

Overview & Synopsis

Setting: **American Southwest, 1536**

Messengers ran ahead to tell of their coming. Thousands of Indians throughout the region rushed to be in the presence of the four men, some bowing as if before gods, others reaching out to touch them, hoping their rumored healing abilities would cure them. Still others knelt in the blazing sun behind their offerings of pelts, arrows, and ceremonial gourds, shaking in fear of the powers the strangers could command in an instant.

Wearing only loincloths, leader Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions—Alonzo, Andres, and Esteban, Andres' black slave—waded through the throng as mothers brought their babies to be blessed and the blind, the lame, the elderly, and the wounded came to be cured. Each went away saying they had improved.

Just two years earlier Cabeza de Vaca had been held a slave and threatened with death at the hands of coastal Indians along the Gulf of Mexico. Now the Indians believed these strange men had the power to raise the dead or will death upon those who displeased them.

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How had these incredible reversals happened? And how did an expedition of 300 soldiers, slaves and pages that began eight years earlier near Tampa, Florida be reduced to these four men who emerged on the west coast of Mexico?

When they arrived, the soldiers were armed with superior metal “skins” and helmets, crossbows, and iron quills and pikes. Their muskets spewed fire and sounds like thunder. Far away from any laws, the Spaniards intended to rule the territory of *La Florida* and exploit its rich and mysterious lands. Unyielding natives, caught in nets, were thrown to ferocious dogs with studded collars.

They were led by the cruel and merciless one-eyed Governor Narvaez. His lust for gold, blind ambition, and foolish decisions led to disaster and the loss of hundreds of lives.

Cabeza de Vaca, a distinguished veteran of historic European battles had joined as second-in-command of the expedition that had sailed from Spain in 1527 to strike it rich in the New World. Almost immediately after landing, the two men would be in conflict as Narvaez abandoned his plan to establish trading outposts and began a futile search for

rumored gold. It would lead them hundreds of miles through swamps and difficult terrain. Food shortages and the powerful archery, tactical supremacy, and tenacity of the Calusa, Timucuan and Apalachee Indians, reduced the lost explorers to defensive rearguard actions against the relentless, encircling attacks that threatened to annihilate them.

Without tools or skills, those not delirious with malaria spent six weeks forging spurs, stirrups, armor and crossbows into tools and fittings and lashed together five sailing vessels. Already down to fewer than 250 men, they launched and made a monumental miscalculation to sail west. Crazy with thirst as they drifted for weeks, they wrecked near Galveston, Texas, as the winter of 1528 began. Their numbers dwindled rapidly. Some survived by eating their former brothers-in-arms, appalling the natives. Indians enslaved and tormented them, often killing on a whim. By springtime, only 15 men were left alive. Held captive for six years, Cabeza de Vaca's group escaped by running to the west.

Because of their unusual appearance and behaviors, as they traveled to new villages, they were perceived to have special powers and were asked to be medicine men. To their own amazement, they were increasingly successful as healers. Cabeza de Vaca attributed their cures to be the direct work of God. Their reputation became so phenomenal that at times hundreds of devoted Indians followed in their dusty wake across the deserts and through mountains of the Southwest. Neighboring tribes saw these strange, silent men as deities, ceased fighting each other and called these miracle workers "Children of the Sky."

Cabeza de Vaca's odyssey ended when his entourage encountered slave-gathering Spanish horsemen near the Pacific coast. His Christ-like healings and increasing compassion for the natives lead him to try to bring Christianity to the natives and protect them from being put into shackles.

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During their odyssey, the survivors of this doomed expedition encountered exotic Native American tribes—now all but gone—crossed wildernesses, swamps and deserts; and suffered disease, starvation and extreme exposures. Cabeza de Vaca made his place in history as the first European to cross North America, nearly 275 years before Lewis and Clark crossed the continent, but little is known about the months he spent perceived as a deity by the Native Americans of whom he was a champion.

Based on years of extensive historical research and known facts of the era, the screenplay of *Children of the Sky* by Gordon Hesse recounts the amazing but true saga of these remarkable men and their times.

Market Analysis

The era and locations of this history are almost entirely untouched in cinema. Although this script is unique in many ways, it has themes common to several films that have been financially successful and critically well received:

“Dances with Wolves (1986).. \$424 Million

“Avatar” (2009) \$517+ million (Domestic as of 1/21/2010)

\$1.8 billion (worldwide January 2010)

“The Last Samurai’ (2003)..... \$457 Million

“The Fall” (2008) \$4 million

“The Mission” (1986)

“The Black Robe” (1991)

Who will fill the seats?

The market that is likely to be drawn to this screenplay is broad and diverse. It has universal themes about seeing the world through the eyes of others and acceptance of those unlike ourselves. It is particularly relevant to our world today where groups are polarized by religious, ethnic, and political affiliation. The theme of *Children of the Sky* comes from Psalm 133 of the *Bible*: “ Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity!”

Aside from the story line, it is likely to draw those with an interest in its unique elements, which include:

An Explorer of African Descent — It is virtually unknown that an African played a role in one of the earliest recorded history of this era. Estevan, one of the four survivors, was a black man from Morocco. He played a vital role because of his unique appearance and his

innate ability to communicate with different Native American cultures. The dynamic of a slave being enslaved with his “master” also introduces interesting elements.

Native American Culture—The real diversity of exotic pre-horse North American Indian cultures are far different from the images that film and television have given us. Some of the Indians lived on the threshold of starvation, and yet they had an extensive communication and trade system, parts of which extended from Mexico into Canada. Cabeza de Vaca developed his knowledge of the land and peoples by serving as a trader between inland tribes that were hostile to those along the coast.

Body Art — The Indians depicted are unlike any normally associated with Native Americans. They include: Karawakan Indians of Coastal Texas (they had pierced canes through their nose, lower lip and nipples); the Calusas of Florida (they lived on shell mounds and painted their lips blue); and Timucuan (tattooed from ankle to forehead, they wore their hair in buns and used their hair as quivers).

History, Locations & Terrain — The era is of 1521- 1536 with settings from Spain, Caribbean islands and Florida, to stunning Texas vistas and the immense Copper Canyon of Mexico. Marine locations feature geological conditions that turn the water from deep blue, to milky white to black. Sources at some locations are likely to provide underwriting.

Educational value — This screenplay is rich with historical details that provide a texture and richness to the events depicted. It is likely to be used as supplemental material for studies on anthropology, sociology, archeology, ethnicity, exploration, and leadership dynamics and tactics.

Armor & weapons— Body armor and the weapons of arquebusiers (a muzzle-loaded predecessor to the rifle), crossbows, pikes, slave capturing “gigs,” attack dogs (throwing someone “to the dogs” originated during this time) may bring repeat audiences.

And lastly, should *Children of the Sky* live up to its potential, it is the keystone of a prequel and a sequel.

Gordon Hesse

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