

Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom: A film largely without history or even politics

Isaac Finn
10 January 2014

Directed by Justin Chadwick, written by William Nicholson

Director Justin Chadwick has taken a shallow, unserious approach in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, focusing on Nelson Mandela's personal life and using his public activity as a mere backdrop.

Although in keeping with the self-absorption and "lifestyle" outlook of much of the film world, this is absurd. After all, Mandela's life was dominated by the *political* role he played as a leader of the African National Congress (ANC) in opposition to the South African apartheid regime and later as president of post-apartheid capitalist South Africa.

To place these elementary facts, which cannot but have left their mark on his family life and his innermost thoughts and feelings, out of bounds is to deny the audience a realistic portrait of the man, the society, and the times.

Such an approach, of course, is not "apolitical," it is simply a means of adapting to the global establishment's line on Mandela, that he was a saint, a "healer," a "reconciler," etc., essentially, a man *above* mundane political realities.

A serious film about Mandela would turn *Long Walk to Freedom* upside down. It would make his private life subordinate to his politics, and place it in the context of that activity.

Of course, a genuinely serious film would also have to treat the South African leader's political role critically.

Why is the establishment shedding tears over Mandela's passing? As the WSWs explained December 6, "Mandela utilised his indubitable political skills and personal courage to stave off the threat of a social revolution in South Africa, dismantling the Apartheid regime while defending capitalism and protecting the property and wealth of the country's white rulers and of transnational corporate investors."

Chadwick, best known until now for the not very inspiring *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), prides himself on his focus on Mandela's family life, telling the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, "The film, as much as it charts apartheid history, more central to me was the effect on the man and the family and the cost to the family." This is identity politics gone mad.

The film starts with a young Mandela going through a Xhosa (one of South Africa's major ethnic groups) rite of passage ceremony in his home village of Mvezo. An older Mandela (Idris Elba), in a voiceover, explains that he was now a man and had a duty to his people.

The film then jumps to 1942 in Johannesburg: Mandela is already an established lawyer, a recreational boxer and a womanizer. He explains to ANC members that he is uninterested in politics—until the apartheid regime's police beat a friend of his to death. When Mandela tries to hold the authorities accountable for their actions, he is told not to question the police report.

Mandela is won over to the ANC. In the same scene, he starts pursuing the woman who will become his first wife. The new marriage is troubled from the beginning by Mandela's responsibilities in the ANC, thus setting the tone for the film.

The work suffers as the result of its distorted attitude toward its subject matter. *Long Walk to Freedom* incorporates some documentary footage. We also see Elba as Mandela speaking at mass meetings, participating in demonstrations, and spending his decades in jail. The political issues lose strength and focus, however, because both the documentary clips and the fictional depictions shift quickly to scenes recording the impact of these events on Mandela's family life.

Mandela's first wife divorces him because of his various affairs. Soon afterward he meets his second wife, Winnie (Naomie Harris), who stays with him for the rest of the film.

Mandela burns his ID card in protest against a law requiring all blacks to keep such cards on them at all times or face arrest. After the violent suppression of protesters by South African police, Mandela becomes dissatisfied with peaceful protest and starts participating in bombings of military targets.

He tells a journalist in a phone conversation: “We have been forced into an armed struggle. The decision was not taken lightly by myself, or the people, or the ANC.” Chadwick’s film, however, provides no indication of what kind of discussion took place around this decision or what the political perspective and goals of the ANC were. The filmmakers never explain why millions followed Mandela, or what they expected the end of apartheid would mean for them.

The strongest part of *Long Walk to Freedom* is Idris Elba’s portrayal of Mandela as a man willing to make great sacrifices for his ideals, but torn by the pain these sacrifices cost both himself and his loved ones. Elba’s performance, however, is held back by the general lack of context and the limited depiction of Mandela’s interactions with his comrades in the ANC.

The film dramatizes the infamous Rivonia Trial of Mandela and nine others in 1963-64 that ended in a life sentence for Mandela. The audience is only introduced to prominent ANC leaders Walter Sisulu (Tony Kgoroge) and Ahmed “Kathy” Kathrada (Riaad Moosa) during this scene.

Both Sisulu and Kathrada are sent to the notorious Robben Island prison along with Mandela. However, their interactions rarely go beyond a few joking comments. Mandela has no deep emotional exchange with them, despite the fact they are in the same predicament as he is. Nor do they have many political discussions and debates even before they are jailed.

The most touching scenes involve Mandela and Winnie, during his years in prison. We feel the immense emotional burden and isolation felt by both of them, as well as Winnie’s hatred for the authorities who persecute her because of her race and her own political activity, as well as her husband’s.

Eventually, Mandela is brought into secret negotiations with the apartheid government’s ministers. *Long Walk to Freedom* only hints at the fact that the conflict between the apartheid regime and the masses threatened the property and privileges of South Africa’s ruling elite.

In one of the more telling exchanges, one of the ministers says, “Can you imagine what the blacks would do to us, if they got us in their power?”

“I am black.” Mandela replies.

“You are different. That is why we are talking to you.”

Chadwick and company do not choose to explore in what this “difference” consisted, seemingly a rather critical question.

Mandela is released from prison, in 1990, and he soon after separates from Winnie because of an affair she had. Mandela is shown ending the chaos and violence in South Africa by convincing the people to channel their anger into electing him as president. *Long Walk to Freedom* ends shortly after Mandela is sworn into office.

The film barely touches on the moods and sentiments of millions in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle. Masses of people are merely shown chanting, protesting or attacking the authorities, with only one brief scene of Mandela speaking with a young worker who participated in a strike. The majority of Africans are presented as silent followers.

The almost complete absence of political discussion makes it seem as though Mandela is guiding the struggle alone. In one of the few scenes where politics is discussed, Mandela’s comrades vote against his meeting government officials on his own. Mandela, however, ignores the decision. In this way, the film portrays him as single-handedly gaining blacks the right to vote through cunning negotiations with the government.

In fact, in exchange for the abolition of apartheid—and the ending of political and economic constraints on the affluent black middle-class represented by the ANC—Mandela and the ANC left the capitalist foundations of the South Africa state intact. Naturally, *Long Walk to Freedom* avoids showing the consequences of these policies in the conditions of mass poverty and immense social inequality that exist in South Africa today.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)