



WE KNOW DRAMA

DRAMA VISION [Schedule](#) [Series](#) [Movies](#) [Originals](#) [Sports](#) [Games](#)

TNT IN HD ▶

SCHEDULER

MESSAGE BOARDS

EMAIL US

feature articles

The Many Hats of Robert Rodriguez

From no budget to big budget, this one-man band is still a master of DIY filmmaking.



by Emily Soares

[about the author >>](#)

MORE EDITORIALS:

[2006 Black Movie](#)

[Awards](#)

An interview with host Tyler Perry

READ →

[Not Your Average Work Day](#)

Noah Wyle relishes the adventures of *Librarian*.

READ →

[Rob Lowe Lives His Own Perfect Day](#)

TNT original explores true meaning of success

READ →

[L&O's Secret Ingredient](#)

David Martindale talks with creator Dick Wolf

READ →

If you were ever surprised to learn that the director who delivered the low-budget miracle *El Mariachi* for \$7000 is the same one who produced three blockbuster *Spy Kids* pictures, take a closer look. Robert Rodriguez, king of cheap thrills and some very unHollywood resourcefulness, has kept his independent instincts intact even though his budgets have boomed.

Of course what else would we expect from a man who loaned his body to science to come up with the funds for his first feature film? To finance *El Mariachi*, which was originally intended as a straight-to-Spanish-language-video venture, Rodriguez signed up for a month-long stint with Pharmaco, which he describes as "a drug research facility that pays healthy young males to be guinea pigs to test their latest medical breakthroughs." There he wrote the screenplay in isolation, reportedly giving blood as often as 10 times a day and handing over other bodily byproducts to eager researchers. He even managed to do some talent scouting while at the lab: Peter Marquardt, who bunked next to Rodriguez, was cast as Moco, *El Mariachi*'s villain.

El Mariachi opened up Hollywood's gilded doors to Rodriguez. After the film's stellar showing at Sundance, Columbia offered him \$6 million to do *El Mariachi* much, much bigger as *Desperado* (1995). Antonio Banderas enters as the title character, and the story works as a sequel, picking up as the *Mariachi* returns to town to seek his revenge. This is also the first of many films Salma Hayek would do with Rodriguez.



[Watch Desperado Sunday, Sept. 7 at 8pm and 10pm ET](#)

Once known as the "rebel without a crew" Rodriguez learns by doing, and wants to learn it all. That's how he engineered the special effects for the first *Spy Kids* movie, and how he manages to make action films on a relative shoestring. The *Spy Kids* movies have averaged \$38 million, a modest budget for the genre. "I'm from a family of 10 kids," Rodriguez told *Time* magazine. "I can't stand waste."

Growing up in his large San Antonio, TX, family, Rodriguez is used to taking inspiration from relatives. He had long admired his uncle Gregario, a special agent for the FBI (a character who shows up in his most recent film *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, 2003) but the idea for *Spy Kids* didn't hit until Rodriguez was working again with Banderas on *Four Rooms* (1995). He was directing kids in tuxedos when it hit him: "They looked like little James Bonds, and I thought, 'Wow, that's the angle. A spy family,'" he told *Time*.

But the *Spy Kids* would have to wait. Rodriguez knew he had a lot to learn about special effects and he figured out an ingenious way to educate himself. He worked with Tarantino on *Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) to, among other things, get effects experience. Rodriguez acted as director, sound mixer, camera operator and editor, among other things on the project.

While he was writing *Spy Kids*, Miramax offered Rodriguez a gig directing Kevin Williamson's *The Faculty* (1998). Ever inventive, he made them a deal: He would direct *The Faculty* if they would green-light four films of his. And so the funding for *Spy Kids* was secured and Rodriguez got yet another director credit under his belt...and one each for producer, editor, sound mixer, camera operator...

Rodriguez didn't hire a special-effects supervisor for the first *Spy Kids* movie; he did it himself, one of six hats he wore for the films. "If I had hired a big effects supervisor from Hollywood and asked him how to achieve various shots it would have cost time and money," he told the *The Palm Beach Post*. The films represent a return to Rodriguez's roots; a cross between the award-winning shorts of his days at the University of Texas at Austin, starring many of his nine siblings, and the cartoonish sensibilities of his "Los Hooligans" comic strip that ran in the university paper, a project that had its nascence in the margins of his grade-school books.

With the aim of making his family the center of his life and working around that, Rodriguez puts together as much of his films at his Texas castle (complete with turret!), perched high above the Pedernales River, near Austin. He filmed on a sound stage at the old Austin airport, but did everything else (performing the work of eight on this film, including original music, production designer, cinematographer and editor) for *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* at home. He supervised the digital effects, done mostly by Canadian company Hybride Technologies, from his home computer and had his wife, Elizabeth Avellan, act as the film's producer, as she has done on all of his films.

Up next is *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (budgeted at \$30 million), and Rodriguez is doing his usual multi-tasking best with seven production parts to play. The film, shot in 24-frames-per-second high-definition video, with a small crew, is titled in homage to one of the directors Rodriguez admires most, Sergio Leone. The idea came from Tarantino, who suggested that *El Mariachi* and *Desperado* were the first two installments of a trilogy, such as Leone's "Dollars" trio. The film is, among other

things, "shot, chopped and scored" by Rodriguez. "The reason I do so many jobs," he says on the film's Web site, " is that I find no matter how big the movie may be, it becomes more personal. I don't ever want to feel like I'm just telling people what to do. I want to lead by example."

[tbs.com](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Use](#) [TV Parental Controls](#)