

Interview: Actor Michael Peña on the Fast Track in ‘Turbo’

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CHICAGO – Michael Peña is a serious guy – dedicated to his career direction, acting craft and perspective on a life in show business. But that is not all he is, as he has dedicated a new role for his young son. It is the new animated film called “Turbo,” and Peña portrays the voice of Tito, the owner of the world’s fastest snail.

The familiar character actor is coming off a stellar 2012 with his acclaimed performance in “End of Watch,” co-starring Jake Gyllenhaal. He has been a working actor since 1994, and has uncompromisingly built his career through notable parts in “Crash” (2004), “Million Dollar Baby” (2004), “World Trade Center” (2006) and “The Lincoln Lawyer” (2011). Besides lending his voice to the character of Tito in “Turbo,” Peña will also portray Cesar Chavez in the 2013 biography film of the civil rights activist in “Chavez.”



Michael Peña is the Voice of Tito, Owner of ‘Turbo’
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

The Chicago native Michael Peña is an interesting and engaging interview. He thoughtfully approached the questions from HollywoodChicago.com like he so apparently has approached his many acting challenges.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was odd or different about doing animated voice work over live action acting? Did you have any challenges?

Michael Peña: The first difference was off the bat is that I had to do this by myself, and they have this voiceover technique down to a science. I don’t know how they do it. Usually chemistry is based on how one person reacts to another, for example a fast talker with a slow talker creates a rhythm that is odd. These animation producers have it down to where they can create the rhythm, and therefore the chemistry. It was

like shooting in the dark, I didn’t know what I was doing for much of the time, but [director] David Soren was able to help me out.

HollywoodChicago.com: After the film was completed, what was your reaction to your voice coming through a completely actualized animated form, again in comparison to a real life character?

Peña: At first I thought, wow, Tito is really big. [laughs] He’s big guy. My kid saw it with me and said, ‘it’s not you, Daddy.’ I told him it’s the guy that I play. He actually replied, ‘they made you fat.’ I tried explaining to him that it was already created, and then he said, ‘you did gain weight for that other film,’ because I had for ‘Chavez.’ I just said, ‘no buddy, c’mon.’

HollywoodChicago.com: From what you have observed about animation in the last ten years, how do you think ‘Turbo’ fits in with the modern form of ‘cartoons’?

Peña: The term ‘cartoon’ is different for me, because I think it means 2-D drawn animation. This technique fills out more of a definition of animation, where everything looks more real in a made up world. It’s telling about the technology they are using right now. I just saw it for the first time in 3-D, and to me the shell on the snail looks real, like it can exist. Older cartoons didn’t look like that, and my kid likes those cartoons as well, but with today’s more realistic animation he’s much more involved.

I’ve worked in CGI [Computer Generated Images] for ‘Battle Los Angeles’ and that was super real as well. Oddly, it seems like acting has become more real because the scenery around it is more made up.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve had a fairly eclectic film and TV career, with a number of different types of roles. What is your strategy for obtaining scripts that interest you, and what is your strategy for taking on a certain role?



Michael Peña in ‘End of Watch’
Photo credit: Open Road Films

Peña: It was a conscious decision to pick roles carefully. There was somewhere along the way when I decided to be more artistic. My Mom told me, ‘nobody remembers your bank account, only the work that you do.’ I did this one for my kid, but as far as other films goes, if the writing doesn’t excite me – and I’ve turned down some really big films – then I feel I would suck at those roles because I don’t see them. I’ve done projects where I’ve been about 80% sure it was okay, and other people said afterward ‘it was good.’ But on set I wasn’t feeling it, or painting my picture.

For me, choosing a project is like choosing a book. Sometimes you start a book, and you don’t finish because you’re not into it. I happened to be in a position when I could say, ‘I really like this book’...meaning the script. I would like to act in this ‘book.’ I’ve done small parts in many films. For example, there was ‘Million Dollar Baby,’ ‘Babel’ and ‘Lincoln Lawyer.’ Every couple of years I will do a small part, literally one or two scenes, just because the script was so good.

HollywoodChicago.com: I felt that last year’s ‘End of Watch,’ was an intense work of cinematic art, and your co-starring role had a lot to do with it. What kind of feedback did you get from the industry after the film was released, and was it the type of film that allowed you to get more attention in the business?

Peña: Honestly enough, I got a lot of attention. At first, it was slow in coming, and not all the voting bodies saw the film. It was marketed as an action film, I actually questioned the producers about that. But it was independently financed, and they wanted it to sell, that I understood. I did just get invited to be an Academy member, which is amazing. The outside business and press did consider my role a ‘starring’ role, which was great. In the end, it was successful and life changing for me.

I am working with [‘End of Watch’ writer/director] David Ayers again, but this time there are five of us in every f**king scene from beginning to end, so it’s a real cool ensemble piece.

HollywoodChicago.com: You worked with several known and unknown film directors, which one of them had the most influence on you as an actor. and what magic moment resulted from that collaboration?



Michael Peña in the Upcoming ‘Chavez’
Photo credit: Participant Media

Peña: It would be J.J. Abrams and Matt Reeves in the year 2000, when I spent a year on the TV show ‘Felicity.’ I remember I was just kind of doing random roles at that point in my career, but then I came across this tough part that I didn’t know if I could do. It was the first time I had encountered cool and interesting writing. I felt that I wasn’t very good, but that was the time I thought I had to practice more to sustain a level of being loose, which was finding the confidence.

I focused on the words and the tonality, and that was the first time I felt I had to figure something out like that. I was able to do it at the audition, and then three years later I took that into ‘Crash.’ It does start with the writing, but it’s also about the character feel and the world I create.

HollywoodChicago.com: You recently finished filming the upcoming biography movie ‘Chavez.’ Now that you’ve finished portraying the civil rights activist Cesar Chavez, what did you admire about his fight, and what was the key to capturing his humanity over and above his place in history?

Peña: Chavez was an ordinary guy doing an extraordinary thing, but the one thing I focused on is that he had to leave his kids, and he had eight of them, and the sacrifice associated with that. He loved his kids tremendously, but his work – according to him – had to be done, because no one was doing it. All the pieces about his history are there and available, so I underlined it with the heartbreak of a man who knows he’s doing the right thing, but leaving a lot behind.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’re raising your son in very different circumstances than your Chicago upbringing. What do you observe most that is different for his generation and circumstance from your own childhood?



Michael Peña in Chicago, July 8th, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Peña: I think it’s pretty much the same. I grew up poor, but I never knew I was poor until I left. It didn’t matter, because I did go to Marist High School here, and I would see that the rich kids there were still depressed. The thing that they didn’t have was parents who were around, and my parents were there for me. They worked a lot, but we spent time together, and I would observe that this wasn’t the case for some of my classmates. I love my son, and try to spend as much time as I can with him. I make that time happen.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the same aspect, what advantages to you have as a self-made success versus your colleagues who came from a background of privilege?

Peña: In life there is an exchange. Sometimes you're given things without really working for them, and to me that is the definition of criminality, if you get something for nothing. I've observed people who have gotten success quickly and with less effort, and they usually don't sustain their career.

It depends on how you're raised. I recognize how fortunate I am, and I'm not going to sh*t the bed. I would keep studying acting, even when I couldn't afford it – on my own reading or in watching three-four movies a day – to study different acting styles.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which actor did you observe most closely in trying to pick up technique?

Peña: Dustin Hoffman. He's the most loose, and he breaks down a script the best. There are guys who are really good, doing their acting thing, but there are others who know how to tell a story. The better you get, the better you're able to tell a story.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, which role, out of all of them you've tackled, comes closest to the person that you really are? How does that come out in the performance?

Peña: I have yet to find that. If I look at 'End of Watch,' 'Chavez' 'World Trade Center' and 'Crash,' those are my favorite roles. I'm proud of those, but I never knew how to do them when I began the process of finding the character. But once I've got it, after sometimes months of work, I fool myself into thinking that it is me. Then two months afterward, I think, 'man, I was so different.' It's like thinking about how I was in high school. [laughs]

"Turbo" opens everywhere on July 17th in 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for 3D theaters and show times. Featuring the voices of Michael Peña, Ryan Reynolds, Paul Giamatti, Luis Guzmán, Bill Hader, Richard Jenkins, Ken Jeong, Michelle Rodriguez and Maya Rudolph. Screenplay by David Soren, Robert D. Siegel and Darren Lemke. Directed by David Soren. Rated "PG"



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