



Eduardo Verastegui "Bella"

The camera adores Eduardo Verastegui. The only problem was that, for so long, he seemed to adore the camera too. That's until he grew tired of being papi chulo and eager to shed his image as the source of hollow fantasies. Keen to add more substance to his life and his career, the Mexican actor has become his own harshest critic.

Best known for his appearance on lists of the most beautiful people, a record that was hardly heard and on roles in mediocre films that are barely remembered (Chasing Papí and Meet Me in Miami), the black-haired, blue-eyed gallant disappeared from the celebrity scene for nearly three years.

Now he's back, with a maturity and depth unseen until now. Concrete proof: his new independent film, *Bella*, that premiered at the 2007 Miami International Film Festival on March 4 and is slated for general release in August.

To the surprise of the star, the rest of the cast, the production team, and the industry press, the indie filmed in 24 days won the People's Choice Award at the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival last fall. *Bella* was the first feature from the young Mexican director Alejandro Monteverde, and the first release from the production company Metanoia Films.

And the recognition hasn't ended there. Just last week, during the Miami International Film Festival, Verastegui received notice that the Smithsonian Latino Center, established in 1997 by the prestigious Smithsonian Institution to celebrate the achievements of U.S. Latinos in the arts, sciences, and humanities, selected *Bella* as winner of the Legacy Award. In celebration, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and his wife Columba (of Mexican origin) will host a private reception and screening at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts on Tuesday, March 13.

This success alone appears to validate the decision the Tamaulipas native made to reorient his life. Settled in Hollywood after *Chasing Papi* (2003), Verastegui pursued his movie career in Los Angeles, leaving behind his temporary home in Miami where he'd moved to record his eponymous album.

"I had a group of 15 people working for me. I did three TV shows (*Charmed*, *CSI: Miami*, and *Karen Sisco*. I traveled to New Zealand to make a movie with Carlos Ponce (*Meet Me in Miami*). That's where I realized that my life was really empty. I was unsatisfied," says the 32-year-old actor on a recent morning in a Key Biscayne hotel. "I realized, too, that the reasons I was pursuing this career were frivolous, banal, superficial. There was too much ego, too much vanity, and idolatry. It was for fame, power, money, and the lifestyle...There was also love of the art, but it was a selfish love."

Too much ego was not the only thing he discovered.

"The same time I was feeling all of this, I realized that, since the 1940s, Latinos in Hollywood have been stereotyped in a really negative way," the star observes. "I started to feel like I was feeding into that stereotype too."



After mulling this over, he decided that from that point on he would only accept projects that would promote a positive image of Latinos and that would give him some sense of accomplishment. That was the origin of Bella and of Metanoia Films, whose name is a spiritual term for regret and conversion.

That also explains why he agreed to play the character Jose in Bella. A rising soccer star whose career was derailed by a tragedy, Jose ends up as a cook in New York City. Bitter over his dashed prospects, the character finds redemption by helping out a friend, a pregnant waitress torn about whether to have an abortion.

“When I look back at these moments that seemed like the end of the world, now I realize that those were the best teachers I’ve had in my life,” Verastegui reflects. “When you work really hard for something, and a door shuts, there is always another that opens. I would not have made Bella if my album had done well.”