

Movie Review: The two parts of 'Che' don't add up to a whole picture

by Lee Grant

If director Steven Soderbergh wanted to bring the Cuban revolution to the screen, depicting guerrilla leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara as a saint, why didn't he attempt one dynamic movie?

What he generated with "Che: Part One" and "Che: Part Two" is a pair of forgettable and wearying ones. It's a lumbering, indulgent exercise in hero worship.

Benicio Del Toro stars as the legendary revolutionary in *~Che, Part I and Part II~*TM
RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Soderbergh is one of those potent filmmakers who gets to do what he wants in Hollywood, studio chiefs clamoring for his services (his "Oceans 11, 12 and 13" combined for more than \$400 million at the U.S. box office).

That means few if any dare tell him "don't do that," like the ill-advised "Bubble," which arrived three years ago in theaters, on DVD and TV at the same time. That bubble burst.

Now, in "Che: Part One" and "Che: Part Two" (being shown back-to-back with an intermission for one increased admission price) comes more than four hours of Benicio Del Toro as the legendary revolutionary.

For his part, Del Toro, who turns into the "Wolfman" later this year, trudges through the narrow storytelling in a quiet, studied manner. He is such a good actor he manages to give poignancy and understatement to a figure that Soderbergh views one-dimensionally as "hero, freedom fighter."

Del Toro's hirsute, warrior-costumed visage, unfortunately, is distracting. There's Che slightly bearded, full-bearded, clean shaven. The story, as they say in Spanish, is in the pelos.

For comparison, check what Gael Garcia Bernal, the brilliant Mexican actor, accomplished as the young Che in "The Motorcycle Diaries" (2004). That extraordinary film focused on Guevara and Alberto Granado, Argentine doctors on a remarkable journey discovering the soul of Latin America.

Directed by Brazilian Walter Salles, he might've been a better choice to take the Guevara character, meaningful to so many, into adulthood.

Soderbergh's work is being called an "epic." It's epic, all right, an epic disappointment.

In "Part One" ("The Argentine"), a gaggle of political rebels meets in Mexico City to discuss that "half the Cuban population is unemployed, there's stealing from the treasury." There, Guevara's pal, Raul Castro, introduces him to brother Fidel, a man with great ideas, including hopes for curing child poverty and illiteracy.

Guevara (who is Argentinian) bonds with the young Fidel (played smartly by the Mexican actor Demian Bichir). Soon, village-by-village, farm-by-farm, they gather an army of Cuban comrades to bring down the American-embraced, corrupt dictator Fulgencio Batista.

In "Part Two" ("Guerrilla"), the cinematic tale slows as Che, the Cuban victory behind him, disappears into the Bolivian jungle immersed now on his grand Latin American Revolution, again traversing the back country, picking up a contingent of ragtag soldiers along the way. This time for Che, things don't go as well facing Bolivia's U.S.-backed forces.

Soderbergh's languid pace sinks the film into tedium. He adores the man who became a symbol of idealism, a battler against oppression and capitalism. More concerned with logistics, important dates and jungle skirmishes, the director fails to create warmth for the characters.

Witnessing "November 26, 1956" or "May 3, 1958" or "Havana, May 1964" produces a college world history class atmosphere. You think, exiting the theater, there'll be an exam.

The films are part professorial lecture, part romanticized portrait. Even Che's death is sympathetic, depicted as something undertaken by a young person torn about what he was about to do. The music is lilting, as in, "Isn't this fun?" It isn't.

What "The Motorcycle Diaries" got to was the personality, the roots, the drive of the man into Marxist thinking — its positives and negatives. The twin "Che" stories delve into politics, but there's a chasm left, a yearning to know more about the man disappearing into Bolivia and changing identity, first as "Ramon," then "Fernando."

The lone personal touch is the encounters with future wife Aleida (Catalina Sandino Moreno from "Maria Full of Grace"), a tough soldier in her own right. Moreno handles the role with grace, displaying strength to brawl alongside the men and the tenderness to love an icon whose eyes are on the world.

Matt Damon, as a clergyman visiting Che in the jungle, and Lou Diamond Phillips, as the head of the Bolivian communist party, pop in for cameos.

The film, mostly in Spanish, utilizes real news film (though not as well as director Gus Van Sant does in "Milk"). Then there are the recreations like Che's arrival at a high-end Manhattan party, where he regales guests (including the late Sen. Eugene McCarthy, D-Minn.) with his anti-American rhetoric.

He tells McCarthy, "We'd like to thank you for the Bay of Pigs invasion. There's nothing like a U.S. invasion to bring the people together."

It's easy to read Soderbergh's politics, and that gets in the way. Che doesn't come off as hero or saint, or even a common man. In fact, you don't get to know him at all. The film is an empty homage, a thin bouquet. Soderbergh cares for him, places him on a pedestal, admires him, but gives us little reason to.

"Che: Part One." Rated: Unrated. Running time: 2 hours, 12 minutes. 2.5 stars.

"Che: Part Two." Rated: Unrated. Running time: 2 hours, 11 minutes. 2 stars.

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