

Interview: Director Justin Chadwick of 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom'

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CHICAGO – When South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela died on December 5th, there was a sense in the media that yes, he was a “great man,” but how he affected social change seemed lost in platitudes. Director Justin Chadwick fills in those gaps in his film adaptation of “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom.”

Chadwick, and Mandela’s daughters, were at the London premiere of the film when they got the word that the great man had passed. There was speculation with the production company and distributor that the film release might be rescheduled. As Chadwick describes below, it was the children of Nelson Mandela that insisted that the film debut should go on, because of the stellar portrayal of Mandela – by actor Idris Elba – and the precise storytelling of his life by Justin Chadwick.



Idris Elba as Nelson Mandela in 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Born in 1968, Chadwick began his career as an actor, in the same drama school as Steve Coogan in Manchester, England. After making his film acting debut in 1991 (“London Kills Me”), he directed a 1993 TV movie (“Family Style”), featuring Ewan McGregor. After steady work as a TV director in Britain, he gained international notice for a BBC adaptation of Charles Dickens “Bleak House” (2006). This led to his feature film directorial debut with “The Other Boleyn Girl” (2008). “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom” is his third feature.

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with Justin Chadwick to talk about the influence of his biographical subject on his life and film, less than one week after Nelson Mandela passed away.

HollywoodChicago.com: The first question is an obvious one. Personally, what has been the impact of Nelson Mandela’s passing for you?

Justin Chadwick: He was such a constant presence for us throughout the production process, including when I met him before I started the shoot. He did see a director’s cut while he was ill, and we were hoping and praying that he would come home from the hospital. On the night of the London premiere, his daughter talked about him getting stronger. We learned about his passing at that premiere, and I’m still reeling from it.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the immersion into the subject of this man and his struggle change you? How were you different afterward?

Chadwick: I'm so fortunate to have spent the last two years of my life studying this man, that at his core was true, and you could live your life through his words. During the 81 days of the production, I got the team to put a quote from him on the call sheet every day. Besides his great capacity for forgiveness and being true, the fact that he kept himself physically and mentally together through his prison years is remarkable.

I'm was just honored – as a guy from Manchester, England – to have access to people who knew him and spent time with him. I was with his daughters when he passed. As a study into the power of what a human being can do, I was humbled every day by it. For me it was about intimacy of the story, and the closeness to all the players in it. On every level, it was unbelievably rewarding.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the characteristics of culture and society is to create, then denigrate, their heroes. What do we learn about this trend when we look at Mandela, both in the life you portrayed and his portrayal in the media following his death?

Chadwick: We made this film ultimately as a celebration of Mandela and his life. We don't shy away from the flaws, because he was a man, and he certainly didn't want to be portrayed as a saint. His legacy extends beyond what it cost him as a human being, as a husband, as a father. He kept his truth and his ideals, even as his greatest battle came when he was in his seventies – when he battled the political power, his wife and fellow prisoners from his exile – as he paved the way for a peaceful transition, with such forgiveness.



Director Justin Chadwick on the Set of 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com: Regarding the nuts and bolts of going through many points in time in this film. When you looked at archival footage and photographs of the actual events, what was important for you and your design team to get right about them, and at what point in his story did you feel a struggle to get it right?

Chadwick: It was a period film at times, but we had a saying that we didn't want the history to be like spinach – digested because it's good for you. [laughs] I wanted it to be an emotion and visceral experience. I wanted it to be immediate and drop the audience into it. It was important for me not so much to look at the archives but to give each of the past periods a modern feel. We created 360 degree sets that were completely true to their era, so we could get in amongst it with the cameras. It was a total immersive experience, which would ultimately lead back to the audience.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk about lead actor Idris Elba. Often when actors are portraying legendary historic figures, a viewer can detect a hint of fear. Elba seemed fearless, but was there any element of the character of Mandela that he had trepidations about, and how did he overcome it?

Chadwick: For Idris, it was about understanding where Mandela came from culturally – the tribal heritage and where he came from on the Eastern Cape – it was about catching the spirit of him. Idris shares Mandela's height and his training as a boxer, so there was a physical connection. He didn't look like Mandela, so it was important to capture the aura of the man. Idris has the same aura, the same star quality, that was true to the character he was representing.

HollywoodChicago.com: After hearing of the passing of Mandela, how has it changed your approach to participate in publicity for this film. Do you think you'd be different in this room if Mr. Mandela had not passed?

Chadwick: I just thought he was invincible, and to have him behind us through the production process, even as I was cutting and tweaking up to the premiere, we always had him there. But then to hear the news, at that particular moment and place – one half hour before the end of the film. Since all of his daughters were there, and we asked them if we should stop the film. They said let it play.

I did ask the next day if we should stop the publicity and rethink what we're doing. His daughter Zindzi said to me, the film is true to her father, and important to his legacy. She said if we felt like we can, we must carry on. So in a small way the film can portray that legacy and celebrate his life.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk about your first major film, 'The Other Boleyn Girl.' What were the circumstances of your landing that assignment, and what was daunting about doing a period drama with some pretty heavyweight actors?



Justin Chadwick in Chicago, December 11, 2013

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Chadwick: I still can't quite believe how that all came together. I had made a television adaptation for the BBC of the Charles Dickens novel 'Bleak House,' and it really connected to the audience. That's what led to the script for 'The Other Boleyn Girl' coming to my door. I was very conscious that I had to be prepared for my first major film, because you only get one great chance for a feature, it has to be a success to continue beyond it.

When I was casting, I just thought I'd go for people I really like – Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson – and all of a sudden it grew into a big studio film. It was an amazing cast, with Jim Sturgess and Benedict Cumberbatch before they were major stars – these great actors who have emerged in recent years.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the experience affect you?

Chadwick: It was a huge learning curve, but two major studios got behind it. After the experience, I wanted to do something completely different. So I went to Kenya and shot a small independent film – called 'The First Grader' – which probably cost what the catering budget was for 'Boleyn.' This little film about the Kenyan community and education then led to the Mandela film.

HollywoodChicago.com: How has being an actor made you a better director? Do you think it's easier for a actor to transition to director, than a director to transition to actor?

Chadwick: Yes, I began as a actor, I was in Manchester Youth Theater as a kid. I was advised to do that to burn off my natural energy. I didn't come from a family of actors at all, and that opened the door for me to want to tell stories. I'm glad I've had the experience of acting, because my job now is to capture the truth in performance, and to create an atmosphere for actors to create that truth.

HollywoodChicago.com: If you were asked to speak at the funeral of Nelson Mandela, what would you say, in the essence of what you've understood him through this filmmaking process?

Chadwick: You could live your life through the way he lived his life. He inspired all those around him, a country and a world. I can't encapsulate in words who he is, and what he stood for, all I know is that he was true – a true, great man who lived in our times, and stuck to a set of ideals that he totally believed in, despite losing nearly everything. And his capacity for forgiveness – when they'd taken his freedom, the land that he loved and his family – to have that in his heart was humbling, that power of strength and character. Nelson Mandela understood humanity in the sense that forgiveness is the only way forward, and love is the only way forward.

“Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom” opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Idris Elba, Naomie Harris, Tony Kgoroge and Gys de Villiers. Screenplay Adapted by William Nicholson. Directed by Justin Chadwick. Rated “PG-13”



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