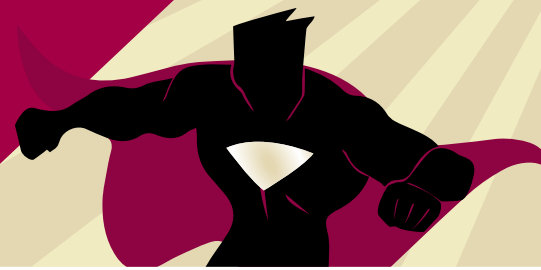


MANDELA: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM



[A Long Walk to Freedom is an adaptation, borrowed from the timeless autobiography, of a man who was bigger than life. Never has there been a more uphill task than to condense the venerable Mandela into prose. The film finds itself inevitably bogged down with the responsibility of doing the man justice, in two and a half hours, in a post humus context. The Justin Chadwick biopic attempts to be compelling and honest, straying away from a sycophantic well-meaning script that a movie of such magnitude could follow. The picture finds itself thrust into a contextual world, fraught with media coverage of Mandela's death and the subsequent globalized state of mourning. It may stumble under the weight of expectation, but it manages to rise to the occasion beautifully.

After a timid start, the film roars to life meeting its contextual problems head-on. The biopic tries to draw our attention to the man and not the legend. He inspires, awe, fear, loathing, and adoration. William Nicholson does an excellent job in adapting the movie from the biography. He provides enough to sustain Mandela's deity-like status and leaves a very human after taste. The motion picture introduces Mandela (embodied in a sublime performance by Idris Elba) to us as a young lawyer, defending a domestic servant accused of stealing underwear. Incensed by the inhumane death of a drunk while in police custody, he burns his identity papers and launches himself into the ANC struggle against apartheid. Mandela transforms into firebrand and a real pain in the state's back. He cheats on his wife, neglects his son and smokes like a chimney. The Sharpeville massacre of 1960 boosts the movie to compelling heights, transforming Mandela into an all out renegade, blowing up government buildings and factories. The plot thickens with Mandela's oral prowess, the ensuing manhunt, and the climax of his trials.

His martyr laced speech in the docks of Pretoria catapult the man into the pantheon of revolution and immediately endears him to the viewer. Instead, the Judge throws life-imprisonment at him at the cruel Robben Island, where he is mellowed into boy clothes and breaking bigger rocks into smaller rocks for twenty-seven years.

The man slowly turns into myth, overtaken by the enormity of his reputation. Grey-haired and stooping, Mandela finds himself in the sidelines. The loss of his firebrand self starkly confirmed to us by Patrick Lekota (Zenzo Ngqobe) who peers at him through the chain link fence, expressly stating his disappointment and how unimpressive Mandela had become.

Elba gives a stellar performance in a film that is vulnerable to formality. He manages to capture the metamorphosis of Mandela from a militant activist into a noble, conciliatory statesman. Mandela returns to a home on the brink of civil war and a resolutely radical wife (Winnie Mandela played by Naomie Harris). The inevitable divorce ensues thanks to years of physical and ideological distance.

There are too many events and accomplishments to cram into two and a half hours, yet William Nicholson does a commendable job. Chadwick rushes through Mandela's early years and his domestic struggles appear to be footnotes in a greater political odyssey. Leadership comes at a steep price. It adopts a deliberate and majestic stance towards the end, portraying a man (who has been through it all) managed to bring a country together and rise to the highest office of the land. The handling of the movie, although it tries to show Mandela as human, borders on being too respectful. However, that is the collateral damage of a biopic based on a man of Mandela's historical stature. Long walk to freedom is a brilliant attempt at telling the story of a man, already immortalized by history.