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## El Muerto Goes from Comic to Movie

Javier Hernandez

by [Kat Avila](#)

An independent film in production this year stars Wilmer Valderrama of *That '70s Show* as the superhero El Muerto from Javier Hernandez's comic book series. In the series, El Muerto's got style and is pretty sexy for a dead guy. In his previous life, he was 21-year-old Diego de la Muerte of Los Angeles, California.

I first met creator Javier Hernandez at **Comic-Con International** 2002 in San Diego. He was selling the premiere issue of his comic **El Muerto: The Aztec Zombie**. I bought the second issue **El Muerto Mishmash** at **Comic-Con** 2004. At the time, sharing the Los Comex booth with Javier was Rooster, lead singer of the Oregon punk/progressive rock band Core13. Javier had done the CD cover for their debut album.

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**Sequential Tart:** *For our readers who don't know any Spanish, what does "El Muerto" mean?*

**Javier Hernandez:** "The Dead."  
"Muerto" is masculine, so it would literally mean "the dead man."

**ST:** *What were the beginnings of*

the comic book **El Muerto**?

**JH:** I've been in love with comics and their storytelling capabilities since I was a kid. My brother had given me his collection of **Marvel** and **DC** comics, and I was completely captivated by the loud colors, garish covers, and melodramatic superhero action!



**Skyman, El Muerto and Skeletron**

© Ted Seko and Javier Hernandez

About seven years ago, several of my friends were creating their own comics. I was influenced by them and by what others were doing in the small press, so I decided to try creating my own comic book character. Of course I wanted to create a character that reflected things I was interested in, as well as drawing from my own cultural background.

**ST:** *Film rights were sold in May 2003 to Peninsula Films. How close is the film to being finished?*

**JH:** We are finishing up our final week of filming. Valentine's Day will be our last day of shooting. Kinda ironic.

**ST:** *What do you think of Wilmer Valderrama as El Muerto?*

**JH:** Wilmer is just drop-dead perfect! Really, it was a lucky break for us getting him to play Diego de la Muerte/El Muerto. He is so completely immersed in the role. For him, it's a chance to play a leading role in a film. And he sees the franchise potential with this character. I mean, he's playing a comic book superhero, how cool is that! Plus, how many Latino screen heroes are created?

Playing Maria, Diego's girlfriend, is Angie Cepeda, a wonderfully friendly and beautiful actress from Colombia who has starred in films and telenovelas all over the world. And playing Zak, Diego's best friend, is Joel David Moore, a cool cat who just got finished filming the new Daniel Clowes/Terry Zwigoff film *Art School Confidential*. Rounding out our cast is

a great collection of gifted actors: Tony Plana, Maria Conchita Alonso, Michael Parks, Billy Drago, Tony Amendola, and E. J. Callahan. The quality of actors should give you an idea about the quality of the script.

**ST** *How will the script handle Mexican cultural references, such as Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and the god of death Mictlantecuhtli, that are part of El Muerto's story?*

**JH:** Well, certainly Dia de los Muertos is a very strong element of the script. And the story uses the ceremony in the right spirit. Our writer/director, Brian Cox, always had great respect for the meaning behind Day of the Dead.

Aztec mythology is also used in the story. Taking its cue from my comic book, we play with the elements as they are needed to move our story along. We're doing a fantasy story here, not a scholarly study of the myths. But we definitely draw on the mythology of the Aztecs.

**ST** *Will you be at the **Alternative Press Expo (APE)** in San Francisco or at **Comic-Con International** this year to sell a third issue of *El Muerto's adventures*?*

**JH:** I will be at the upcoming **APE** con. I actually debuted **El Muerto** at **APE** back in 1998, and I haven't missed a single show there yet! I'll also be back in San Diego with a new Muerto adventure, and we are working on getting an **El Muerto** movie panel there.



**Javier Hernandez  
at Comic-Con 2004  
photo by Kat Avila**

**ST** *Do you know cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz? What do you think of his work, like the syndicated comic strip **La Cucaracha** (The Cockroach)?*

**JH:** Lalo, I'm happy to say, is a friend of mine. A very

talented, entertaining, and trailblazing artist. It's great to see a Mexican-American getting such a wide audience to display his work to, particularly with the subject matter he works with. Hey, maybe all the fans can write him and ask him when he is going to draw an El Muerto pin-up?!

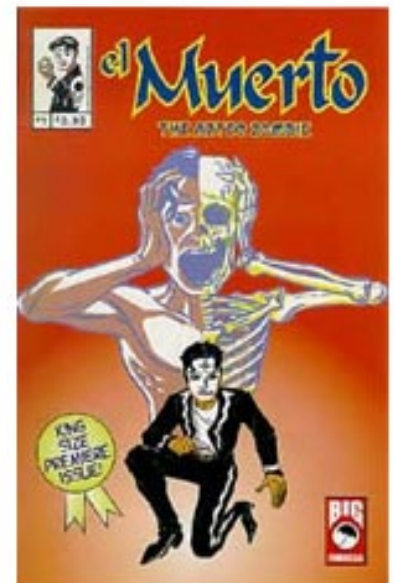
**ST:** *At our first meeting, I was surprised by how much you knew about the history of Mexican comics. Could you please share some important dates and facts with our readers?*

**JH:** You know, a recent issue of **Alter Ego** (a comic magazine published by **TwoMorrows**), just had a great cover story about the history of comics in Mexico - "The Silver Age of Mexican Comics" by Fred Patten! I would recommend any interested readers check out that magazine in a comic shop or check out the magazine's [web site](#) for ordering info.

I don't remember what info I shared with you during that meeting! I probably know a lot more about Mexicans here in the U.S. self-publishing comics. Most of them are my friends: Rafael Navarro does **Sonambulo**, Rhode Montijo created **Pablo's Inferno**, Richard Dominguez who created **El Gato Negro** in the mid-'80s was an inspiration to me, so was Carlos Saldana, the creator of **Burrito**.

I was actually featured in a story in a San Antonio bilingual newspaper last fall about Latino comic books here in the U.S. I think it would be a valuable service if someone chronicled Mexican/Latino creators in small press in a book or documentary. Hmm ....

**ST:** *In addition to your **El Muerto** comic book and the film, what other projects take up your time?*



**El Muerto:  
The Aztec Zombie**  
© Javier Hernandez

**JH:** Is collecting 1970s comics a "project"? Well, I also teach a comic book workshop at the Pico Rivera Centre for the Arts, a local facility near my home in Whittier, California.

I also want to publish a graphic novel in the future detailing all the events that led to the *El Muerto* movie. From the day I was contacted by our director Brian, to the whole process of watching my creation translated to film, to the premiere of the movie. I think there is a story there that may be just as exciting as that of a guy getting dressed up to go to a Day of the Dead festival and finding himself abruptly abducted by the Aztec god of death!

Besides the next *El Muerto* comic book, I have some other comic character I'm developing. I've already had some interested parties asking about potential movie projects based on any other ideas I may have, so one doesn't know what this *Muerto* film will bring in terms of opportunities.

**ST:** *One final silly question for us Japanese manga fans. Will we ever see Manga Muerto with his robot sidekick Skeletron again?*

**JH:** Ah, yes, Manga Muerto! If more people ask (and frankly my dear, you're only, like, the second!), we just may see the return of Manga Muerto and his dead giant robot Skeletron!

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