



Photo by Joe Beine.

A mural in Denver.

CINE

Cesar's Footsteps

by Erica Hellerstein

When I first heard that Diego Luna had directed a movie about the life of farm worker leader Cesar Chavez, I wasn't quite sure what to think. To be clear, I, like many other starry-eyed fans, love Diego Luna: his mischievous half-grin, nonchalant scruff, and shaggy flop of hair. And I enjoy his films, too: "Y Tu Mamá También," "Miss Bala," "Rudo y Cursi," to name just a few. But my doubts didn't have anything to do with his body of work. I just wasn't sure he'd be able to pull off a movie about such a triumphant moment — and movement — in our recent past. However, after watching an advanced screening of the film sponsored by UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies, I admit, happily, that I was wrong.

Luna's modestly funded film, which took years of fundraising to complete, chronicles the life of Cesar Chavez, the Arizona-born co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) who famously boycotted the

grape industry and led a 300-mile march from Delano to Sacramento, California. Rather than tell the entire story of the California activist's life, the movie focuses on a moment in history: Chavez's efforts to unionize underpaid, overworked Latino farm workers in the Central Valley in the 1960s. Chavez, a farm worker himself, who worked in the fields until the late '50s, galvanized Latino grape pickers to protest for higher wages and fair working conditions after witnessing the Delano grape strike called by Filipino-American farmworkers on September 8, 1965.

Their demand for livable salaries pushed Chavez and other key activists, like UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta, into action. On March 17, 1966, in an attempt to raise public awareness about the farmworker's plight, Cesar Chavez and fellow strikers undertook a 300-mile pilgrimage from Delano to the state's capital in Sacramento. They also encouraged all Americans to boycott grapes, striking a blow to profitable growers.

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Cesar Chavez breaks his 1968 fast by sharing bread with Robert Kennedy.

Chavez and other strikers pushed forward for five years until the farmers finally agreed, in the spring of 1970, to sit down at the bargaining table. Growers hard-hit by the boycott signed contracts with the union, and since their grapes were union-approved, they sold for premium prices across the country. This increased pressure on other growers and eventually led the large growers to sign contracts with the union, giving workers higher wages, union representation, health insurance, and safety limits on the use of pesticides in the fields.

But the struggle to earn better working conditions and wages did not come without its sacrifices. The film depicts the brutal, 25-day hunger strike that Chavez undertook in 1968 in order to rededicate the movement to nonviolence as well as the alienation of his brooding teenaged son, who is often roughed up and hassled at school due to the activism of his father. These tensions helped dramatize the movie's storyline, which was about the personal as much as the political. Some of the more critical reviews of the film have said that Luna's Chavez was painted as a sanitized saint, cast in a glowingly reverential light. But I didn't find

him to be saturated with well-meaning sanctity. In fact, as the film reveals, the father of the movement was not always the family man he could have been, prioritizing his work over his family. And the rest of the characters in the cast weren't perfect, either. Yes, they were certainly movers and shakers, but they weren't, thank God, martyrs — how boring it is to watch perfect characters glide through life's miserable obstacles — and how much more relatable to watch people, not heroes, do remarkable things.

Chavez's family members had complicated relationships and gnawing self-doubts; some men in the movement were afflicted with machista swagger, occasionally throwing punches that undermined their leader's trademark nonviolent philosophy. Sure, Luna could have imbued the film's protagonists with a more radical, tortured bent, but I think the point of the movie was much simpler — to shed light on an overlooked chapter of our history — rather than explore the fracturing of a movement and the inner demons of its leader.

The preview audience seemed to agree. After credits rolled, the film received a standing ovation at Berkeley's

continued on page 32 >>



Michael Peña as Cesar Chavez.

“Cesar Chavez”

Directed by Diego Luna, 2014



Photo courtesy of Canana Films.

Diego Luna on location during the filming of “Cesar Chavez.”

A Conversation With Diego Luna

On why he made the film:

When I was 15 years old, I remember seeing images of the funeral of Cesar Chavez... that amazing image of thousands of farm workers walking with the wood box that held Cesar's body. Even in his funeral he was sending the right message. He was sending the message that he was just another person in the movement.

I come from a place where politicians have showed us that change will never come from their angle. We were at Harvard recently, where our politicians go to give lessons to young kids about stuff they didn't do. I wanted the film to send the message that if we fight indifference, things can happen. It's by telling personal stories, as this movement showed us, that we can engage with people.

I did the film because I thought there was an amazing message behind the boycott. Instead of using violence and attacking the machine that is oppressing us straight on, if you go around and talk to consumers... mothers talking to mothers, parents talking to parents — people don't want to do wrong. They don't want to hurt you, but it's indifference, it's ignorance that stops them from doing the right thing. I love the idea of mothers saying, “Well, just remind yourself when you buy a grape, you are supporting child labor.” And that's when I connected with the story because that's what we do as filmmakers. We tell personal stories that hopefully will confront you with a bigger thing, a bigger issue, and make you react and do something.

On using farm workers as extras:

We were shooting in Sonora... Makeup cannot do that, you know? Those faces have been under the sun for hours and hours in rough conditions, and their hands are real hands. We thought it was easier to explain to a farm worker how we do film than to explain to extras what it is to be a farm worker. And it was fun because the first day there were thousands of them: all Sonora came to be part of the film. By the third day, they realized that film was not glamorous. It was boring, and they had to wait long periods of time. So we had to go to other towns to find people. But also, every time we were shooting, you would turn right and people were picking grapes. So we were reminded of the story.

All our actors went to work in the fields. I remember being in the fields and saying to the guys, "Please treat them as you treat every worker here." And they came back with the feeling of knowing something they didn't know before. It was the feeling of being in a place that visually looks gorgeous, but you are in the middle of that field, just a little dot in the middle of a huge landscape, where there is no shade, no bathrooms, no nothing... Being left alone in the middle of the fields, they had that memory... and they could portray what they did.

These selections from the question-and-answer session have been edited and condensed.

Michael Peña as Cesar Chavez working in the fields.





Farm workers and supporters march from Delano to Sacramento, 1968.
(Photo: Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Union Affairs, Wayne State University.)



Cesar's Footsteps

continued from page 28

California Theater. One woman cupped her hands around her mouth and screeched, “*Si se puede!*” while a thunderstorm of claps rumbled throughout the room. Dolores Huerta was sitting two seats away from me — small-boned, with a shiny black bob and a presence much larger than her petite frame. Nearby, other original members of the UFW, who had marched to Sacramento with Chavez, were also seated, as was the current president of the organization, Arturo Rodriguez.

Viewers jeered and groaned when old footage of Reagan and Nixon popped onscreen and hooted gleefully during the film’s triumphant moments. I must admit that a few scenes in the movie did give me chills: it was thrilling to be watching that movie surrounded by the folks who birthed the movement in the first place. No matter what the cynics and jaded naysayers declare — the ones who shrug off activism because the system is damn corrupt anyway — watching the film in that theater was

a profoundly moving experience. It was raining bitterly outside, and there I was, for the first time in months, inspired. The film is truly a must-see for anyone seeking to be reminded of one of history’s simpler lessons: if you want to change the future, it helps to study the past.

CLAS showed an advanced screening of “Cesar Chavez” on March 5, 2014. After the film, Diego Luna, the director; Arturo Rodriguez, president of the United Farm Workers, and Maria Echaveste of Berkeley Law responded to questions from the audience.

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The discussion panel after the film (from left): Harley Shaiken, chair, Center for Latin American Studies; Diego Luna, director, “Cesar Chavez”; Arturo Rodriguez, president, United Farm Workers; Maria Echaveste, Berkeley Law School.



Photo by Jim Block.



Dolores Huerta surrounded by young Latinas at the screening of "Cesar Chavez."
(Photo by Jim Block.)