

Benicio Del Toro Shines in Steven Soderbergh's Mesmerizing 'Che'

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Steven Soderbergh's "Che" not only features one of the best recent performances by the excellent Benicio Del Toro but this challenging biopic, unlike any that has been made in years, is one of the best films of 2008.

Critics and audiences who are constantly lamenting the lack of filmmakers truly willing to take risks and provoke discussion should look no further than the two-part "Che", opening as one experience in the "Roadshow Edition," at the Landmark Century in Chicago today.

The multi-talented Soderbergh wants to provoke discussion with his complex recreation of what it was like to be in the company of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. He doesn't believe that the life of "Che" should be easily disposable entertainment and he has made a film that reflects that artistic mind-set.



Benicio Del Toro as Che and Catalina Sandino Moreno as Aleida Guevara in Che directed by Steven Soderbergh

Photo credit: Daniel Daza

In one of the best performances of the year and one that should be in a *lot* more of the awards season discussion than it has been, Benicio

Del Toro plays Guevara during the two most crucial parts of his life.

The first half of "Che," sometimes referred to and shown as "The Argentine," detailed Che's arrival in Cuba and the overthrow of the Batista regime with Fidel Castro. We meet him on his way to Cuba, intercut with footage of a speech he gave at the UN at the height of his counter-culture fame. Che is presented as a natural leader, someone easy to get behind and follow, something many, many men did.



The second half of the film, sometimes referred to as "Guerilla," is the mirror image of the success and fame of the first half and details Che's final days in Bolivia. After Castro was put in power, Che went to Bolivia to see if lightning would strike twice with another revolution. It didn't and he died there.

Soderbergh is trying to recreate the experience of actually being in the presence of one of the most recognizable figures of the twentieth century. We see the revolutionary as pop icon during his visit to New York to speak to the United Nations but also as an average human being. We see Che in his biggest moments, but also in quiet ones with his fellow revolutionaries. Intellectual, romantic, doctor, leader, revolutionary, speaker - "Che" is one of the most multi-faceted portraits to ever grace the typically two-dimensional genre known as the biopic.

Soderbergh consciously avoids turning Che into a hero. In fact, it's easy to read the two films as a commentary on the inevitable failure of what Che believed in, Marxism. The revolution that worked in Cuba failed miserably in Bolivia. This is not a hero's story. But it is one of the most mesmerizing and accomplished works from one of our best directors.

And Del Toro's riveting performance drives it all. It is a remarkable emotional and physical transformation that easily carries the weight of Soderbergh's daring and complex film on its shoulders.

"Che" is a film that I firmly believe will grow with esteem in the passing years. It is a movie that demands discussion and provokes its audience. Those can be hard films to recognize on their initial release.

There is a difference between "long" and "boring". "Che" is undeniably the former, but never the latter. I've been more bored during films with a third of the running time of "Che". The second half of "Che" *should* be slow, painful, and drawn out. This is a life that didn't end in a blaze of glory. It burst into flames in Cuba and then slowly burned out in South America.

"Che" is one of the most daring and complicated films of the year, one that challenges viewers to look at what they expect from film differently. Does every biopic need to hit the same beats? Can a story be told in four hours instead of two? Can a film be both political and personal? Shouldn't we expect more from what we call entertainment? Love it or hate it, Soderbergh is trying for something more with "Che" and it is a critic's responsibility to praise the attempt to shatter expectations. "Che" shattered mine.

'Che' stars Benicio Del Toro, Demian Bichir, Rodrigo Santoro, Franka Potente, and Catalina Sandino Moreno. 'Che,' which was written by Peter Buckman and Benjamin A. van der Veen and directed by Steven Soderbergh, opened in Chicago on January 16, 2009 at Landmark Century.



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