

Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom

The producers of the new biopic “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom” could not have dreamed of a better burst of publicity for their picture than the December 5th death of Nelson Mandela and the rhapsodic international celebration of the beloved South African. With a world eager to learn more about the man, a movie that effectively outlined his life, trials, and triumphs should be a smash. Yet “Mandela” the movie, while it aims to be high-toned and serious, misses the mark because of a too thin, too disjointed structure.

Starring the British actor Idris Elba as Mandela, the film tries to cover the whole of the man’s life, from halcyon days on a farm through work as crusading lawyer and ANC leader to his 27-year imprisonment and a triumphant emergence as his country’s liberator. The trouble is that’s it’s too episodic, with some themes touched too gingerly and some missed.

Most effective, because it is inherently dramatic, is a core middle sequence covering Mandela’s imprisonment on Robben Island, where he spent 18 years of his imprisonment. Part of the reason it is most effective is that Elba himself (now 41 years old) is closest to Mandela’s age at the time (he was 46 entering prison). And while the actor doesn’t much resemble the sinewy Mandela (he is too large and picture-book handsome), he gets the distinctive cadence of the voice and embodies a noble presence that makes the sequence work.

The prison scenes, too, give weight to the middle-aged Mandela getting past rage to a more accepting stance--yet with his awareness of his people’s repression firmly intact. Unfortunately in much of the latter third of the film, the script (by William Nicholson) seems to just tick off a parade of highlights in his life, with the predictable finale of his 1994 election as South Africa’s first black president.

Alba himself does a creditable job throughout, though it can be disconcerting to have to watch him display 60 years of makeup and hair changes. At least he is a charismatic actor playing, with control and tact, a charismatic political figure. Mention should be made of the portrayal of Winnie Mandela, played by Naomi Harris, convincing as a young wife driven to radical politics by the subjugation of her husband and her own victimization. Winnie’s own political arc is a significant sub theme of the movie, and the film doesn’t flinch from her own harsh score-settling with supposed ANC enemies. Her final estrangement from Mandela is believably handled by both leads.

The film, a long-time project of South African producer Anant Singh, is enhanced throughout by being shot entirely in South Africa, sometimes in the actual sites of the events it depicts. Still, I wanted this ambitious film to be the superior, more meaningful drama the man’s life deserved.

(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 141 min.).

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