

THE LONG ROAD:



By Judi Jordan
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**HOW DIRECTOR DIEGO LUNA GOT CESAR
CHAVEZ HIS DAY IN FILM**

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ICH VISUALS IN Diego Luna's "Cesar Chavez" carry you back in time; you can smell the earth, feel the sweet breeze, the hot sun and taste the pesticide.

Hope hangs in the air as voiceless people dare to dream because Cesar told them to. That trust, now suspended in a void until a great Latino leader emerges, was one of the reasons Luna had for making "Cesar Chavez." It was his driving force to honor a man whose achievements have grown muddled in the minds of those should be inspired the most. Luna took on a giant responsibility in the making of the film, and along the way, he found out a lot about himself as well

"I didn't know what to expect," said Jacob Vargas, who portrays Chavez's brother, Richard. "He (Luna) is a good actor, but he's a great director. He found his calling; he's very visual."

This is a new Diego Luna. For anyone who only remembers him as the horny teen from "Y Tu Mama Tambien" — things have changed. At 34, Luna's grown a beard. He's also a producer, a grounded father of two and a man with a mission.

"I chose this project ("Cesar Chavez") for many reasons. California was a very important place for me. I have been going back and forth between Mexico and the States for almost 15 years now, and this was such an important part of California's history," Luna's gentle voice harshens with indignation.

"And I was shocked no one has done a film about this man," Luna said. "It is a David and Goliath story."

Luna was born and raised in Mexico City and saw the importance of Cesar's accomplishments. He made

it his cause to bring the most significant moments in the life of this American hero to the screen. Known mostly for his work in front of the camera, Luna's determination and influence convinced funders to back his film, and despite his own international fame and popularity — the result of his acting in 45 films in Mexico and internationally — it took a solid four years to find the \$10 million needed to make "Cesar Chavez."

It haunted him, and fortunately, Luna refused to give up.

"I was offended that this community was neglected and disregarded in a country that celebrates every kind of success."

Luna's frustration with the lack of visibility of the farm worker movement on the big screen was shared by Vargas.

"Cesar was one of my heroes," Vargas said. "But in school, we didn't learn about the movement. We didn't learn about civil rights at all!"

Luna's production company, Canana, founded in 2006 with his long-time best friend, Gael Garcia Bernal, has produced

33 projects. Founded to create films trumpeting social justice, Canana was the logical home for Cesar Chavez, the most recent of Luna's four directing projects.

"Cesar Chavez" is the most recent of Canana's projects to date.

"The fact that this wasn't celebrated on the big screen tells you why the immigration reform hasn't happened," Luna said as he shook his head. "It explains why there is such inequality. We have many more tools of communication, but we are not using them. We (American Latinos) tend to stay on the surface. With all of these possibilities, we are not using them. That's why immigration reform in the States is not moving forward; it makes no sense that such a huge community is not recognized. It makes no sense!"

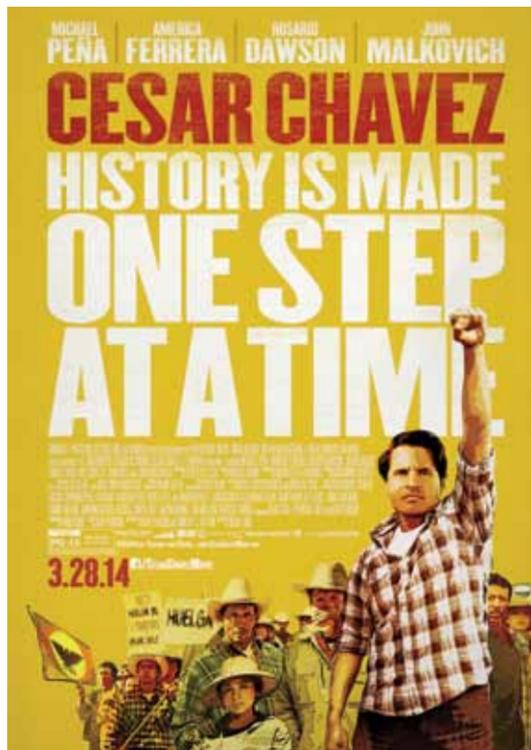
It seems that the only simple thing about the project was the idea to make it. The rest was a four-year struggle that paid off as the satisfaction of a job well done and a collaboration of artists, producers, the Mexican government and, now, the audience who will be encouraged to see the film.

"From the first time we sat down with the Chavez family, it has been four years — a long road."

But Luna had help from experienced producers such as John Malkovich and Russell Smith.

"John Malkovich is a great collaborator," he said. "As producer, it's a team effort. I did a theater play for him in Mexico. He worked with me as a producer on 'Abel' [Luna's 2010 film]. John brought producers he's been working with really closely; they are perfect partners; they come from Chicago," Luna said.

"Russ Smith got us in touch with the family at Participant Films, and every time you see a film by Participant, I feel that it matters. It's the kind of film I like to watch, and you see, today — and with Pantaleon you have the feeling that it matters to everyone — they are not doing it because it's a job. They under-



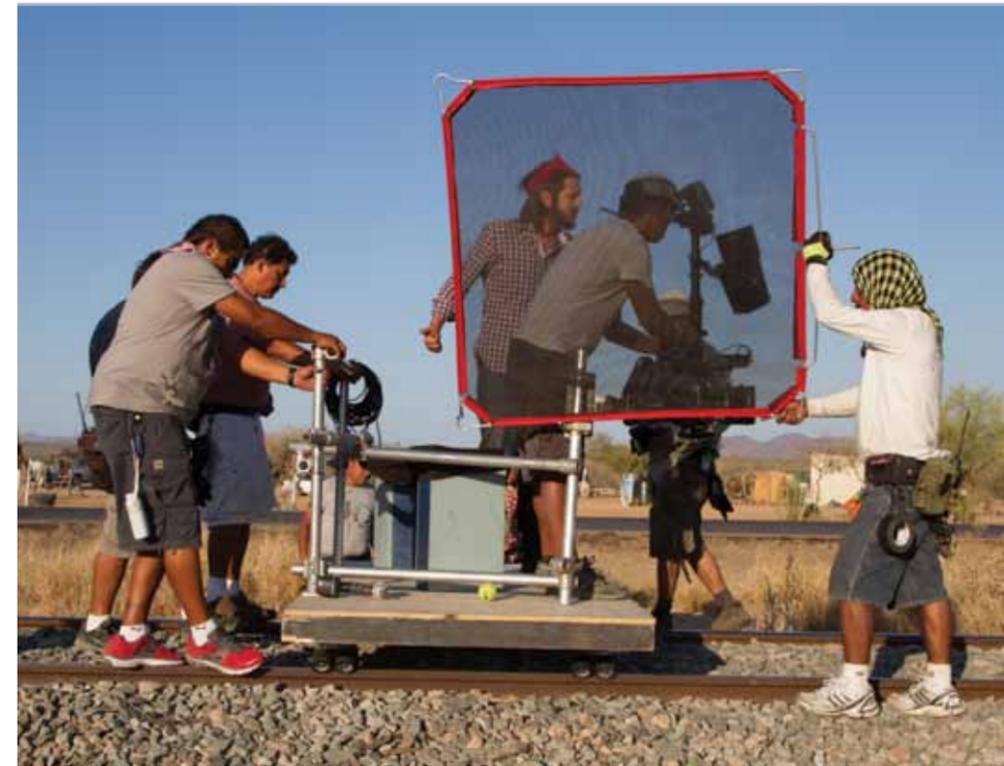
"THE MAIN IDEA WAS TRY NOT TO IDEALIZE THE CHARACTER BUT TELL THE STORY OF A SIMPLE MAN THAT HAPPENED TO DO SOMETHING AMAZING... YOU DON'T NEED SPECIAL POWERS AND A CAPE TO BE A SUPERHERO."

stand the urgency of the story; it's been a nice journey for us at Canana.

"This film matters a lot — it is our biggest film, and we hope that we can establish a connection between the Mexican population and the American Latino, audiences and we hope that it is a natural market for all of us; we should not allow that wall that is getting bigger and bigger to divide us. We should think together and make sure that our films travel up and down the border. I'm a young director. I'm willing to explore to get to know better my craft, but today, I have to say I have the feeling that we haven't gotten to the end of this project. I am focused on the coming out of the film and making sure we don't miss any opportunity to take this as far as it can go. That is my main focus."

Luna had a specific vision: Keep it simple, authentic and inspiring.

"The story of Cesar is very close to me. As a director, the main idea was try not to idealize the character but tell the story of a simple man that happened



to do something amazing ... that happened to do something that had never been done to inspire and propel change. You don't need special powers and a cape to be a superhero. It's about living with responsibility and helping this weak community living in this very unbalanced situation."

While Chavez's story spans from the '60s through the '80s, Luna knew he had to hone in to tell his story to maximum effect.

"I wanted to focus on the boycott — they went to talk to the consumers; they went to talk to the rest of the country ... to say just before you buy a grape consider where it comes from and what are you supporting by buying something like this," Luna said.

The effectiveness of Chavez's clear, goal-focused leadership fascinates Luna.

"They managed to establish this connection that worked to collapse one of the most powerful industries of the States. It was as simple as that — reminding people of child labor, unfair wages and to just make sure you think before buying something. I think people should be reminded of their responsibility — what it is to be a citizen of this world. It's

a very universal thing.

"I also wanted to tell the story of nonviolence. That message needs to be out there internationally. It's unfair to try to tell the story in two hours, but you can tell them to go and learn a little more about the community that is feeding America."

America Ferrera, who plays Helen Chavez, knew Cesar Chavez's son, Paul Chavez. In February, she and Luna went to Washington, D.C., to screen "Cesar Chavez" for U.S. Congress. Paul was present with his blessing.

"This was not easy by any means for Diego and Canana with no American finance until later on," Ferrera said. "He has all of my thanks, gratitude and hope that the film is successful — and hope that it brings more to conversation about what it's like to be in that situation."

Vargas also understood what Luna was aiming for.

"He (Luna) said, 'We're not shooting a documentary,' and if we did everything that happened in his life, we'd have a movie that never ended. It's an interpretation of his life."

Vargas emphasizes that the leader's citizenship needs to be understood — Cesar



Chavez was an American.

"This story importantly points out that this is an American story about an American of Mexican descent. Chavez is not really represented in history. People see a foreigner. This should shed light on the Chicano experience," Vargas said.

Vargas said it was an honor to play Richard. He is known for his fiery performances, but playing an actual person is another story.

"I tried researching about Richard; eventually, I found a really good interview," he said. "He was a carpenter and a really good golfer, but he gave it all up for his brother. He actually took a loan out on his home to fund the credit union."

Vargas found the admiration for Richard Chavez that made his performance come alive.

"Here's the tough thing: People associate the Chavez movement only with Chicanos, but the real story is the minority groups coming together. I'm an actor, not a politician, but I hope we have some kind of positive effect or influence."

That positive influence starts with the right casting, and Luna found his Cesar with Michael Pena.

"I've been living here in LA for close to twenty years, working, and it was interesting doing this movie," Pena said.

In his acting, Pena had to hold back. Luna and every research he found on Cesar revealed that "he (Chavez) was very reserved, and for example, I heard that he was the not the most natural speaker." Pena worked on the inner Cesar, explaining, "Diego, for the most part, wanted it very subtle."

"To be honest, the entire movement was a surprise. People wanted a change, and they were willing to listen to him. As an actor, you want to take license; you want a really flashy role," Pena said.

But Pena had to be true to his character.

"I found out that he wasn't a natural speaker; he just did what needed to be done.

"It takes a big man, so small of stature, to lead. That was hard to research. Everything I read was that he was a very quiet man; he just tried to blend in. . . . I had an instinct to make

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it funny, but I was warned not to. I rehearsed for three months, and two weeks before filming, Diego said, 'Why don't you learn his speech patterns.' Basically, I really had to take care of his speech and use the appropriate amount of energy. You don't want to oversell it. You gotta trust the director when it comes down to it," Pena said.

Luna worked with all the actors to get the portrayals just right.

"Diego was very collaborative — dedicated to portraying all these characters as very complex," Ferrera said. "Not heroes but humans. We went and met Helen together; there were things that we learned together. Helen was not happy about the fasting at all [Cesar fasted three times for in 1968, '70 and '72 for 25, 24 and 36 days, respectively], but Helen would cook for the people that gathered at the house to support Cesar."

Ferrera was highly conscious of playing a still-living legend.

"I was lucky enough to meet Helen," she said. "At the time, it was more about being in her presence. She is a deeply intelligent and deeply strong and loving. She feels a lot, a great character for a person to hold, to still be a person who could feel at a very strong level.

"She was prepared to sacrifice so much for her family. She was a constant. She completely put herself in the front; she had a lot on her plate, and yet she was an incredibly private person, so it was hard to find a clip of her speaking [when she was young], but I found one. She and Cesar were living a life that was very middle class, but then when they moved out west, she had to go back to the fields to make a living while Cesar did his work. She was worried about their kids being alone so much. This was a woman who was not afraid of arrest, but she was concerned about her family. I hope for it to work culturally — this is an American story about American heroes. Cesar deserves to be held at the same level. My hope is for the film to be supported and seen and accepted."

To get the authentic look, Diego Luna had to shoot in Sonora, Mexico.

"The fields in California are much more modern. In Sonora, we found the old-fashioned vineyards," Luna said. "We shot in super 16, which is an amazing film; not many shoot in film these days. I wanted to have the feel that we are looking at a piece of history — something real. We went to Sonora state, where they produce 80 percent of the table grapes in Mexico.

"The whole idea was to put all the money we had in front of the screen. It wasn't easy to raise the money. When we went around looking for funding, we saw why there was never a film made: No one wants to fund a story about farm workers, but we found the right backers. We found them in Mexico, and we found the right ones in the States as well.

"It was about trying to do it in the right way without making any compromises at all."

Luna had more pull on his home turf.

"Shooting in Mexico, we had complete freedom, and obviously, we had the extras — people we actually found in Sonora in the fields. They had been exposed to the sun. We didn't have extras in the fields pretending to be field-workers; we had field-workers pretending to be extras." Luna said, laughing.

"With all the other [Latino] actors, they knew the importance of the film because as a community, they also struggle with an industry that doesn't represent them the characters are very limited. We all knew the importance of the film besides whether you like the film or not. I think you have one shot to allow these kinds of films to exist, to have films that represent a community that you don't see in cinema. I wanted to show the complexity of this community."

"I want audiences to enjoy the film," Pena said. "You want them to go on this guy's journey — just for them to know and appreciate that there was someone out there that did that."

Vargas said the one thing he took away from the experience is the audacity to say we're going to take on the oppressors.

"That is amazing to me — how a small group of uneducated Chicanos can stop an entire industry," said Vargas.

Vargas had direct access to Dolores Huerta, Richard Chavez's wife and fellow civil rights leader. Alive and kicking at 84, Huerta is still active. She also didn't pull any punches with Vargas.

Vargas saw the elderly woman's fearlessness from across the lunch table as Dolores shared precious memories.

"She, Dolores, asked me if this was going to be accurate or some bulls**t movie." Vargas said, chuckling.

"I think that it is a hot time for immigration, and Cesar can help to inspire," Ferrera said. "There is context; there is a history of Latinos standing strong, showing up for those who say it is impossible to do. It's not impossible! We've made great changes in the political climate. I think I'm well-connected to many issues, and I can say that power is invisible — opportunity isn't. I see the need for opportunity where it doesn't flourish. Being devoted to this cause is so important."

By Judi Jordan

Cesario Estrada Chavez was born March 31, 1927, and in his 66 years, he moved mountains. Director Diego Luna had to move a few of his own mountains to tell the story of the leader. And even for a movie star, it was not easy.

Films about real people, especially a humble soul like Chavez, are not generally expected to explode at the box office, but the shared belief that this was the right time to tell this story kept Luna and his cast on the long path to completion.

Shot in 16mm, saturated in sunlight, "Cesar Chavez" should be seen by Latino and non-Latinos to understand the scope of Chavez's courage and achievement in the tough aftermath of the close assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

Luna's film captures the optimism and despair of Cesar and the power of the humble when gathered together with a single voice.

Cesar's family, migrant workers by trade, moved from Yuma, Ariz., to a place warning residents to "escape if you can," Salsipuedes, Calif., after losing their farm in the Great Depression. After experiencing the extreme hardship of the migrant life, Cesar joined the U.S. Navy after World War II. He called that time the "worst two years of my life." In the service, he read books and adopted radical ideas on equality and having a voice in the outdoor workplace. He did not set out to change the course of history. A soft-spoken man with a gentle smile and undeniable charisma, Cesar sought justice, not power. With great certainty of mind and a singular devotion, Chavez took a stance that never wavered for the rest of his life: Cesar Chavez peacefully waged war on the powerful produce industry that kept his people in poverty and insecurity, and he won.

He formed the National Farmworkers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers union, UFW. Cesar sacrificed his health with lengthy hunger strikes; his final strike lasted 36 days and compromised his health. After the success of the UFW, Cesar and his supporters protested the Vietnam War, and he was one of the earliest supporters of gay rights, protesting discrimination as far back as the '70s.

He is responsible for many of the labor codes we take for granted today beginning with the basic right to organize and protest mistreatment. He knew 45 years of great, unwavering love with his wife, Helen, with whom he had eight children. Though posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton, Chavez is still unknown to many of the upcoming generation, but for those who do know of him, he was, and forever will be, the original Latino leader.

Who was Cesar Chavez?

