

Joseph B. Vasquez, 1962–1995



MARTIN DIXON

Hanging With the Homeboys
director, 1991

For the record, Joseph B. Vasquez, once a promising young director from the mean streets of the South Bronx, of Puerto Rican and African American parentage, died last

week of AIDS-related complications in a San Diego hospital. But even though his body succumbed to disease, the pressures of the fast-lane world of filmmaking had long been conspiring to kill his soul. After making a big splash with *Hanging With the Homeboys* in 1991—it won the screenwriting award at Sundance that year and was well received by critics—Vasquez kept refusing the *House Party* sequels Hollywood came calling with and remained inactive for almost two years. “He wouldn’t make the crap that would give him a record of playing ball with them,” says his friend and sometime collaborator Mark Groubert. “He was like a boxer that wouldn’t take the dive when he was told to.”

Homeboys, which helped to launch John Leguizamo’s film career as well as provide TV opportunities for his costars Mario Joyner, Doug E. Doug, and Nestor Serrano, was written, according to Groubert, in a three-day mania, an early manifestation of the clinical manic depression he was eventually diagnosed with. In late ’93, after

lack of work forced him to move out of his luxurious penthouse in the Village and in with his grandmother in an East Harlem housing project, Vasquez finally got work directing *Rice, Beans, and Ketchup* (since retitled *Manhattan Merengue*), starring *Like Water for Chocolate* stars Lumi Cavazos and Marco Leonardi. He was so happy to be working again that he moved to Hollywood. In postproduction, Vasquez became depressed over doubts about the film, but when it was screened to an enthusiastic audience in November of last year, he fell victim to a bizarre period of manic delusions of grandeur. The next month, he landed in a Los Angeles County mental hospital.

After his release, Vasquez set out to make *Devil in the Hellhouse*, a low-budget knockoff of *Silence of the Lambs*. He flew out some old colleagues from New York City but assembled the rest of his crew from homeless people he had recruited from the streets, claiming he was Jesus Christ. To make *Devil*, he invested and lost all the money he had amassed in advances from several

projects, including a Showtime special about the L.A. riots. He wound up penniless and living with his mother outside of San Diego on SSI payments. In early December he entered a hospital suffering from full-blown AIDS and passed away after two weeks.

Before his illness took over, Joe Vasquez was a stubborn, intelligent, no-bullshit kind of guy who surprised his best friends when he turned down enormous sums of money to do projects he considered beneath him. Having graduated from CCNY’s film program, he was an inspiration to minority filmmakers who aren’t lucky enough to get into prestigious film academies. He was generous and sweet—as soon as I finished interviewing him for a piece in the *Voice* four years ago, he invited me to play basketball with a crew that included Leguizamo, Jellybean Benitez, and Esai Morales. His New Year’s Eve parties were the best, and the joy he took in them will make me miss him even more this weekend. —ED MORALES