

VARIETY

Berlin Film Review: 'Cesar Chavez'



FEBRUARY 12, 2014 | 12:00PM PT

A civil-rights hero who put others' rights above his own fame proves a difficult figure to dramatize in Diego Luna's dry biopic.

Peter Debruge | Chief International Film Critic

A passion project about a passionate man takes surprisingly flat form in "Cesar Chavez," demonstrating that however effective the tactic may be in real life, starving oneself for social justice doesn't necessarily make for the most compelling screen entertainment — but then, preaching the virtues of nonviolence has never been cinema's strong suit. Recognizing that Chavez's victory in earning equal rights for migrant workers remains scandalously under-taught in classrooms, director Diego Luna responds with a biopic that feels more polite than political, counting on the worthiness of his subject and the participation of a well-meaning ensemble to galvanize mostly Latino auds.

A passion project about a passionate man takes surprisingly flat form in "Cesar Chavez," demonstrating that however effective the tactic may be in real life, starving oneself for social justice doesn't necessarily make for the most compelling screen entertainment — but then, preaching the virtues of nonviolence has never been cinema's strong suit. Recognizing that Chavez's victory in earning equal rights for migrant workers remains scandalously under-taught in classrooms, director Diego Luna responds with a biopic that feels more polite than

political, counting on the worthiness of his subject and the participation of a well-meaning ensemble to galvanize mostly Latino auds.

Too young (or young-looking) to play Chavez himself, Luna cast sterling character actor Michael Pena in a rare leading role — the sort of opportunity that ought to mark a turning point in his career. However, while playing Chavez may sound like an irresistible opportunity for any Mexican-American actor, the part also comes with certain pitfalls, and Pena never quite manages to breathe life into the legend.

Chavez is presented here as a saint, far removed from the fiery personalities of more radical activists. Where other civil rights figures wrestled with inner demons or had their lives tragically cut short, Chavez's biggest vice was that he cared too much and didn't always put his family first. Rather than risk tarnishing their subject's reputation, screenwriters Keir Pearson ("Hotel Rwanda") and Timothy J. Sexton ("Children of Men") approach events from a simplistic and overly reverential historical perspective.

The only complication that can't be overcome by the slow yet seemingly inevitable progress toward equality is the way Chavez's dedication to his cause deprived his oldest son, Fernando (a petulant-acting Eli Vargas), of a much-needed father figure. This is a familiar refrain in immigrant culture, where parents work themselves too hard in order to provide better opportunities for the next generation. In that respect, Luna aims to remind Chavez's beneficiaries of the sacrifices made on their behalf, too easily taken for granted in the decades since.

Turning from field world to activism in the mid-'50s, the Arizona-born organizer opened a national conversation that still rages today about the role of America's invisible immigrant labor force, whose undocumented status allowed employers to exploit their working conditions. Even so, neither Pena nor the pic itself delivers the necessary dynamism, strained by a modest budget and too few extras to sufficiently re-create a movement that found strength in numbers.

With encouragement from Robert Kennedy (Jack Holmes) and opposition from Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan (seen in hiss-inducing newsreel footage), Chavez went about organizing the migratory workers under the United Farm Workers banner, orchestrating a protest against California grape growers and even staging a march on the state capital. The film depicts Chavez successfully getting through to sympathetic white housewives, who boycott the table grapes at their local supermarkets, but doesn't necessarily update its message for their present-day equivalents (the way a film like "Milk" powerfully tied the San Francisco mayor's struggle to the gay-marriage debate).

Though unions remain a touchy issue in contemporary politics, stirring films have been made on the subject (see Norman Jewison's "F.I.S.T." or Warren Beatty's "Reds"). The trick to getting the public to eat their vegetables, as it were, is to draw them in by dramatizing the characters' personal lives. As written here, however, Chavez is a bit of a bore, already married to a supportive wife (America Ferrera) and consistently taciturn in moments that beg for combustibility.

He may be leading a movement, but his revolution feels passive. When more volatile Latinos want to fight back against police abuse, he preaches resistance. And when his more agitated allies drag their feet about embracing his nonviolent policies, Chavez pledges to starve himself until they come around. Meanwhile, Evil White Men — led by John Malkovich, fascinatingly drawing on his Croatian heritage to suggest how the American Dream can differ between immigrants — disparage the perceived laziness of their Latino workers and lean on bigoted local law enforcement to keep the power balance rigged in their favor.

Where a battle might have been exciting, Chavez instead orchestrated a waiting game, de-emphasizing his own celebrity in the process. Ironically, this patient, selfless approach merely added to his stature as a compelling folk hero, and yet, Luna and Pena struggle to capture the underlying spark that a wealth of biographies and docs — including "Cesar's Last Stand," unveiled a month earlier at Sundance — have so dynamically depicted.

Berlin Film Review: 'Cesar Chavez'

Reviewed at Sunset screening room, Los Angeles, Jan. 7, 2014. (In Berlin Film Festival — Berlinale Special.) MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: **101 MIN.**

Production

A Lionsgate release, presented with Pantelion Televisa Cine, Canana presentation, in association with Participant Media, Image Nation, Dream Management & Entertainment, Mr. Mudd, with the support of El Gobierno del Estado de Sonora, of a Canana production. Produced by Pablo Cruz, Diego Luna, Lawrence Meli, Keir Pearson. Executive producers, Emilio Azcarraga Jean, Haim Saban, Jeff Skoll, Jonathan King, Lianne Halfon, John Malkovich, Russell Smith, Gael Garcia Bernal, Julian Levin, Rebecca O'Brien.

Crew

Directed by Diego Luna. Screenplay, Keir Pearson, Timothy J. Sexton; story, Pearson. Camera (color/B&W, HD/16mm), Enrique Chediak; editors, Miguel Schverdfinger, Douglas Crise; music, Michael Brook; music supervisor, Lynn Fainchtein; production designer, Ivonne Fuentes; costume designer, Mariestela Fernandez; sound designer/supervisor, Frank Gaeta; visual effects supervisor, Raul Prado; associate producers, Fernando Perez Gavilan, Vanessa Perez, Heidi Levitt, Mauricio Katz; casting, Heidi Levitt.

With

Michael Pena, America Ferrera, Rosario Dawson, Jacob Vargas, Yancey Arias, Wes Bentley, Mark Moses, John Ortiz, Gabriel Mann, Eli Vargas, Michael Cudlitz, Darion Basco, Noe Hernandez, Hector Suarez, Jack Holmes, Ron Perkins, Julian Sands, John Malkovich. (English, Spanish dialogue)

<http://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/berlin-film-review-cesar-chavez-1201098532/>