

## Mexicans in America Keep Striving in ‘A Better Life’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 8, 2011 - 6:35pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – One of the most contentious issues in America now is the handling of “illegal” immigrants from Mexico. They, like anyone else, want a better circumstance for themselves and their families, as director Chris Weitz explores in the new film “A Better Life.”

Essentially a modern re-telling of Victorio De Sica’s “The Bicycle Thief,” A Better Life mines the emotional journey of its protagonists, a father and son trying to get somewhere, anywhere in the midst of the slave wages and substandard living conditions for the illegal immigrant in this country. Surrounding the father is a cloak of pressure-filled fear, and even when a sliver of hope appears on the horizon it comes with consequences.

Carlos (Demi  n Bichir) life is one of redundant hard labor, earning a living sub contracting through a friend’s landscaping business. He has been in America illegally since he and his wife escaped from Mexico years before. After his wife passes away, he is left to raise his son Luis (Jos   Juli  n), now a teenager, who views his father as weak. Luis doesn’t even share Carlos illegal status since he was born in the U.S. The son is also being challenged in high school, as the gangs loom as an alternative to his poverty-stricken existence.

The tide turns somewhat when the owner of the landscaping business decides to move back to Mexico. He offers Carlos the business for a seemingly insurmountable sum, but a good deed Carlos had done years before miraculously secures the proper amount. He proudly buys the truck and equipment, then sets out to find that elusive “better life” for himself and his son.



Hard Knocks: Carlos (Demi  n Bichir) Keeps Going in ‘A Better Life’

Photo credit: Merrick Morton for © Summit Entertainment

When an unthinkable turn of events takes away the business opportunity, it is up to Luis to help his father recover what it his. This takes the pair toward a path of self-discovery, both through their relationship and their approach to solving the situation of the loss. What results from this challenge has the potential to change both their lives forever.

This is Demián Bichir's film, and his performance establishes the emotional highs and lows. He seems somewhat beaten before he ever takes a step forward, because his illegal status means that deportation can come at any time. It is a relatable persona, and is acutely felt through natural empathy, because all the feelings of fear, paranoia and depression seems very familiar to the post-millennial citizen. Amplify that by a hundred fold, and Carlos becomes a Kafka-like figure, constantly on trial in front of a judge and jury he can't see.

Director Chris Weitz, who has "Twilight: New Moon" and "About a Boy" under his belt, expresses this new territory with distinction. He doesn't blink in exposing the poverty behind this shadowy America, with all the settings and personalities suited more toward darker emotions. There are two happy moments for Carlos during the story, and both of them have a similar aura about them. Both express a cinematic language that speaks for hope.

Another remarkable performance comes from José Julián, who is the son Luis. He is blessedly a normal looking kid, with virtually no Hollywood gloss. There is true understanding about his potential fate. His father's interest in his schooling is cursory, and by the atmosphere of the school it's probably a drop-out factory. Given all this, the temptation to stay on the straight and narrow is almost a fool's errand. But his father obviously loves his son, and in that sense love becomes a force that pushes back.

The parallels to "The Bicycle Thief" (1948) is in the father-and-son coming together to solve the inherent problem. It is about the adult who is vulnerable in his own situation, and the more innocent younger generation being more direct toward controlling an outcome. It is good vs. cynicism in a dark world, where cynicism already has unfairly claimed the territory. The pockets of goodness among that claim are the rifts in the madness, offering the slim promise of survival.



On Set: Director Chris Weitz Instructs José Julián (Luis) and Demián Bichir in 'A Better Life'

Photo credit: Merrick Morton for © Summit Entertainment

The ending was an odd choice, but an appropriate one given what had happened. It is fair of writers Eric Eason and Roger L. Simon to formulate a bit of a silver lining, simply by emphasizing the aforementioned pockets of goodness. This film allows us to step inside the main character's shoes, ponder his life and speculate "there but for the grace of God go I."

In reality we are all from someplace else, bound by borders drawn up in the past by wars and socio-economic evolution. Increasingly, the United States is losing its status as the Land of Opportunity, and what is behind that loss will determine the fate of both the so-called illegal immigrants here and the native citizens who insist this land is only made for them.

*"A Better Life" has a limited release, including Chicago, on July 8th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Demián Bichir, José Julián, Joaquín Cosío and Carlos Linares. Written by Eric Eason and Roger L. Simon, directed by Chris Weitz. Rated "PG-13"*



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