

## Legacy Matters in 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 25, 2013 - 9:39pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The memory of South Africa freedom fighter Nelson Mandela, who passed away on December 5th, is filled with deserved accolades and iconography. Director Justin Chadwick and actor Idris Elba brings the man to human life in the essential “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom.”

This is the story that seemed lost in the overindulgent focus on the death of Mandela, but not the life. He was a radical and a freedom fighter, and fought a virulent and jack-booted white power base. He was thrown into prison for 27 years, and sacrificed his life, family and freedom for the cause he believed in. Focusing on that in the media after Mandela’s demise was impossible, they wanted the grandfatherly man who lived to the ripe old age of 95. “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom” reinstates the rabble rouser, the intellect and the social theorist who affected the 20th Century as much as any other man.

Nelson Mandela (Idris Elba) was born in 1918 in South Africa’s Cape Province, part of the Thembu people. He desired higher education in his life, contrary to his tribal roots, and eventually became a lawyer in Johannesburg, South Africa. His early life was defined by cases involving the injustice of apartheid, and his work in the African National Congress (ANC) in the 1950s split him from his first wife.



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

His radicalism and arrests increased in the late 1950s, while he wooed and wed his second wife Winnie (Naomie Harris). In 1961, Mandela founded a militant group which used acts of sabotage against utilities to influence the opposition party. This led to an arrest and conviction on



conspiracy to overthrow the government. After 27 years in two prisons, Mandela was released. His second act in life included a controversial negotiation to end apartheid, and a term as South Africa's president.

It is a complex life, and complex issues to encapsulate, but Justin Chadwick created a well-paced story that defines the injustices that Mandela fought against, while commenting on the radicalism that man participated in. The early life is the most intriguing, only because it slapped the face of the white power, who insisted that only they were graced to make decisions against a native people. The tamping down of Mandela and the prison that was designed to break him, only incensed the population further.

Idris Elba, who heretofore had mostly been known for action films, breathes life into the human element of his subject. He was most compelling in the quiet moments in the story, the contemplative soul of Nelson Mandela, but he was also forceful in expressing the physicality that was part of his survival mode. Shadow boxing and prison exercise was shown to be a big part of his instinct, and Elba's presence was important in that theme.

The supporting cast is passionate, including a magnificent Naomie Harris as the often put-upon Winnie Mandela. Her experience in being radical results in the same prison lockdown as her husband, as well as a long separation from the man she loved. The eventual post-incarceration reunion is shown as strained, and it is in these scenes that Harris accumulates all the layers that Chadwick's film exposes regarding Winnie. It is a strong counterpoint to the supposed sainthood of Nelson Mandela, neatly symbolizing his flawed humanity.



Winnie Mandela (Naomie Harris) on Her Own Journey in 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom'  
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The later years are harder to grasp, as subtle politics are in play rather than guerilla tactics for change. Elba's portrayal of the more elderly Mandela is a little bit harder for him to grasp, probably because the image of the older president is so ingrained in social consciousness. There are less profound episodes of change, and more of the natural evolution of what had to happen. Mandela bucked the trends a second time, negotiating often against the wishes of his fellow ANC membership and former fellow prisoners.

But this is the life that needs to be experienced, and Justin Chadwick's film biography is a full and rich journey. The best way to memorialize the nature of Nelson Mandela is to understand that in doing the best that he could, he managed to create a better world, and his "long walk to freedom" is a path that we all must follow.

*"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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