



THE CITIZEN ACTOR: GAEL GARCÍA BERNAL'S SENSE OF DUTY

Words: Jesse Ashlock, Photo: Derek Shapton

"Life shows you two roads," says Gael García Bernal. "The road where you can live better, and the road where you should live, where your duty is for you to live, and where you can make a change." He's paraphrasing one of his favorite writers, Jose Martí, the 19th century political dissident who became a cultural hero of Cuba's fight for independence from Spain. Essential to Martí's philosophical code of conduct were the notions that "it is the duty of man to raise up man," and "to fulfill one's duty elevates the soul to a state of constant sweetness." Those ideas are manifest in the choices Bernal, at 25, has made already in his career as a performer and public person. Beyond the sharply hewn features and an easy, endearing smile that often seems tinged with a shadow of melancholy, there's an inner directedness and clarity of purpose about the Mexican-born actor that lets audiences see him not only as a performer, but also as a symbol of hope at a time when hope seems to be in too short supply.

Most emblematic of Bernal's focus on duty is his recent turn as the young Ernesto "Che" Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Walter Salles' rousing and often humorous historical account of the Cuban guerrilla leader's awakening of social conscience during an epic 1952 road trip from Buenos Aires to Venezuela with fellow medical student Alberto Granado (Rodrigo de la Serna). Bernal, who'd already played Guevara once before (in the 2002 TV mini-series *Fidel*), became further acquainted with Martí's social criticism during his 14-week preparation for the role, which included perusing texts which had most influenced Guevara. As he encountered locales in Chile, Peru and Bolivia with social conditions unchanged or worsened since Guevara passed through a half-century before, Bernal found himself engaging with Latin America, and in the process himself, in much the same way the man he was portraying had, and came to understand how much Guevara's subsequent life choices embodied Martí's precepts.

With a mix of poetry and imperfect syntax that marks his spoken English, Bernal describes his own confrontation with Latin America during the three months of filming as "something as subtle as very small rain" – but something with the cumulative effect of crystallizing his own sense of duty. "Right now my generation is awakening, and we're discovering a world full of incredible injustice – again, once again," he explains. "We're rediscovering that we're not actually represented. There's no representation for what we want as people.... Perhaps it used to make me angry and it used to make me upset. Now I take it as it's all a learning process and it's all something I can help for us to get our voices listened to."

The Motorcycle Diaries, while enthusiastically received in most quarters, has also earned some criticism for the moist-eyed preachiness of its portrayal of the marginalized people Guevara and Granado encounter during their journey. Though not without merit, the charge overlooks the fact that the film is not a sweeping survey of 1950s Latin American working conditions, but a coming-of-age story, a portrait of the "learning process" Bernal describes, which shows a world through the lens of a young man discovering for himself what duty is. The "two roads" choice is subtext for the entire story, and Bernal portrays Guevara's struggle between them with contained intensity, becoming increasingly demonstrative as he assimilates the social landscape of the continent and leans increasingly toward the road of duty. This internal process reaches its dramatic climax on the last night of the duo's three-week internship at a Peruvian leper colony, when Guevara delivers a farewell toast that becomes a righteous, passionate plea for a united Latin American identity. He then makes good on his rhetoric by diving into the Amazon, heedless of his asthma, to swim to the side where the patients are

kept segregated from staff. "We forget that politics is everyday life," observes Bernal. "A choice you make is a political decision. And what Che did was a political decision. He decided to live on the side of the mistreated, to live on the side of the people who have no justice – and no voice."

Not that Bernal is some sort of celluloid missionary, but as an actor, those are the kinds of choices he wants to make, and has made consistently throughout his career. Bernal earned the political tag for his condemnation of the Iraq war at the 2003 Oscars, but his acting corpus is dominated by "political decisions" to speak for the victimized and bereft. After his 2000 performance in *Amores Perros*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's incendiary examination of the margins of Mexico City, and his 2001 breakthrough, Alfonso Cuarón's coming-of-age road trip movie *Y Tu Mamá También*, Bernal earned plenty of offers to appear in mainstream Hollywood movies. Instead he did *Fidel* and *El Crimen del Padre Amaro*, the controversial melodrama about corruption in the Catholic Church that became Mexico's highest grossing film ever, despite (or rather, because of) the Church's attempts to boycott it.

This year, just as he revisited self-discovery through travel with *Diaries*, Bernal returned to church scandal from a markedly different perspective in Pedro Almodóvar's sensational *Bad Education*, a multi-layered tale of Catholic school misdeeds and the spectacularly damaged lives that followed them. If ever there were a director who sought to use art to live on the side of the people who have no voice, it's Almodóvar, with his surprisingly human portraits of drug addicts, sexual transgressors and others shoved to the fringes by social convention. In Bernal, he finds an able accomplice in his quest to represent the unrepresented. As scenery-chewing here as he was quietly smoldering in *Diaries*, Bernal turns in an astonishing performance that far surpasses past roles in breadth and depth, exploiting his chameleon-like physical traits to play a character that is in fact (at least) three interlocking characters.

Almodóvar has said that the quality that most distinguished Bernal from other actors during auditions was his attractiveness as a boy and as a girl; indeed, Bernal's ability to be destructively alluring as the flamboyantly extortionary transvestite Zahara and the monomaniacally ambitious young actor Ignacio/Ángel/Juan provides the engine of obsession that drives *Bad Education*'s complex, nonlinear narrative. But just as important, he's able to humanize both, even as they ruthlessly pursue their own self-interest, using body language and especially gait to project a devil-may-care cattiness as a woman and a macho faux-bravado as a man, without ever quite concealing the raw desperation that drives the linked characters.

With these most recent projects, Bernal, a polyglot who traveled widely as a teenager, seems to have taken to heart Guevara's assertion of the "fiction of nations." He's seized opportunities beyond the Mexican film industry, adopting an Argentinian accent for *Diaries*, a Spanish one for *Bad Education*, and most recently, speaking English in his first American feature, James Marsh's *The King*, due out next year. The sophistication and bravery of his performance in *Bad Education* will further raise the magnetic actor's profile, but the "crossover success" many have predicted for him seems unlikely to translate to Hollywood glamour roles. Instead, it will mean more opportunities for Bernal to travel roads where he sees himself making change. "There is a necessity for me to tell these stories, definitely," Bernal remarks. "And that instinct, or that fact of their being congruent with myself, is perhaps the only thing that drives me to do them."