



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Motorcycle Diaries

In December 1951, 23-year-old medical student Ernesto Guevara, who in the future would become the iconic revolutionary leader 'Che', took a long motorcycle trip with his friend Alberto Granado on a Norton named La Poderosa II (The Powerful One). They left Cordoba in central Argentina, headed first to Buenos Aires to visit Ernesto's family, then speeded west to the coast of Chile, then north along the Pacific seaboard through Peru and Colombia, ending up in Venezuela in July 1952. This six-month mini-Odyssey, full of mishaps and chance meetings, was the basis for Guevara's book *The Motorcycle Diaries*, an impressionable, idealistic youth's thoughtful commentary on his road encounters and the harsh realities of South American life, which became a backpack classic in the 1960s when Che's fame was at its height.

In these morally more slippery times, the need for such positive political certainty has led to a revival of interest in Guevara, the most obvious manifestation of which is the elegiac new road movie based on the book from Brazilian director Walter Salles, which stars Gael García Bernal, possibly the most brilliant young actor of his generation, as Che and Rodrigo de la Serna as Granado. The film avoids the tub-thumping clichés of the average biopic, choosing to portray the dawning of Guevara's social conscience by inference and mood rather than through overt political statement – at least until the climactic moment when he swims the Amazon in Peru from the bank where the medical workers sleep to the camp where the lepers they tend reside. Salles also weaves in close-up photographic studies of South America's poor.

I talked to Salles at Cannes in May, where he seemed invigorated by the way the film had come together through improvisation.

With a figure as iconic as Che Guevara, how do you avoid the pitfalls of the biopic?

It took us five years to make *The Motorcycle Diaries* including three years of research before the filming began. We retraced Che's journey through Latin America twice and we did many interviews with Alberto Granado, who is still alive, and with people who had met the two travellers in 1952. We realised this was a journey of two guys who were trying not only to find their own identity, but also what one could call a 'Latin American identity'.

We had a solid screenplay by Puerto Rican writer Jose Rivera, who knew everything about Guevara and didn't try to mythologise or demythologise. He tried to show Guevara and Granado as they could have been at that time as opposed to what they would become. But when we went on our version of their road trip we found that what was peripheral was as interesting as the road itself. So we started to improvise, and the film is a blend of very structured material and improvisation. We wanted to be faithful both to the book that inspired us and to the spirit of the journey: these two young guys who were completely open to the encounters they had.

Which is why the film is full of so many real people.

Non-actors permeate the film. We encountered them on the road and incorporated them.

One wonders what would have happened to Guevara if his sweetheart hadn't dumped him. Would he have embraced the bourgeois life?

Guevara has resonance today because his quest never ended. His desire to unveil the unknown was present in every moment of his life. At the age of 16 he bought a small engine which he put on a bike and toured the north of Argentina in a single month. When he was 23 he did this journey through Latin America at a time when people from his social class were more interested in Europe. We live in an age where people are blinded by cynicism and here you have a true idealist. We were tired of the rhetoric about the death of ideology and we wanted to make this film in order to believe in something again.

There are many head-on, composed shots of the poor.

The human geography of those weathered faces was more appealing to us than the physical geography. We were influenced by Martin Chambi, a Peruvian photographer of the 1920s who was the first to take the camera out of the studio and photograph people in the streets. He treated people you would never have seen before as citizens, anticipating what the Italian neorealists did in the 1940s and 1950s. We wanted to be sensitive to the faces we encountered – for instance, as we were leaving a small hotel in Cuzco, a boy of about ten years old asked us if we would like to hear the untold history of the Incas. We said, ‘Yes, but on camera.’ And Gael and Rodrigo were so in tune with their characters that such improvisations were a joy to film.

Did Gael Garcia Bernal really swim the Amazon?

Gael swam for three days in the river, and when we were all tired, he’d say, ‘Let’s go one more time.’ That tells you what kind of actor he is. The scene of crossing the river was the last we shot, and when I said ‘Cut’, we all jumped in the Amazon, one by one. We gathered in the water and the night was completely still and the river seemed endless and the boat was pretty distant, and we started to swim together against the current towards the boat in complete silence. It was a very moving moment.

When Ernesto says, ‘We’re the same people from Mexico down to Patagonia’, it seems like a personal statement for you.

Absolutely. This idea of one continent, one people, seemed utopian as we were starting this small Odyssey because we all came from different countries: Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Brazil. But little by little we understood our frontiers were more porous than we imagined.

How many people were on the shoot?

It varied from a hundred in the leper colony in Peru – 70 of them non-actors – to 12 in the Peruvian Andes. Whenever we wanted to improvise, myself, our DoP Eric Gautier and the actors would run away from the main crew. Eric solves lighting problems naturally. Most DoPs would have tried to light the Amazon to show the crossing of the river but he just had a very small light on a zodiac turned towards Gael as he swam. If we’d shot in a more conventional way we would still be filming.

How many motorbikes did you get through?

Three Nortons we found in Argentina. Two were in miserable condition when we started, but Gustavo Agra, a genius mechanic in Buenos Aires, reconditioned them so they were running better than ever. The bikes in the accidents are what we called Nortukis: Suzukis transformed into Nortons. Those broke shamelessly every time we put them on the road, even before shooting the falls. The 1935 Nortons were way more solid than the 1989 Nortukis.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, September 2004

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

Director: Walter Salles

©/Presented by: FilmFour

Production Company: South Fork Pictures

In association with: Tu Vas Voir

Executive Producers: Robert Redford, Paul Webster, Rebecca Yeldham

Produced by: Michael Nozik, Edgard Tenenbaum, Karen Tenkhoff

Co-producers: Daniel Burman, Diego Dubcovsky

Executive in Charge of Production: Peter McAleese

Production Financing for FilmFour: Kim Ballard

Andrés Wood Producciones: Patricio Pereira

Co-ordinator for Tu Vas Voir: Bernard Berge

Co-ordinator for FilmFour: Laura Franses

Casting: Walter Rippel

Screenplay: José Rivera

Based on the books: 'The Motorcycle Diaries' by Ernesto Che Guevara,

'With Che through Latin America' by Alberto Granado

Director of Photography: Éric Gautier

Editor: Daniel Rezende

Production Designer: Carlos Conti

Artistic Supervisor: Gianni Ninà

Producción de Arte: Nelso 'Coco' Castillo

Costume Designers: Beatriz Di Benedetto, Marisa Urruti

Title Design: Susan Bradley Film Design

Titles/Opticals: Title House Digital

Music: Gustavo Santaolalla

Guitars/Guitarron/Ronroco/Charango/Caja/Pipes/

Percussion/Vibes/Flutes/Bass: Gustavo Santaolalla

Flutes: Don Markese

Cajón: Braulio Barrera

Violín: Javier Casalla

Music Supervisor: Adrián Sosa

Executive in Charge of the Soundtrack Album: Kathy Nelson

Music Editors: Aníbal Kerpel, Stephen Lotwis, Robert Boyd,

David Lee Scott

Music Recordist: Aníbal Kerpel

Additional [Music] Recording: Hector Coulon

Sound Recordist: Jean-Claude Brisson

Re-recording Mixers: Patrick Giraudi, Todd Orr

Re-recordists: Andrea Lakin, Chris Sidor

Supervising Sound Editor: Frank Gaeta

Sound Editors: Javier Bennassar, Jed Dodge, Dennis Twitty, Todd Niesen

Dialogue Supervisor: Patricio Libenson

ADR Supervisor: Patricio Libenson

Loop Group Leaders: Vera Taylor, Miguel Valdarrago, Gabriel Rodríguez,

Patricio Castillo

ADR Mixers: Peter Gleaves, Anne Hadsell, Lauro Galindo

Foley Artists: Catherine Harper, Chris Moriana

Foley Mixer: Gary Coppola

Dolby Consultant: Bryan Arenas

Special Thanks to: Ettore Scola

Press Liaison: Furgang Comunicaciones

Unit Publicist: Emma Chapman

Argentinian cast:

Gael García Bernal (*Ernesto Guevara de la Serna*)

Rodrigo de la Serna (*Alberto Granado*)

Mía Maestro (*Chichina*)

Mercedes Morán (*Celia de la Serna*)

Jean-Pierre Noher (*Ernesto Guevara Lynch*)

Lucas Oro (*Roberto Guevara*)

Marina Glezer (*Celita Guevara*)

Sofía Bertolotto (*Ana María Guevara*)

Franco Solazzi (*Juan Martín Guevara*)

Ricardo Díaz Mourelle (*Uncle Jorge*)

Sergio Boris, Daniel Kargieman (*young travellers*)

Diego Giorzi (*Rodolfo*)

Facundo Espinoza (*Tomás Granado*)

Matías Gómez, Diego Treu, Ariel Verdún,

Gustavo Mansilla (*kids*)

Susana Lanteri (*Aunt Rosana*)

Natalia Lobo (*La Negra*)

Maída Andrenacci, Bárbara Lombardo, Dana Frijoli, Valeria Echeverría,

Ariel Prieto, Matías Strafe, Nicolás Watson (*Chichina friends*)

Carlos Rivkin (*Horacio Ferreyra*)

Elvio Suárez (*Uncle Martín*)

Pablo Villarrazza (*Esteban Aguirre*)

Liliana Kolinsky (*Chichina's mother*)

Guillermo Ojeda (*man with oxen cart*)

Óscar Alegre (*Don Olate*)

Fernando Ignacio Llosa (*Von Puttkamer*)

Marta Lubos (*Schatzie Von Puttkamer*)

Chilean cast

Cristian F. Chaparro (*Luna*)

Cristian Arancibia (*Tulio*)

Gabriela Aguilera (*Piedad*)

Juan Maliqueo (*Araucano father*)

Samuel Cifuentes (*Araucano son*)

Constanza B. Majluf, Evelyn Ibarra (*Chilean sisters*)

Víctor Hugo Ogaz (*waiter*)

Fernando Farias (*fire chief*)

Maximiliano Toledo (*Cañaco*)

César López (*fireman*)

Pablo Macaya (*janitor*)

Rosa Curihuentro (*old woman*)

Erto Pantoja (*mechanic*)

Vladimir Paredes (*truck driver*)

Brandon Cruz (*miner*)

Vilma M. Verdejo (*miner's wife*)

Jaime Azúcar (*mine foreman*)

María Esther Zamora (*Chipi Chipi band singer*)

'Pollito' González (*Chipi Chipi band pianist*)

Jorge Lobos (*Chipi Chipi band percussionist/trumpeter*)

Cuti Aste (*Chipi Chipi band clarinet/accordion*)

Robert Lindl (*Chipi Chipi band double bass player*)

Peruvian cast

Gustavo Morales (*Felix*)

Gustavo Bueno (*Dr Hugo Pesce*)

María Beatriz Abele (*Zdenka Pesce*)

Jonathan Balbis (*Luis Pesce*)

Matías Delgado Rizzi (*Tito Pesce*)

Jorge Rodríguez Paz (*Peruvian from Canepa*)

Jackelyn Vásquez (*Luz*)

Ernesto Cabrejos, Víctor Ángeles, Willy Gutiérrez, Gerald Mayeux, Matías

Gómez (*card players*)

Jorge Chiarella (*Dr Bresciani*)

Ricardo Velázquez (*Banca*)

Carolina Infante (*Sister Margarita*)

Nidia Bermejo (*young Indian nurse*)

Carlos 'Caitro' Soto De La Colina (*Papa Carlito*)

Delfina Paredes (*Mother Sister Alberto*)

Nemesio Reyes, Hernán Herrera

(*lepers from San Pablo*)

Antonella Costa (*Silvia*)

Igor Calvo (*Dr Souza*)

UK/USA/France 2004©

126 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780