

Neruda (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 47 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 4; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 5.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Proverbs 31:8-9

Chili's best known film director Pablo Larraín and scriptwriter Guillermo Calderón must have enjoyed making this somewhat whimsical, semi-biographical film inspired by the life of Nobel prize winner Pablo Neruda (Luis Gnecco), considered by some as "the greatest poet of the 20th century." To do so they create a fictional policeman for whom The Pink Panther's Inspector Clouseau could have been the role model, so full of himself is he, and yet so incompetent. Set in the late 1940s when the Chilean President Gonzalez Videla (Alberto Castro) has banned Communism, police prefect Oscar Peluchonneau (Gael García Bernal) is ordered to hunt down "the most famous Communist in the country" and humiliate him.

Although the consequences could have been deadly, the pursuit of the poet by his ego-inflated nemesis is treated in a way that might bring to mind a toned-down version of those zany Looney Tunes cartoon pursuits, such as Wiley Coyote chasing after Roadrunner. Hidden from sight by various Communist friends, the poet and his Argentinian wife Delia del Carril (Mercedes Morán) always manage to stay one step ahead of their pursuer. Neruda enjoys leaving behind one of the pulp

detective novels he is reading. Meant to taunt the policeman, when he reads the novels, they create a bond between the Inspector and the fugitive, at least in the policeman's mind. As the film develops, we see that the story is as almost as much about the policeman as the poet, with the cop imagining himself as the chief character and Neruda as a supporting one in an epic story.

The film's Neruda is a very mixed person indeed, like so many European leftists of the time, loving the pleasures of the flesh—women, food, and drink—as much as “the people.” He enjoys parties and orgies, and hangs out at brothels where he recites his love poems. The term used to describe members of the leftist intelligentsia of the time aptly fits the poet, “Champaign Communists.”

Originally sought because in the Senate he spoke against the government's brutal suppression of miners, Neruda becomes a beloved figure by the people—in one scene a large group of factory workers listen intently to one of his poems. As in the Soviet Union, poets were looked up to by workers as well as by the literati. By the end of the film we see that the life or personality of the poet is of less significance than his works, and the fact that the latter inspires and brings hope to the powerless. Thus, even a person of dubious moral character can have a positive effect upon people, producing words of beauty that are similar in their effect to those of the Hebrew prophets who spoke out “for those who cannot speak.”

Director Pablo Larraín's 2012 film [No](#) has a similar theme: the story of how the people of Chili put an end to dictator Augusto Pinochet's 15-year reign of terror, it credits a young advertiser, creator of a cheesy beer commercial, with producing a campaign that inspired people to dare to say “No” to the powerful dictator. In the director's new film it is very ironical in Neruda's case that, though opposing tyranny in his own country, he was an admirer for much of his life of

the ruthless Joseph Stalin, one more example of the bizarre mixture of conflicting values and behavior that made the poet such a compelling character in the mid-20th Century.

For me, this is one more example of a God with a sense of humor, choosing an unlikely person as his instrument for denouncing injustice. If he crazily selected a geriatric couple to begin a new people (See Genesis 12-15) to be his advocates, why not in the 20th century a poet with morals that would have gotten him kicked out of most any church? Such are the thoughts that a group discussing this amusing film might come up with. I invite you to join in the fun with Pablo Larraín, and then go on to his more sober film *No* and see how the morally dubious methods of advertising can be used for good ends. What a world we live in!

This review with a set of questions will be in the 2017 issue of VP.