

## The Motorcycle Diaries

Though Ché Guevara in Latin America was (and is) a symbol of unflinching revolution, and though his face on T-shirts elsewhere has long stood as a symbol for youthful revolution, he was, of course, not always a symbol. He was once an idealistic young Argentine, studying medicine, from a good family, just trying to find his way. Brazilian director Walter Salles has discovered that youthful idealist and crafted a most effective road movie about him and his formation as a man in the new *The Motorcycle Diaries* ("Diarios de Motocicleta").

*The Motorcycle Diaries* was adapted by screenwriter José Rivera from both a diary kept by the 23-year old Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (Mexican star Gael Garcia Bernal) and a memoir by his travel partner Alberto Granado (Rodrigo de la Serna). It traces their seminal journey on a beat-up motorcycle through a good portion of Latin America in the first half of 1952. The two friends cycled from Buenos Aires through southern Argentina then across to Chile and up to Peru and beyond. The young ramblers have a string of typical on-the-road adventures, encountering motor and money problems, fiddling and flirting with girls, taking on odd jobs and discovering new elements of their vast continent. There are the glimmerings, especially in the young Guevara, of a new social consciousness when he sees how Andean Indians live in stultifying poverty. That consciousness is solidified further--and the beginning of a new vision is forged--when Ernesto and Alberto work as assistants to Dr. Bresciani (Jorge Chiarello) at a leper colony in the Amazonian forests.

This is a coming-of-age story that many Latin Americans know well, and the telling of it affords director Salles a chance for a primer on spectacular South American geography. Salles, who has effectively conjured up the vast interior of his own Brazil (*Central Station*, *Behind the Sun*), is just as revealing with the rest of his continent as he and his cinematographer, Eric Gautier, show the two intrepid figures put-putting through spacious Patagonia, the craggy Andes, Chile's sun-drenched coast, Peru's highlands, and the fecund Amazon basin.

The travelogue, intriguing as it is, takes second place, however, to the human dimension of the two comrades discovering their world and each other. The contrast is clear: Alberto is older, crasser, more robust and hungrier for the female of the species, while Ernesto is more callow and sensitive, a reader and asthma sufferer who is more uncomfortable with the opposite sex. De la Serna and Garcia Bernal play off these opposites well yet still show a natural and genuine camaraderie, much of the latter revealed in humor.

What is most effective about *The Motorcycle Diaries* is that it eschews the easy sentimentalism and righteousness that a tale of the young Ché might evoke in clumsier hands. Sentiment is present--especially in a climactic swim by the challenged Ernesto to the leper colony--but it is not wallowed in. Consciousness is raised, as young Guevara observes and tries to reach out to the wretched, but it is shown as fellow-feeling, not revolutionary zeal. We see a young man during a believable transition, the forming of the germ of the later political crusader. It is a transition shown on the vivid face--alternately amiable, shy, and poignant--of Garcia Bernal, who adds a new worthy film credential beside his other recent triumphs (*Amores Perros*, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*).

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