robert Rodriguez's diary. In this chapter dealing with how Rodriguez developed the idea for his movie, his entries go from March 8th through May 29th of 1991.

Rodriguez arrives at Ciudad Acusa feeling sick. He is introduced to Alfonso Arau, the director of *Like Water for Chocolate* and his wife, Laura Esquivel, the author of the novel that the movie is based upon. After a visit to the doctor, Rodriguez finally feels better, so on his following visit to the set, he gives a copy of "Bedhead" to Laura Esquivel, hoping that she can get her busy husband to watch it, too. He was right; the next day, Laura and Alfonso both congratulate his directing skills.

The production manager makes an offer to Rodriguez and Gallardo—they would make a Spanish video action movie for him for \$30,000 in exchange for no pay. Rodriguez and Gallardo decline and think they would be better off making their own movie. That is when Rodriguez remembers a story he had been thinking about—a man with a guitar full of weapons, named The Mariachi. It seems like seeing the actual shooting of a feature film in Mexico has convinced Rodriguez to go ahead, develop the Mariachi idea, and make his own movie. Alfonso Arau and his wife's congratulations on Rodriguez's directing skills might also have encouraged him to take the leap.

Once he is back in school, Rodriguez starts working on a short film entitled "Pretty Good Man," and it receives an enthusiastic response from his fellow students, which encourages him even more to make a feature film.

Rodriguez remembers how his first boss once told him that being creative was good but being creative *and* technical was even better. Because of this, Rodriguez believes he should work on a film without a crew; this way he would learn to be technical, too. This combined with older equipment and Rodriguez's system of minimum takes and video editing would allow him and Gallardo to film *El Mariachi* for only \$8,000. However, when Rodriguez runs this idea by one of his film school professors, the professor insists that such a project would fail and that Rodriguez needs to learn how to delegate—that Rodriguez could not accomplish this. Rodriguez manages to change the professor's mind as he explains that he single-handedly made his award-winning short movies. The professor eventually offers him plenty of advice on how to be careful with the production money. Not only does Rodriguez have talent, but he is also a hard worker who is not afraid to replace a whole crew. What is interesting is how contagious his enthusiasm proves to be, because it succeeds in changing his skeptical professor's mind.

Rodriguez is considering being used in a drug study conducted by Pharmaco, a research center. They offer \$3,000 and the candidates would need to stay at the center for a month. Rodriguez thinks it would be a well-deserved vacation away from his two





jobs and school. It might also be a great place to write his script. It is obvious once again that Rodriguez likes to be in control. He wants to be a one-man crew and refuses to borrow, and therefore to owe, any money; because of this, he considers being locked up for a medical study in exchange for money. His interest in Pharmaco shows that Rodriguez is also ready to go to extremes to get what he wants by his own means.

In an attempt to size up their competition, Gallardo and Rodriguez rent Spanish action videos and find that most of them, in spite of having at least one famous actor, are bad. Rodriguez is certain that he and Gallardo can do much better on their small budget in Acusa. All they would need is a famous actor, so Gallardo tells Rodriguez he could try and get Lina Santos, an actress and family friend.

So far, Rodriguez only has one scene completed wherein the Mariachi tries to find work at a restaurant but is turned down. Later Azul, who also carries a guitar case, enters the same restaurant, opens his case, and shoots several men down. When he leaves, he is described as a man dressed in black carrying a guitar case, just like El Mariachi.

Rodriguez is being screened for the Pharmaco study. He really hopes to be picked because this money would be more than welcome for his *Mariachi* project, especially since he does not want to borrow money. The word seems to be getting out about Rodriguez's Spanish video project because he receives an offer from someone he describes as a "shark of a producer." He of course declines it because he is very careful about other people's business offers, and he also seems to fear that he is going to be taken advantage of by more ruthless businessmen. Next, Rodriguez is excited to report that "Bedhead" has won the University of Missouri Fine Arts Competition. This is the third time that "Bedhead" has won first place.



## Chapter Two, "I Was A Human Lab Rat"

### Chapter Two, "I Was A Human Lab Rat" Summary and Analysis

The entries in the second chapter date from the 31st of May until the 3rd of July in 1991. In his introduction to this chapter, Rodriguez writes that he participated in Pharmaco research studies before. Originally he thought that it was not worth enduring the side effects caused by medical experiments for money. He changed his tune, however, when he found himself penniless. The first time he did it, he was paid \$2,000 to test a speed healing drug. For this, he had to be wounded; to this day, he still bears two tiny scars on his arm as proof. He used the money earned to make "Bedhead," which later won several awards. Rodriguez concludes that when money is earned through such suffering it makes one think hard about how to spend said money. Therefore, when the \$3,000 study came up, Rodriguez thought it would be perfect for him, as he would be paid and would have a whole month away from his life to write his script. He is exhausted from working hard on his short films in addition to working two jobs, and he only wants some peace. Little does he know what awaits him at the laboratory. Once at Pharmaco, Rodriguez is very observant, which is probably required of filmmakers since they are storytellers. This chapter contains many details on the procedures he and his fellow study participants endure. Rodriguez explains the meticulous screening that the applicants go through when they first register. For the study to be conducted, the participants need to be in good health, which means that they have to go through a series of tests. The wait for the final results is almost unbearable as Rodriguez realizes that he really needs this money and cannot go back—he has already quit his two jobs. Finally, he is admitted as part of the Red team and decides to put his plans on hold for a week and just relax for once. Although his blood has to be drawn on a daily basis, Rodriguez is enjoying his four meals a day. His roommate's name is Peter Marquardt.

Life at the research center is carefully planned and any infraction to the schedule results in a fine. Rodriguez is bored by the slow pace of life and as there is not much to do; he seems to be observing everything and everyone around him. This is how he realizes that he and Peter are reading the same Stephen King book. Next, Rodriguez feels humiliated by a new procedure that consists of collecting his stools and then discussing them with a technician. He has only been at Pharmaco for a week but he is already sick of the lab rat life. His description of his previous stay sounds traumatic, but he feels that he does not really have any other options to keep from having to borrow money. If he wants money for his movie, he has to be a lab rat for a month.

Back in the script-writing mode, Rodriguez contacts a film school professor who gives him advice on how to cut costs on *El Mariachi* by using a negative film. As Rodriguez is always eager to learn more about his chosen trade, he is thankful for his professor's advice because it teaches him something he did not already know.



The only entertainments at Pharmaco are video rentals, television, and playing pool. Rodriguez is still bored, but he enjoys watching the other "lab rats," the Teal Blue team in particular, as they are on a very strict low-calorie diet. Hunger is getting at them, so some of them end up stealing food from the cafeteria. After watching several videos, the group seems to think that Peter, Rodriguez's roommate, looks like several famous actors, which is enough for Rodriguez to decide that Peter will be the villain in his movie. After Elizabeth, Rodriguez's wife, visits him and brings him some of his short films, the Red team members enjoy watching them and Peter accepts the offer to act in *El Mariachi*, which will be filmed in Mexico. Rodriguez is happy with his skeleton of a script. He has now written several *El Mariachi* scenes and has elaborated the Mariachi's case of mistaken identity, complete with villain attacking him.

In an interesting observation of human nature, Rodriguez realizes that members of various teams at the research center tend to group themselves with people assigned to the same color group. Pondering his career possibilities, he notes that June 20th is his 23rd birthday. As he reflects on Orson Wells and Stephen Spielberg's careers, Rodriguez thinks he only has a couple of more years to make his breakout movie. He is certain that the three *Mariachi* movies will give him the necessary experience for that day.

Rodriguez is excited because "Bedhead" has won another festival and this first place comes with \$700 that he will use in *El Mariachi*.

Gallardo is in Acusa filming locations that Rodriguez may use in the movie. Gallardo is also looking for an actress and making contact with the Spanish video industry. Rodriguez advises him to take guitar lessons for his role as the Mariachi, and Rodriguez has decided to name Peter's character Moco. At Pharmaco, to Rodriguez's amusement, the Teal Blue team's misadventures continue as the perpetrators of the cafeteria theft are discovered and fined. Rodriguez now prefers to be awake at night to write, as he finds this schedule more productive.

Rodriguez and his friends all long for freedom again, and fortunately they only have a few more days to go; Rodriguez keeps busy with his writing. Rodriguez explains that many of the study subjects are there because they need to pay off credit card debt. In an interesting analysis, Rodriguez concludes that there might be a conspiracy to flood college campuses with credit card offers and then have students commit themselves to research studies at places like Pharmaco, which are conveniently located near those campuses. Although Rodriguez writes at length about tests, reactions, team members, and conspiracy theory, he is bored by the slow pace of life at Pharmaco, so any distraction is welcome. His boredom also allows him to flesh out his story of *El Mariachi*; therefore, his stay at Pharmaco, although strange, is very productive, he writes most of the scenes for his movie during this thirty-day stay.



# Chapter Three, "Preproduction"

## Chapter Three, "Preproduction" Summary and Analysis

One word can sum up this entire chapter - improvisation. From costumes to finding locations and actors, everything is improvised, so at first it is a bit of a struggle. In preparation for the shooting in Mexico, Gallardo has found an outfit for his role, but it is not entirely black. Because of lack of funds, there is no other choice, though. Similarly, Rodriguez is restricted in his choice of material, as he thinks the quality of the image might suffer from it. Nonetheless, he is certain that his shooting and editing style will compensate for any inadequacies in costuming. Once in Acusa, Rodriguez and Gallardo's search for a female actress continues, and so does their quest for the perfect set: a bar, a jail, and a bedroom with a large bathtub, among other locations. After a bit of a struggle, they do manage to find everything they need.

Rodriguez is ecstatic about his new camera, an Arriflex that he borrowed from a friend in Austin, because although he does not know how to operate it, he is certain that the quality of the images will be good. Rodriguez is definitely not afraid of a challenge; he is so excited about his new camera that he does not worry about the fact that he cannot operate it. As with everything else, he figures he will improvise and learn the hard way. Now that almost everything is ready, he feels prepared to go on this adventure. However, in another introspective moment, Rodriguez reiterates how he is afraid of failure and how this plays a role in him wanting to control everything about the making of *El Mariachi*. For instance, although his film school friend, Tommy Nix, offers a hand, Rodriguez turns him down because he does not want to have a witness in case the movie is a failure.

After Rodriguez goes back to Mexico, he and Gallardo look for a costume for their friend Reinol Martinez, who will play Azul, the villain who gets confused with the Mariachi. Reinol ends up with a makeshift costume. Rodriguez seems amused by his tight budget and he refers to the whole thing as "el cheapo productions." By chance Rodriguez finds Juan Suarez, a musician who agrees to compose music for the movie. Still without an actress, Rodriguez and Gallardo try to persuade Lina Santos once again. Although the famous actress promises to check her schedule, she does not really seem interested in this low-budget action movie. A bit disappointed, Rodriguez carries on with the planning and records a couple of songs by Juan Suarez; they call one of them "Mariachi Love Theme."

Finally, Gallardo finds an actress to play the role of Domino. Her name is Consuelo Gomez and she has no experience, but she agrees to help them. Gallardo is excited and Rodriguez likes her, but he still hopes he can find a real actress. In spite of the fact that Gallardo and Rodriguez are not professionals and that they have a very low budget for their feature film, everything somehow falls into place. They end up using local

people as actors. They are also very lucky because their meeting with Juan Suarez, the musician, happened by accident.

Although Rodriguez writes from the beginning of *Rebel Without a Crew* that he did it all and that he is basically a one-man show, this chapter shows otherwise. His friend Gallardo, who gives him access to a real movie set in the previous chapter, is very present at every step of preproduction. Gallardo is the one who secures permission, uses his relations, and finds actors. Gallardo is particularly useful in finding the actress who plays the role of Domino. Without Gallardo, it probably would have taken Rodriguez much longer to accomplish the film.



# Chapter Four, "Production"

## Chapter Four, "Production" Summary and Analysis

This chapter gives a detailed account of the shooting of *El Mariachi*. Rodriguez's entries span from the 31st of July until August 30th of 1991. Scenes with Reinol Martinez, the man who plays Azul, are shot first. The cast and the crew (Rodriguez and Gallardo) have to endure burning temperatures, yet they show great enthusiasm. Because of the heat, Azul forgets to put his jacket back on for one scene, but Rodriguez does not want to re-shoot the scene because he is still trying to conserve film. This movie is supposed to be Rodriguez's practice movie, and he wants to learn from it and make better movies in the future; as a result, he does not seem to care too much about the details. Even when he notices an error, he does not feel the need to re-shoot the scene. A relaxed Rodriguez only hopes that the mistake will not be too noticeable.

As one would expect, the commotion caused by Rodriguez's movie in this quiet border town brings the attention of the local media, and Gallardo finds himself on the cover of *Texas Times*. They want to interview Rodriguez, too, but he prefers to remain behind the scenes and claims that Gallardo is the one who wants to be famous.

In spite of Rodriguez and Gallardo's efforts, Lina Santos still will not commit to being in the movie. The shooting continues nevertheless, and Rodriguez gets a little frustrated with having to perform so many duties. The improvising continues as well. Little by little, Rodriguez and Gallardo are finding the equipment they need by using Gallardo's connections. Now, even the actors chip in; for instance, Azul has to pull Rodriguez in a wheelchair for a particular shot.

Rodriguez is using a turtle (that Azul finds) for a scene with Gallardo and gets excited about the idea of a turtle walking to town with the Mariachi; he likes this idea so much that he goes against his self-imposed rationing of material and shoots two takes. What is interesting is that he shows no hesitation in shooting the turtle scene twice, whereas he refuses to re-shoot the scene with Azul and his jacket. For some reason this eccentric filmmaker, who relies on improvising, gets very excited about the idea of the found turtle walking on the road with the Mariachi. After this they come across a coconut stand and an inspired Rodriguez decides to shoot a scene of the Mariachi drinking from a coconut.

Rodriguez finally agrees to take on Consuelo, Gallardo's friend, to play the female lead, Domino. A little boy from Acuna is also hired to play a character in the movie. A self-deprecating Rodriguez calls his movie "an art film" because it really is a patchwork of improvised scenes and actors. With the help of the local police, Rodriguez is able to shoot a chase scene between the villains and the Mariachi. They are using real guns borrowed from the police, so Rodriguez predicts that he will have to work hard to edit this scene to make it look as though these guns, which can only shoot one bullet at a time, are semi-automatic.



In an attempt to finish production early, Rodriguez wants to film scenes fast, so he packs up several scenes each day. The local paper publishes an article about *El Mariachi* on its front page. Rodriguez is happy that the shooting is going well. Now that Peter has arrived from Texas, they can shoot his scenes. The problem is that he does not speak Spanish, so an ingenious Rodriguez comes up with a visual trick: Peter hides his lines in his hand and wears sunglasses so that he does not look like he is reading from his hand. Rodriguez also decides to rig the squibs to make the bloody scenes more realistic. Rodriguez is very resourceful and seems to function on instinct - whatever looks or feels good at the moment is what will work for him. For instance, he hires a local boy on the spot and turns him into an actor. He also comes up with an ingenious idea to solve Peter's dilemma. It is obvious that it is Rodriguez's filmmaking style and resourcefulness that make it possible for him to make a successful movie with such a small budget.

An entire day is wasted because the new film shipment has not arrived. When it finally does, the production of the movie intensifies and shooting resumes with several scenes, including those with the villains and with Domino. Rodriguez is a bit worried that he will encounter a problem with sound (because the movie will be dubbed) so he plans on recording everything. Also, his back hurts from the nonstop shooting and, to make matters worse, on Friday, August 16th, he is informed that the camera's owner will need it back on Tuesday the 20th. This prompts Rodriguez to accelerate the shooting even more, but he is not quite sure that production will be done by then. Gallardo and Taco have to do their own stunt scenes and manage to make them look very realistic, perhaps getting a bit hurt in the process. This time even the actors help out, but Gallardo's role is still very central—he acts, he helps out with movie production, and he uses his many contacts to obtain a wheelchair from the hospital.

The *Mariachi* team manages to finish shooting all of the indoor scenes, but on Monday, the day Rodriguez plans to shoot outdoor scenes, it starts to rain *and* the motorcycle they were going to use breaks down. This is the last day before the deadline, when the camera must be returned. Fortunately, Gallardo fixes the motorcycle and the rain stops. By Tuesday afternoon, shooting is complete with scenes and sounds, and Rodriguez heads back to Texas to return the camera. There are 250 minutes of film, so Rodriguez will have to do some serious editing on his film, but he seems satisfied with all of his work.



# Chapter Five, "Postproduction"

## Chapter Five, "Postproduction" Summary and Analysis

In the introduction to this chapter, Rodriguez writes that he was surprised to find that having his rolls of film developed and transferred to video cost only \$6500, which was \$500 less than the original budget. The task at hand is now to reduce the four hours of footage to an acceptable length for his action movie, but first Rodriguez studies the footage to make an attractive, fast-paced trailer for *El Mariachi*, which will help him entice movie distributors. The entries in this section are from September 5, 1991 to November 26, 1991.

Rodriguez uses his old double VCR system to edit the trailer. He is very focused and ends up with three trailers for his movie, each with a different soundtrack. Not only is Rodriguez a creative person, but he also seems to be business savvy. He knows that an attractive trailer will be more interesting to potential buyers than a simple pitch. He knows the power of images and this is why he invests so much time in making three different versions of the trailer. After showing the third trailer, which is his favorite, to some friends, he is excited because they all really liked it. When his trailer is aired on September 23rd on public access television, it receives positive responses from viewers. Rodriguez appears on the air, too, to discuss how he made the movie. He also gives some tips about creating an expensive-looking film with a limited budget.

Now that the trailer is out of the way, Rodriguez decides to make a rough edit at home before doing a full edit of the film. When he is given access to old equipment at the cable station he decides to work on dialogue syncing—he has to line the dialogue (recorded separately) with the images. Editing the movie will take even longer than working on three trailers, but the positive professional comments he receives encourage him to keep going. His dedication is reminiscent of the time when he would spend hours drawing cartoons as a child; it seems that once he decides to do something he will not stop until he sees the finished product. After spending hours and hours working on the movie, however, his back goes out and he needs to take a break.

On October 7th, Rodriguez is informed that the cable station will be closed in mid-November, so in spite of his back pain, he pushes himself to work harder on the movie, as his plan is to go to Los Angeles to sell his movie before Christmas. He really needs the money that he expects to make from *El Mariachi*.

There's a problem with some of Gallardo's lines and Rodriguez thinks he needs to re-record them, so he and his wife drive to Mexico to work with Gallardo. Several days into the editing process, however, Rodriguez stops having fun; he is visibly overwhelmed by the amount of work that the movie requires. Replacing a large crew finally takes its toll on him and he gives in to despair. Clearly Rodriguez is a hard worker but he only likes to work on things he enjoys, and at this point it seems like he is not enjoying working on





*El Mariachi* anymore. He used to enjoy it, but now he says that it feels like real work. Because of this, Rodriguez is even considering not making a sequel.

Although it's hard, Rodriguez does not give up because he likes to learn. As his former professor said, it's better to be both creative and technical. By learning how to handle all the postproduction details, he is definitely acquiring some technical training. After two weeks spent on dialogue syncing, Rodriguez manages to find more music for the movie. Thanks to his at-home rough cut of *El Mariachi*, Rodriguez is able to edit the final version at the cable station faster than he had expected and his spirit lifts up again. Then Rodriguez encounters Dominic Kancilla, who works for the Texas Film Commission. Impressed by "Bedhead" and what he saw of *El Mariachi* at the cable station, Dominic wants to show Rodriguez's demo tape at a conference with Hollywood producers organized by the Commission. Rodriguez is excited, but a few days later he hears that the conference fell through.

In his quest for more songs for *El Mariachi*, Rodriguez secures music by Marc Trujillo, a former *Daily Texan* colleague, and by his own brother, Cecil Rodriguez. A few days later, Gallardo joins Rodriguez in Texas and together they work on the final narration, and they also decide to call the movie "A Los Hooligans Production" after Rodriguez's cartoon. Rodriguez is being very careful to avoid the dreadful sound that most straight-to-video Spanish action movies have, but while putting the last touches to the movie, he works long hours and is forgotten and locked in the cable station building several times.

When the editing of the movie is finally over, Rodriguez is moved and excited at the same time. When his wife asks to view it, however, he becomes nervous and starts doubting the quality of his movie. He finally relents and is pleasantly surprised that Elizabeth likes the movie. An exhausted Rodriguez writes that he is still not quite sure that she liked it because she's his wife; he also wonders whether she was being honest because now that it is time to try and sell the movie, he cannot really tell whether his movie is any good.



# Chapter Six, "Highway to Hell"

## Chapter Six, "Highway to Hell" Summary and Analysis

As always, Rodriguez and Gallardo do everything themselves and as always, they are short on money. They therefore resort to driving to Los Angeles and staying at a friend's place. Because of their very limited budget they cannot spend too much time in Los Angeles, so they have to pound the pavement for a contract. As the title of this chapter implies, it is "hell" to find a contract for the movie. This chapter's entries go from December 1, 1991 to December 24, 1991.

Gallardo and Rodriguez's plan is to drive to California, sleep at their friend's place, and literally go door to door to sell *El Mariachi* to the Spanish speaking video market. In Los Angeles they try the following companies: Film-Mex, Mex-American, Million Dollar Video, and Tel-Star. In San Diego, they meet with the president of Cine-Mex. Only Mex-American seems interested in making them a reasonable offer. Rodriguez experiences mixed feelings in this chapter because going door to door and trying to woo the Spanish-language video companies proves to be quite difficult. Most of these companies seem to be conducting shady business, trying to make a profit by exploiting their contractors.

Rodriguez and Gallardo's budget is so limited that they can only afford one meal a day, so they are shocked when they eventually meet with Mex-American's co-president, Javier, and he offers them \$25,000 for the movie. However, Rodriguez, who has a good business sense, would prefer somewhere between \$30,000 and \$50,000, so he turns it down but promises to come back if the movie does not get better offers. Rodriguez is almost starving, living on one meal a day, so he could have jumped on Mex-American's offer the first time it was on the table yet he did not, thinking that he could do better. The reason for this is perhaps that now that its trailer has received great reviews, Rodriguez knows the movie's worth. Although *El Mariachi* was supposed to be a throwaway movie, Rodriguez now believes he can make a very good profit. However at MexCinema, they are only offered \$10,000 and a share in the profits, which will take months to materialize, so Rodriguez decides to accept Mex-American's offer. He asks them to draw the contract and have the check ready.

In the meantime, Rodriguez, who is always willing to try new things, decides to send his tape to ICM, the one of the biggest agencies in the country. He works up the nerve to call ICM, a major talent agency. He manages to convince them to accept his demo tape, which contains "Bedhead" and the trailer of *El Mariachi*. When the demo he has left does not work properly, Rodriguez needs to drop off another one, and he finds himself in the office of Robert Newman, an ICM agent. Newman is impressed that the cost of the movie was so low but that it received a \$25,000 offer. He promises to watch the tape. Newman does more than watch the tape, however. When he calls Rodriguez back a few days later it is to let him know that he loves the trailer and that he wants to work



with him. Rodriguez is ecstatic. He now needs to go back home, add subtitles to the movie, and send a copy to Newman in Los Angeles.

Mex-American has drawn a \$10,000 contract for Rodriguez, claiming that the remaining \$15,000 will be provided by their sister company in Mexico. They suggest that he sign the American contract first, but Rodriguez is suspicious and refuses to sign until the Mexican contract arrives. Meanwhile Rodriguez works on his painting of a *Mariachi* poster. As Christmas gets closer, he really wants to go back home, but no check has arrived. On December 23rd, he and Gallardo drive back to Texas empty-handed. Rodriguez sounds disappointed but he still believes that the contract will come through and he will just handle everything by mail.



# Chapter Seven, "The Chase"

## Chapter Seven, "The Chase" Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Rodriguez writes about how he ends up landing an agent and a Hollywood contract for *El Mariachi*. This chapter shows Rodriguez under a different light. As he goes the conventional route and finds an agent to represent him he does not seem to be a rebel anymore. This, however, turns out to be his best move because as soon as he has his foot in the door, via ICM, everything goes very quickly and *El Mariachi* becomes the talk of Hollywood. Indeed, the news about his unusual filmmaking and his talent spreads fast. The entries go from January 13th to April 10, 1992.

After hearing details about how fast the movie was made and for how much, Robert Newman and other agents from ICM cannot wait to see *El Mariachi*. When Rodriguez finishes adding subtitles to it and sends it off to L.A., the ICM agents view it and immediately want to become Rodriguez's agents. Although Newman does not think that Miramax, a famous film company, would want *El Mariachi* because it is considered a foreign movie, with no famous actors in it, Rodriguez still wants to offer it to them.

Rodriguez has not heard from Mex-American yet and although they seemed genuinely interested in conducting the transaction with Rodriguez, they do not follow through; therefore, the question of whether they will purchase *El Mariachi* remains up in the air. But there is more great news for "Bedhead"—it ties for first place at another festival. The next day Rodriguez signs the ICM contract. All of a sudden, everything is going well, he has an agent from one of the best American talent agencies and everyone that he gives a copy of his movie to ends up loving it. For instance, the owner of a movie theater in Austin informs Rodriguez that he is taking a copy of *El Mariachi* to the Berlin Film Festival, whereas Newman wants to send it to the Cannes Festival. Finally Mex-American calls Rodriguez to let him know that the contracts are ready and are being mailed to him. The biggest surprise is that Tri Star pictures and Columbia Pictures are now interested in *El Mariachi*. According to Rodriguez's agent, the other major Hollywood companies have also received a copy and all of them are interested.

After Rodriguez receives several phone calls from the Hollywood companies he seems a bit overwhelmed by how fast things are happening, but he decides to go meet them in person. After a brief phone conversation with his agent, Rodriguez finds it strange that he could earn around \$250,000 for *El Mariachi* and double or triple for subsequent movies. On his way to meeting the major movie companies, Rodriguez gets a taste of the Hollywood lifestyle: a limousine picks him up, he stays at a luxurious hotel, and a rental car is waiting for him. Unaccustomed to such treatment, Rodriguez thinks of this as a vacation.

Rodriguez meets with Trilogy and TriStar, then flies back home. Back in Texas, Rodriguez goes from one surprise to another as he is contacted by Disney and Columbia, and both companies want to fly him back to California for meetings. In the



meantime, TriStar informs Rodriguez that they would like to work on an action movie with him and his budget would be up to ten million dollars. Everything seems a bit too much for Rodriguez who is used to struggling.

The story of the making of *El Mariachi* appears to be a great selling point to the Hollywood companies and now Rodriguez considers turning his Pharmaco episode into a movie entitled *Needles*. In the meantime, he reads the scripts of several hit movies, as he feels that it will teach him how to write a proper script. Apparently the word about *El Mariachi* is spreading in Hollywood and the phone calls continue—this time Rodriguez hears from Steel Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, and Paramount Pictures among others. They also want to meet with him.

Rodriguez has not received the MexAmerican contracts and when he attempts to contact them, no one answers. So Rodriguez flies to L.A. to start a new round of meetings and once again receives the star treatment with fancy accommodations. When Disney representatives discuss the remake of the movie with him, Rodriguez does not like their "commercial" take on the story. When he meets with them again the next day he sounds like does not really want to commit. However, he does think that he might work on a remake with Disney provided they let him be in control.

Meanwhile, his ICM agents think that Columbia, Paramount, and TriStar are seriously interested in working with him so they will probably make an offer soon. Now that Rodriguez is being courted by several film companies he mockingly calls himself a "whore" because he feels like he's willing to do anything to get a filmmaking deal. Overall he thinks that Columbia likes his ideas the most.

His agents keep showing his movie to Hollywood moguls and they even sent a copy to Spielberg. When Rodriguez's agent takes him to the premiere of the movie *The Player*, he is absolutely star struck by all the celebrities around him. This chapter contrasts with the previous one in that Rodriguez is not in straight-to-video hell anymore, but rather in movie heaven. Rodriguez discovers a new world, the Hollywood lifestyle, where everything is paid for. Rodriguez is now certain that he wants to be able to reside in Texas even if he works for Hollywood. He even calls living there a curse, so before anything concrete happens, he flies back to Texas on April 4th.

TriStar offers Rodriguez a home. The next one is Columbia and they are even sending their representative, Stephanie Allain, to talk to Rodriguez in person. They would like a remake of *El Mariachi* with Antonio Banderas, and at the thought of working with the famous Spanish star, Rodriguez gets excited. Columbia then makes him a firm offer which guarantees Rodriguez a minimum of \$250,000. The ICM agents now expect an offer from TriStar, and probably Disney, too. Now Newman advises Rodriguez not to sell his rights to the original movie to the Spanish market because Columbia will probably want them, too. Following his agents' advice, Rodriguez hires an attorney. While his ICM agents are waiting to hear on their counter offer to Columbia, Rodriguez feels torn over whether he should accept an exclusive deal, which is what everybody seems to want to offer him, because he feels that a remake of *El Mariachi* would be great for

Columbia but that a longer version of "Bedhead," a family movie, would be at home with Disney.

Now that Columbia has made an offer the other companies all seem eager for Rodriguez to reconsider. They try to appeal to Rodriguez's sensitivity by giving him all sorts of advice on whom to choose, which would probably ultimately serve their own purposes. For instance, Kevin Mischer informs Rodriguez that Jonathan Demme, the filmmaker, has seen and liked his movie, and Rodriguez feels bad because if he accepts Columbia's exclusive deal, he will not be able to work with Demme (whom he admires). So he thinks that if Columbia refuses the counter offer, he will then be free to talk to Demme.

Similarly, a Disney representative asks him to reconsider working for them and assures him that Disney, too, can get Antonio Banderas for Rodriguez's next movie. In an unprecedented move, Columbia accepts the counter offer. The ICM agents call this "a coup" because Rodriguez has accomplished the impossible - sell what is technically a foreign movie to a major American film company. Rodriguez has no Hollywood experience, yet Columbia has agreed to let him be in control of his projects. Because of this, the story will likely hit the press soon. An elated Rodriguez shares the good news with Gallardo (who will also be paid) and also calls his family.

Things are finally looking up for Rodriguez and he is flattered by all of the attention he is getting, yet he is still poor and this frustrates him, probably because he's not in control of this situation. The movie companies' bidding war over *El Mariachi* makes it longer for a final offer to be made, so all Rodriguez can do is wait.



# Chapter Eight, "Columbia Pictures"

## Chapter Eight, "Columbia Pictures" Summary and Analysis

The entries of this chapter go from April 14th through May 24, 1992.

The Columbia contract is being finalized, and Rodriguez expects to receive some money soon. His life has definitely changed because this time he flies back to Los Angeles in first class and on the next day, he finds himself on the first page of *Daily Variety*. He also meets more Hollywood big names, such as filmmaker John Singleton.

Rodriguez is introduced to everybody at his new company and Mark Canton, a Columbia Pictures executive, tells him that the *Mariachi* remake should be his first project. Once he's back in Texas, Rodriguez seems to enjoy the fact that he does not have to go anywhere in the morning, he reports that he loves his new job. Yet at school he has a strange encounter with a former colleague who appears to be jealous of his success so it seems like Rodriguez has found out that fame comes with a downside, too.

Newman calls Rodriguez with good news—the president of Miramax wants to purchase then release the original *El Mariachi*. Other Hollywood powerful people are interested in it, too, and a bidding war ensues. However, because he does not believe that his first movie is good enough for a theater audience, Rodriguez would rather do a remake. Now Rodriguez really needs money, but his attorney does not think it is a good idea to accept advance money from Columbia yet, given that they are still in the middle of negotiations. When Columbia offers \$100,000 for the original movie and a generous share in the profits, Rodriguez becomes worried that they might expect a film print, which he does not have. A few days later Columbia raises its offer to \$150,000.

The good news is that his career has finally taken off and that he probably will not be poor ever again in the future, but the bad news is that, although enormous sums of money are being dangled in front of him, Rodriguez now finds himself completely penniless, which brings him to a desperate gesture—he pawns his video camera, "his most prized possession." The irony of this situation does not escape Rodriguez, who complains that he and his wife are starving in Texas but when he is flown to L.A. he is treated like royalty. Because he is reluctant to take out a loan, Rodriguez's only choice is to wait for Columbia Pictures to pay him.

Back in L.A. Rodriguez discusses the fate of *El Mariachi* with Columbia executives. All along Rodriguez thought that Columbia Pictures was only interested in a remake of *El Mariachi*, so it comes as surprise that they want to release the original, too. Not keen on releasing what he calls his "home movie," Rodriguez tries to convince them to shelve it by making what he thinks are outrageous demands. He tells them that if they want to release it then first he wants to shoot alternate scenes and make several other changes.



After an interview with the *LA Times*, Rodriguez goes to a meeting, where he is informed that *El Mariachi* will be screened by a selected audience; the reactions to the movie will determine its fate. A confident Rodriguez explains that he does not want this plan to go on and that he does not have a film print, anyway. He's surprised to hear that Columbia will produce a print for the movie. Rodriguez, who is used to being the only person in charge, tries his best to dissuade them, but to no avail. Now that he has a contract he cannot control the fate of his practice movie anymore, and this must be frustrating for him because he is a perfectionist who is afraid of failure. He seems to think the movie will not do well and that he will fail publicly.

Throughout this chapter it is obvious that Hollywood is about deals and money, but the problem is that it takes a long time to clear all the legal aspects. Because of his financial situation Rodriguez is desperate for his first check to arrive, and he even starts doubting that it will ever come true. It is easy to understand why he starts to think it is all a joke - he's the talk of the town in Hollywood and everybody seems to want a piece of his movie yet he and his wife do not have enough money to buy food. When Rodriguez eventually gets his advance \$13,000 paycheck, his attorney first tells him not to cash it right away, which brings the *Mariachi* director close to a breakdown. The next day his attorney finally gives him the green light. What is interesting is that once he finally cashes his check, Rodriguez still remains very conservative about money and takes his wife shopping at a discount store. As he repeats often, he's not a Hollywood type of man, and prefers his simple life in Texas, which perhaps is why the money and fame do not go to his head.





# Chapter Nine, "Postproduction, Take 2"

## Chapter Nine, "Postproduction, Take 2" Summary and Analysis

Rodriguez has been through many changes in just one year. From being a lab rat to directing a movie for \$7,000 to making it in Hollywood, his life seems like a fairy tale. What is amusing is that after reading the *LA Times* article about him, Rodriguez wonders if he's crazy. It certainly takes a particular type of personality to accomplish what he has by his 24th birthday, so he is one of a kind. After his interview for the *LA Times* is published, people start recognizing Rodriguez.

Back in L.A. Rodriguez is offered a per diem, and he inquires about whether he can keep the remaining money should he not spend it all. This puzzles his agents who are not used to people who, like Rodriguez, prefer to save their per diem to help their family members. Even though everything is free and paychecks are large in Hollywood, Rodriguez never forgets where he comes from. He seems to be very family-oriented and is even considering paying for his brother's education by saving his per diem.

Rodriguez now has a very large office at Columbia Pictures, and he also has his own corporation based in Texas, called Los Hooligans Productions, Inc. In preparation for the film release, he works with a couple of professional editors one last time, but he does not agree with their editing methods, which he feels take too long. As always, he is used to his own fast pace, so he gets to be in charge in the editing room because he enjoys being in control.

Now that Rodriguez knows that he can keep the per diem money he does not spend, because he is excited to be able to pay for his brother's education. He is also happy to learn that the *Mariachi* music composers will earn royalties. On June 20th, Rodriguez turns twenty-four and Elizabeth comes to L.A. for a brief visit. Rodriguez remarks how things have really changed since his last birthday spent locked up at Pharmaco.

A few days later he is joined by Gallardo who wants to see the editing process. Once again Rodriguez realizes that doing it all is hard and takes longer so he ends up asking for an assistant because the deadline to turn in the edited film approaches. Perhaps the lesson here is that Rodriguez needs to learn how to delegate a little. The assistant is named Jim, and he is a fellow Texan. Rodriguez confides in him that he hates film editing and he cannot wait until computer editing is made possible because it will be a much faster process.

On July 8th, Rodriguez finally receives his final Columbia contract and he is very excited about it. As in his previous editing sessions, Rodriguez works very long hours, even forgetting to eat, and ends up suffering from backaches. But Rodriguez is not afraid to take on more work because when he hears that having the subtitles done professionally would take three weeks and cost \$3,000, he decides to do it himself, certain that he can

do it faster than that and for less money. Indeed, he completes the subtitle spotting in just one weekend.

Now that the movie has also been invited for a screening at the Telluride Film Festival, Rodriguez needs to work even more on fixing sound problems and he's starting to feel discouraged. When the very first screening of *El Mariachi*, which takes place in front of people from the movie industry, goes very well Rodriguez decides to gather his remaining energy to complete his arduous work before the Telluride Festival. He now needs to transfer raw dialogues onto 35mm film and then onto the film print. On July 30th, *El Mariachi* is invited to the Toronto Film Festival. Four weeks later, an exhausted Rodriguez announces that the movie has improved quite a bit but that a few things still need to be fixed. This chapter is yet another example of how hard a worker Rodriguez is. He remains so focused on his editing that he even disregards his pain. A few days later he is on his way to Telluride for the film festival.



# Chapter Ten, "Telluride and Toronto"

## Chapter Ten, "Telluride and Toronto" Summary and Analysis

In this chapter Rodriguez is invited to present his movie at two film festivals. His journal entries start on September 3rd and end on September 18, 1992. *El Mariachi* is premiering at Telluride where it will be shown on opening night, so Rodriguez's emotions run high. He feels uncomfortable and under pressure because he fears failure, and especially failure in front of witnesses. He gets to meet the famous movie critic, Roger Ebert, and the critic tells him he has heard about *El Mariachi* and cannot wait to see it, which makes Rodriguez wish he could have redone a few scenes. On opening night, upon seeing the long line of people waiting to see his movie, Rodriguez becomes really anxious and thinks that they will hate his "practice" movie. To make matters worse, he has to give a speech before the movie starts.

It turns out that Rodriguez has no reason to worry because his speech gets a great response from the public and so does the screening. Rodriguez is surprised. In fact, the public reacted so well that Columbia executives are now considering releasing the movie nationally. When the same thing happens at the following screenings and some young people tell Rodriguez how inspired they feel after hearing his story, Rodriguez feels good that his story has served a higher purpose.

Later he attends the screening of *Reservoir Dogs*, a movie by Quentin Tarantino, which might be useful because he is supposed to sit on a panel with Tarantino at the Toronto Film Festival. Film critic Ebert eventually lets Rodriguez know that his review of *El Mariachi* will be positive.

Rodriguez is proven wrong about his training movie because the Telluride Festival turns out to be a big success. His movie is so popular that they decide to add two more screenings. It also gets invited to the Miami Film Festival. In addition, he is solicited for several interviews and people take pictures of him. So Rodriguez ends up thanking the Columbia Pictures executives who pushed for the release of the movie.

After the festival ends, Rodriguez flies back to Austin where he is joined by Gallardo who is traveling with him to the Toronto Film Festival. Once in Toronto, Rodriguez hits it off with Quentin Tarantino and the discussion panel goes very well. So far Rodriguez has not felt comfortable around people in the filmmaking business, especially in Los Angeles, so he had not connected with anyone, but at Telluride and Toronto he meets Quentin Tarantino. They are both young filmmakers and share the same cinematographic tastes, so this may be the beginning of a friendship.

Before the movie premieres at the festival, Rodriguez is busy with interviews. *El Mariachi* is getting great reviews in the press and Rodriguez likes Roger Ebert's article about his movie. Alfonso Arau is also at the festival because his movie, *Como Agua*



*Para Chocolate* is premiering. Rodriguez notes how strange it is that they are both at the same festival when *El Mariachi* was supposed to be a straight-to-video movie but Arau's film was an expensive production.

Like in Telluride, *El Mariachi* receives a very warm reception in Toronto and when Rodriguez leaves, he seems very satisfied and at peace, no longer questioning the quality of his movie and finally accepting that *El Mariachi* is a crowd pleaser. If the festival goers had not liked his movie, Rodriguez would probably have felt exposed and embarrassed, especially because he never wanted the release of *El Mariachi* in theaters in the first place. But after the two festivals end, Rodriguez, who is a perfectionist, finally relaxes about showing his practice movie to hundreds of people.



# Chapter Eleven, "Postproduction, Take 3"

## Chapter Eleven, "Postproduction, Take 3" Summary and Analysis

Postproduction turns out to be a never ending journey and the title of this chapter, "Postproduction, Take 3," says it all. According to Rodriguez, the main reason for this is the incompetence of professionals and the waste of money that film companies incur on a regular basis.

Columbia Pictures organizes a test screening of *El Mariachi*, where the audience will be asked particular questions about the movie. Because Liz cannot accompany him, Rodriguez decides to treat his old friend, Tommy Nix. During the test, the audience's response is so positive that Columbia executives are now convinced that Rodriguez should write a sequel.

There's more good news—the movie has been invited to the Sundance Film Festival. Columbia is also talking about releasing *El Mariachi* nationally, which Rodriguez feels conflicted about. He is not used to other people making decisions for him, so he does not really know how to react when he's told about the national release of *El Mariachi*. He seems confused and unhappy in this chapter, and the result is that he does not come across as assertive, the way he used to in the beginning of *Rebel Without a Crew*. Perhaps Hollywood is finally rubbing off on him. He's eager to show the kind of movies he could make with a "real" budget but he is not really in control of the situation. Understandingly, he is very frustrated, so he turns to what he knows best: story telling. He decides to write two scripts—a remake and a sequel, and while he works on his scripts he moves into his office.

The L.A. lifestyle never ceases to amaze Rodriguez because he keeps seeing famous people. First he sees Arnold Schwarzenegger on the set of his new movie; then he meets Gary Oldman and Francis Ford Coppola at one of the movie premieres he gets to attend. There is some bad news about the movie now, though—forty feet of it was destroyed during the transfer process. In addition, Rodriguez discovers that the foley editor did a poor job, so he's very annoyed about the rampant incompetence in L.A. Now two foley editors are working to fix the problem. When his friend George Huang visits him, Rodriguez manages to convince him to quit and realize his dream of making a movie. A few days later Rodriguez reunites with Tarantino, this time to participate in an interview of young filmmakers.

Rodriguez, who always seems self-conscious about money, is happy that he saved money by moving into his office, and he's finally about to be paid his per diem—a total of \$15,400. However, it seems like something always happens with the postproduction because now the movie needs color correcting. This is going to take a long time to fix



and Rodriguez finds it depressing that his \$7,000 movie looked much better than its professionally treated print. He decides to go home before the final print is done and spend the holidays with his family.

Next, Rodriguez is happy to report that he's making real progress on the script of the sequel because in his usual style, he works non-stop. When he finally has a first draft, however, he's nervous about letting his wife, the one critic he really cares about, read it. He is quite relieved that she likes it. He sends it off to Columbia Pictures and they like it, too. Rodriguez has convinced Columbia to release *El Mariachi* in Austin, too, his home base, so he's happy about that. In a note added later, he writes that the movie performed better in Austin than in San Antonio. When Newman receives the revised script he calls Rodriguez to congratulate him and promise him that he will always have work in the action movie arena. Once again Rodriguez's hard work pays off.



## Chapter Twelve, "Sundancing"

### Chapter Twelve, "Sundancing" Summary and Analysis

From the beginning things seem to foreshadow that, just like it did at the other festivals, the movie will do very well at the Sundance Festival. The six screenings are sold out and Rodriguez's first speech receives a great response. Each time Rodriguez introduces the movie he tries to be as precise and technical as possible so that people understand exactly how he shot the movie. Again Rodriguez is solicited for interviews and panels, so he does not get much sleep, but he does find the time to ski for the first time. Apparently some skeptical filmmakers are saying that Rodriguez is lying about the cost of the movie; he does not let this bother him and sets the story straight in an interview for the *Hollywood Reporter*. As usual, the press loves Rodriguez and so does the public. This is probably because he likes to explain in technical terms how it was possible for him to make the movie; he wants them to understand so they can realize that anybody can do it.

On January 27th, Gallardo and Peter, both actors in *El Mariachi* join Rodriguez at the festival. On the next day the three men take a look at the brand new *Mariachi* poster for the first time and Rodriguez writes that "this is finally hitting" them. The beautiful poster finally proves that this was not all a dream. During an NPR interview, Rodriguez explains his passion was not making movies to become rich, but rather the process of filmmaking itself which is why he never thought he would make it to Hollywood. He said that people will tend to connect to movies that are made out of passion more than purely commercial ones. At the largest screening, Rodriguez gives a twenty-minute speech. He tells the audience everything about how this was supposed to be his practice movie and how he had no crew. He also asks them to vote for his movie.

His hectic schedule still keeps him from relaxing and he has trouble staying asleep. Finally, in spite of what Seymour Cassel told him earlier about awards being fixed, Rodriguez's movie wins the Audience Award prize. He and Gallardo both walk to the stage to receive the prize. In his acceptance speech, Rodriguez says he hopes that his story has inspired budding filmmakers to make their movies. The Sundance Film Festival goes beyond everybody's expectations. Like in Telluride and Toronto, *El Mariachi* does very well with the crowd and critics, but this time it also wins an award. Because the Sundance Film Festival is the festival by which excellence is determined for independent movies, the Audience Award that *El Mariachi* wins is a very high honor.



# Chapter Thirteen, "*El Mariachi*: The Release"

## Chapter Thirteen, "El Mariachi: The Release" Summary and Analysis

This is the last chapter extracted from Rodriguez's diary and the entries go from February 1st to February 26, 1993. Accompanied by his wife, Rodriguez travels to every corner of the country because now that the movie is being released nationally, he has to promote it in the media. He finds himself on *The Howard Stern Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman*. He is interviewed on TV by Ted Dawson, Peter Jennings, Charlie Rose and by the Spanish language channels, Univision and Telemundo. An *Entertainment Tonight* crew films him for an entire day. He also gives several interviews to members of the press and even goes to a photo shoot for *Vogue*. Some interviewers seem skeptical, so Rodriguez needs to constantly explain how he managed to keep the cost of production so low.

Rodriguez and his wife attend the Miami Film Festival where *El Mariachi* is going to be screened in a 1,500-seat theater. In the middle of this excitement, Rodriguez receives a rather unsettling phone call from John Watson, a producer, who assures him that the public will inevitably turn on him just like they did against Kevin Costner. It seems that now Rodriguez *is* a phenomenon as much as his movie is, probably because of his extraordinary story of determination and resilience. But as he found out earlier, fame comes hand in hand with envy and negativity. Perhaps his media overexposure is what causes Watson's comment about the backlash effect and perhaps Watson thinks he is being friendly by warning Rodriguez of imminent failure. Instead he plants negative thoughts in Rodriguez's mind. Rodriguez also reports that ICM is interested in turning his diary into a book. Although he does not expand on the idea behind *Rebel Without a Crew*, a book based on his diary, it has obviously come to fruition.

The Grammy Awards organizers have paid to show *El Mariachi*, a movie about a musician, at their party. Once Gallardo and Rodriguez arrive, an army of photographers shoot pictures of them. Rodriguez has a great time and receives many compliments. When he meets actor Cheech Marin, the actor tells Rodriguez that he wants to work with the filmmaker on the next movie.

In his last entry, dated February 26, 1993, Rodriguez describes the incredible day he has had and writes, "These are the kind of days you start a diary for in the first place." This is the day that the movie opens nationally and Rodriguez's schedule is full. First he is interviewed on *The Today Show*, then he has a pre-interview with *Dateline*, and finally he appears on *Late Night with David Letterman*. His sisters are in the *Late Night* audience and Rodriguez is very nervous, but everything goes well. On the show he tells Letterman that Peter Marquardt, who plays a villain in *El Mariachi*, is back at Pharmaco and probably watching.





He is excited that people have recognized him and asked for his autographs. This is probably the day he dreamed of when back in middle school he started working on his craft. His ever supportive family is moved by his success. As in previous chapters, it is clear in this one that Rodriguez comes from a loving family. From the beginning of his filmmaking endeavors, his family has always been supportive, and his many siblings often starred in his home movies. Now that he is famous, they are all very proud of him.

But at the end, in spite of all the great reviews his movie has received and in spite of the media's enthusiasm for him, Rodriguez remains humble. He seems incredulous at the end and even seems to think that Watson was right, and that this certainly will not last too long.



# Epilogue: The Curse of *El Mariachi*

## Epilogue: The Curse of El Mariachi Summary and Analysis

In this final chapter, Rodriguez reflects on the adventure he embarked on with *El Mariachi*, which was originally thought of as a challenge because it was a movie in Spanish with English subtitles. Rodriguez titled this chapter "The Curse of El Mariachi" in jest because so far, there has not been a curse. In fact he still seems baffled about this experience, but also proud of his accomplishments: the original *El Mariachi*'s videotapes sold for a total of \$1.5 million, and the dubbed version performed even better. When it was released on DVD, it included Rodriguez's "Bedhead," the short film of which he seems to be the most proud.

In 1993, two years after he shot the movie, Rodriguez went on an international tour to promote *El Mariachi*. Rodriguez still cannot believe that his "practice" film shot for almost nothing became such a hit, not only at home but also overseas, garnering all sorts of awards. Rodriguez writes that the movie will live forever thanks to video and that it has already found a new life in schools, where it is often used in Spanish classes. In spite of people who predicted his failure or his fall from grace, Rodriguez succeeded, and the main reason is probably that never once did he doubt that he could be a filmmaker.

Understandably, Rodriguez's career as a filmmaker took off. His style made such an impression on the public and film companies that he was in high demand after the *Mariachi* craze died down. He went on to direct three movies in 1994 and one in 1995. As always afraid of failure, Rodriguez thought he would avoid the curse of the sophomore effort by making several movies at the same time after *El Mariachi*. He describes *Roadracer*, his second movie, as "an obscure little movie" that taught him a lot, and helped him realize that he could shoot "*Mariachi* style," meaning in a fast yet effective manner, and make a good Hollywood film. He also went back to Mexico to shoot *Desperado*, the sequel to *El Mariachi*, this time with a \$7 million budget. Rodriguez was very proud of having a Latino lead actor in a Hollywood production. Once again Rodriguez was in charge of writing, directing, and editing.

The *Mariachi* is now a classic, much more than what Rodriguez could have ever dreamed. The reason he has written this book, Rodriguez explains, is to inspire budding filmmakers who, like him, begin with almost nothing. He wants them to know that success is possible. Years before, he was a child enthralled by classical Hollywood movies, and now it is hard for him to believe that he, too, has made a mythical film and that it was his first attempt, his "practice movie," in fact. This story seems to come straight out of a fairy tale. In the conclusion of *Rebel Without a Crew*, Rodriguez is overwhelmed and humbled by his experience.



# **Characters**

**Rodriguez Rodriguez**

**Carlos Gallardo**

**Elizabeth**

**Robert Newman**

**Peter Marquardt**

**Alfonso Arau**

**Laura Esquivel**

**Stephanie Allain**

**Quentin Tarantino**

**Roger Ebert**



## Objects/Places

### San Antonio

This is Rodriguez's hometown.

### Austin

This is where Rodriguez goes to college. He attends University of Texas at Austin.

### Ciudad Acusa

This is Gallardo's hometown and the set of the movie *El Mariachi*.

### Los Angeles

This is where the movie industry is mainly located so this is where Rodriguez flies frequently from Texas to meet with representatives of ICM, Columbia Pictures, and other film companies.

### Telluride

This is where the first film festival where *El Mariachi* is screened takes place.

### Toronto

This is where the second film festival where *El Mariachi* is screened takes place.

### Sundance Film Festival

At this prestigious festival of independent movies, Rodriguez's movie wins its first award: the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award.

### El Mariachi

This is Rodriguez's award winning first feature film. It is an action movie in Spanish filmed in Mexico.



## **Bedhead**

This is Rodriguez's award winning short film.

## **Los Hooligans**

This is the name of a comic strip Rodriguez used to draw for his school's newspaper. Later this is also the name he chooses for his movie production company.



# Themes

## Determination

Rodriguez's fascination for filmmaking starts when he's very young. When he's in 5th grade he draws cartoons, and a few years later he even makes claymation movies, which shows unusual patience and determination for a child. He wants to see the finished product and is willing to work as long as it takes for this. It is the same determination that leads him to believe that he can direct a movie for only \$7,000. Not only does he accomplish this but he does so in just over two weeks and in spite of the uncooperative weather.

Having to spend thirty days as a lab rat at Pharmaco tests Rodriguez's patience to no end and he even feels humiliated there, but ultimately, he knows that he is raising much needed money for his movie. Therefore, he is determined to stay until the end and collect his \$3,000 check. This particular episode of his life seems to really make a difference with the public and the media, as they all feel pity for a young man who is willing to sell his body to science to pursue his dream.

When Rodriguez works on a movie or a script, he seems so obsessed by what he is doing that he almost forgets the rest of the world. This is how several times he finds himself being forgotten then locked up at the cable television station. He is so absorbed in his task that he may also forget to eat and disregard his frequent backaches.

## Control

Rodriguez is a young man who likes to be in control. One of the reasons he gives for this is that he is so afraid of failing publicly that he prefers to be the only person in charge, and if he must fail then it will happen in private. This is partly why he decides to be a one-person crew on the set of *El Mariachi*. The other reason is his lack of money.

Money is another area that Rodriguez likes to control. Although he could take out a loan to finance his movie, he refuses to do so because he hates the thought of owing money to someone. In addition, coming from a humble family, he cannot stand wasting money, so when he realizes that that's what movie companies often do, he gets upset. In fact, he decides to save as much as he can from his per diem allowance because he knows that this money will allow him to put his brother through college.

Rodriguez's constant need to be in control is related to the fact that he is a perfectionist and thus likes doing things his way. For instance, he has trouble taking orders, so he becomes visibly annoyed when Columbia Pictures decides to release *El Mariachi*, which Rodriguez does not deem worthy of national theaters, so he tries to sabotage the project. Similarly, Rodriguez asks to take over the editing from the union foley editor because Rodriguez thinks that *he* would do a much better job. Ironically, Rodriguez ends up needing an editing assistant.

## Creativity

Rodriguez is an artist who can draw, paint, and make movies. He knows he is creative and receives a lot of compliments on his filmmaking style. His short film "Bedhead" receives several national awards and his movie receives public and media acclaim. As he explains it, his style is partly due to the fact that he developed pre-visualization skills because he had to use his family's two VCRs to edit his home movies. He had to learn how to shoot scenes fast to make the editing process as painless as possible.

With *El Mariachi*, his idea is to create a movie that looks more expensive than it is. For this he refers to several shooting techniques but he also uses special effects that he has to improvise because of his lack of money. The result is so good that several film industry professionals even think that he is lying about the real cost of the movie.

The truth is that Rodriguez is a young and talented filmmaker with a fresh approach to filmmaking. For him making movies is fun, and he is glad that he was not trained professionally as he thinks that that would have made his movies more rigid. Instead, he allows his creativity to express itself. This is particularly true on the set of *Mariachi* where he improvises several scenes, such as the one with the turtle walking along the Mariachi.



# Style

## Perspective

By the time he is twenty-three, Rodriguez has written and directed several home movies, among which is his multiple award winning "Bedhead." He uses elementary equipment for so long that he becomes skilled at shooting fast and editing effectively; when he is admitted to the Film Department, thanks to his talent and not his grades, he is already a self-trained filmmaker. Although he acknowledges that the Film Department gave him access to expensive filmmaking equipment he would not have had otherwise, Rodriguez believes that professional training is not necessary to make a movie and he is a living proof.

With this book, Rodriguez wants to inspire people, especially young people like him, to follow their dreams. He wants them to know that the odds, such as, in his case, a humble background and little interest in academics, will not always play against them. He is convinced that believing in himself and also avoiding debt and overspending were keys to his success.

When Rodriguez hears that his story has inspired a few people, he is moved that he has served a higher purpose than simply entertaining an audience. Rodriguez's story sounds unbelievable, so with this book he wants people to understand how it was possible to shoot an expensive-looking action movie with only \$7,000, some determination, and quite a bit of patience.

## Tone

*Rebel Without a Crew* was not originally planned to be published since it was Rodriguez's diary. This is probably why it is so easy to read. Rodriguez's tone is light and at times funny. When he describes his shooting and editing methods and the kind of equipment he uses, he uses technical terms that may be hard to understand for readers who are not particularly interested in filmmaking.

Because it is a diary Rodriguez often sounds subjective, discussing things he enjoys or dislikes. For instance, he really does not enjoy life in Los Angeles, as he finds this city too strange and even thinks it would be a curse to have to live there. Yet Rodriguez also comes across as objective, especially when he describes filmmaking techniques or when he plans the budget for his movie.

Rodriguez's tone is enthusiastic and effective. He tries to explain everything in detail, perhaps to demystify what he accomplished; he manages to make it sound easy. The result is that after reading this book even someone who is not interested in filmmaking can be inspired to pursue a career of their choice because Rodriguez sounds so happy that *he* did just that.



## Structure

The introduction and epilogue of *Rebel Without a Crew* were written some time after the *Mariachi* frenzy died down, so those parts differ from the body of the book, which is directly extracted from Rodriguez's diary, written between 1991 and 1993. Apart from the introduction and the epilogue, which contain Rodriguez's recollections, for the main part the structure of *Rebel without a Crew* is very linear.

In his diary, Rodriguez gives an almost daily account of not only his filmmaking endeavors but also of everyday occurrences. In random accounts, Rodriguez discusses sicknesses, birthdays, or family gatherings, which, although it makes the story seem like a patchwork, reminds the reader that Rodriguez has a social life, too. Overall, however, Rodriguez keeps his eyes on the prize and mainly writes about making and then selling his movie.

At times, Rodriguez does not write as much as the reader might want him to. For instance, when he announces that there are talks about his diary being turned into a book, he only writes one sentence and then moves on. Also, the book is sometimes repetitive. For instance, Rodriguez is able to edit for very long hours for several days on end, so when he writes diary entries during those times, he simply writes that he's working long hours.



## Quotes

"I found so much validation from peers and faculty who all appreciated my hobbies that I became more positive. I had a better self-image and my grades went up" ("Introduction" xi).

"My boss said that if you are someone who is *already* creative, and then you become technical you become unstoppable. I like that" ("The Idea" 4).

"What we'll have to do is jam pack this movie with action and a lot of movement and camera angles to make it look as expensive as possible, that way we can get a good price even if we can't get a name actor to star in it" ("Preproduction" 29).

"It's better to figure out all the things you own or can borrow that will add production value, and then include those in the script" ("Preproduction" 31).

"I can't wait to go back to school and when people ask what I did this summer I can say, 'I made an Artsy Foreign Action Film'" ("Production" 46).

"I've got this movie in the can with my master tapes and everything for about \$6,500. We ended up spending a lot less than I thought we would" ("Postproduction" 57).

"It's funny how once you're locked into a project nothing else seems that important. You forget everything else your life is about and you hopefully pour it all into your movie" ("Postproduction" 58).

"I edited for twelve hours. From 8:00pm to 8:00 am. They forgot I was in there so they turned on the motion control alarm system" ("Postproduction" 70).

"Everyone at one point or another gets a little attention, then it's all over before you know it and you're back to your regular life" ("The Chase" 97).

"I make movies for fun, I have a fun time making them. It's my creative outlet. But if I work for these people I could make more money on one fun project than my parents make slaving at work for several years. It's crazy, completely crazy" ("The Chase" 99).

"The corporate apartments are a lot cheaper than any hotel; in fact I'll save almost \$4,000 in one month's time, since I'm making \$2,000 a week in per diem and I can keep the rest. Cool. I can put my brother David through school with that money" ("Columbia Pictures" 139).

"If I had known you could go out and make your own movie by yourself for comparatively very little money I would have done something like this a lot sooner" ("Telluride and Toronto, Take 3" 152).

"Upstairs in the room, Quentin Tarantino dropped by to tell me how much he enjoyed *Mariachi*. He was very encouraging, and then he told me how he's going to be making



his new movie called *Pulp Fiction*, and that now that he knows the kind of sick bastard I am he knows I'm going to love it" ("Telluride and Toronto, Take 3" 157).

"Liz finished the script. She told me she loved it and that as excited as she was to sit down and read it, it was still far better than she had expected. Whew" ("Postproduction, Take 3" 170).

"Today I woke up and experienced a day to end all days. These are the kinds of days you start a diary for in the first place. If I never have a day like this again, it would be alright, because now it's in the diary and I'll never forget it" ("*El Mariachi*: The Release" 188).

"*Mariachi* opened with a bang and fell off quietly. It did much better than I had imagined, fueled mainly by the wonderful ad campaign that Columbia put out with the film" ("Epilogue: The Curse of *El Mariachi*" 192).

'The main reason was that I wanted to make a modestly budgeted Hollywood picture with a Latino action hero, something I'd always wanted to see in movies since I was a kid" ("Epilogue: The Curse of *El Mariachi*; 194).



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss inspiration. Is self-motivation enough for Robert to achieve his dreams? Does he benefit from anyone else's support, material or emotional?

Discuss self-reliance. Does Robert really produce *El Mariachi* by himself? Is he a self-made filmmaker? Why is it so hard for movie professionals to believe his story?

Discuss rebellion. Does Robert follow rules? Does this help or hurt his career?

Discuss changes. How different is life for Robert in Los Angeles? What kind of values does he encounter there? Do they resemble his? Does he enjoy his visits there?

Discuss the value of hard work. How hard does Robert work on his practice movie? Does he enjoy work? Once he makes it in Hollywood, does the help of professional editors make his load lighter?

Discuss Carlos's role. Carlos is Robert's friend and *El Mariachi*'s main character; what other roles does he play in the book? Are his roles acknowledged by Robert?

Discuss Robert Newman and Stephanie Allain. Newman is Robert's ICM agent and Allain is his Columbia Pictures contact person. Robert seems to like them, but is their friendly relationship genuine?