

# No from Chile and *The Sapphires* from Australia

Joanne Laurier  
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No, directed by Pablo Larraín, screenplay by Pedro Peirano, based on the play by Antonio Skármeta; The Sapphires, directed by Wayne Blair, screenplay by Tony Briggs and Keith Thompson

No, by Chilean director Pablo Larraín (born 1976), is the last in a trilogy of films about life under the Pinochet dictatorship, a made-in-Washington regime that interned, tortured or killed tens of thousands of Chileans from 1973-1990.

In both *Tony Manero* (2008) and *Post Mortem* (2010), Larraín's central protagonists are fairly repugnant figures. In the former film, set in Santiago in 1978, a psychopathic killer is obsessed with the disco movie *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), while in the latter a stifled morgue assistant is largely unmoved by the bloody repression taking place at the outset of the dictatorship in 1973. Each film is disagreeable.

Larraín's latest movie is set in 1988 when the military dictator Augusto Pinochet is forced to call a plebiscite on his presidency. The outcome of the vote will determine whether he will rule for another eight years.

Opposition leaders for the NO vote enlist the aid of a young, skate-boarding advertising executive, the fictional René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal), recently returned from exile in Mexico. The concern of the NO vote camp is that Chileans will not vote, either out of fear or a belief that the referendum has been rigged. In fact, René's estranged wife Verónica (Antonia Zegers), a left-wing activist, accuses him of giving credibility to the regime by participating in the plebiscite.

René is employed by an ad agency whose chief, Lucho Guzmán (Alfredo Castro—a Larraín regular), is organizing the public relations campaign for the dictatorship. Lucho berates René, claiming the NO vote has been financed by Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union, while the unbeatable Americans and the CIA support Pinochet.

In the NO camp, René must challenge those who want to appeal to the populace by highlighting the dictatorship's murderous acts. He rejects campaign ads that feature material about torture and killings. Instead, he creates a rainbow logo, representing the unity of all the political parties, right and left, with the slogan, "Chile, happiness is on its way." The filmmakers assert that René's efforts largely account for the

success of the No vote.

No presents archival footage documenting the crimes of the Pinochet regime, as well as the mass celebrations when it fell. The graininess of these images deliberately continues in the film's own cinematography, perhaps a questionable aesthetic choice.

This, however, is the least of the film's problems. The most obvious is its premise that an ill-defined "democracy," eradicating 17 years of savage dictatorship and benefiting all social classes, could be ushered in by a clever public relations campaign.

The tragic events in Chile in the 1970s are complex, but Larraín's film makes no attempt to tackle them. There is no consideration given to the circumstances leading up to the coup in September 1973, so that event itself remains a mystery. A pre-revolutionary situation existed in Chile, but the Salvador Allende Popular Unity government, which included Communist Party and other "left" cabinet ministers, demobilized and disarmed the working class and made possible the CIA-backed military coup.

Nor do the filmmakers bother to investigate the real issues and social forces engaged in the 1988 referendum. Many of the same parties and movements responsible for enabling the military to take power 15 years earlier were now negotiating with the butchers for a peaceful transition in which the foundations of Chilean capitalism would remain untouched.

The bourgeois opposition had already accepted the 1980 constitution drafted by Pinochet, which prescribed a return to "protected democracy" by the end of the 1980s. Under the constitution, Pinochet remained a Senator-for-Life and the military continued to enjoy a key role.

In his election biography, Ricardo Lagos of the Socialist Party claimed that he "was one of the staunchest advocates of participating in the 1988 plebiscite with the objective of resuscitating democracy."

The coalition of the Socialist Party-Party for Democracy (PS-PPD), Christian Democrats and others, known as the Concertacion, won the first presidential election in 17 years. The thinness of Chile's "democratic" veneer was exposed in 1998 when the government then headed by President Eduardo

Frei Ruiz-Tagle condemned Pinochet's arrest and detention by British authorities.

Why does the film present such a superficial and misleading account of Chilean history? A definite agenda is at work. In an interview, Larraín asserts that "Chile was a socialist project under Salvador Allende, then Pinochet came in and he basically imposed the capitalist system, and the capitalist system of course brings the advertising and marketing logic... so finally he creates his own poison, he creates his way out without knowing it, and that paradox is very interesting."

The implication here, that "paradoxically" things worked out rather well in the end, is light-minded and irresponsible in the extreme. The "transition to democracy" was preferable to sections of the Chilean bourgeoisie, and even their American handlers, by 1988, otherwise the referendum would never have been held or its results accepted. The extermination or intimidation of thousands of left-wing opponents and trade unionists had "cleansed" the Chilean working class of many dangerous elements. The return to parliamentary democracy, in other words, passed through the piling up of corpses.

No's emphasis on clever public relations and such brings to mind the perspective of Adbusters Media Foundation, credited with initiating the Occupy Wall Street movement. The "not-for-profit, anti-consumerist, pro-environment" organization describes itself as "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age." This is the perspective of an affluent global layer of NGO activists, anti-globalists, greens, and other "progressives." It is far removed from a concern with the conditions and fate of the working class.

To whom is Larraín speaking, in Chile and elsewhere? After all, broad layers of the Chilean population, whether they voted in the 1988 plebiscite or not, did not have to be *convinced* to oppose the dictatorship. They hated the regime, which had sadistically repressed opposition and pauperized millions, with every fiber of their being. The filmmakers are addressing those for whom it was a debatable issue whether the Pinochet regime should have carried on or not. Thus, a limited film for a limited audience.

### ***The Sapphires***

"Ninety percent of all recorded music is shite. The other 10 percent is soul," says a character in the Australian film *The Sapphires*, by director Wayne Blair.

The 2004 stage play by Aboriginal actor/writer Tony Briggs, now adapted for the screen, is based on the story of Briggs' mother Laurel Robinson, who was the lead singer in an all-Aboriginal female singing group that toured Vietnam in the late

1960s, entertaining American and Australian troops.

Wanting to escape the poverty and isolation of their Aboriginal reservation, sisters Gail (Deborah Mailman), Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell) and Julie (Jessica Mauboy) perform at a talent competition in a nearby town. Having faced racial taunts from the audience and various unworthy competitors (who are "allergic to music"), the girls catch the attention of the half-sober (and therefore half-drunk) Dave Lovelace (Chris O'Dowd), an Irish music promoter down on his luck ("You're the best Aboriginal singing group I know ... You're the only Aboriginal singing group I know.").

Dave takes the girls under his wing, trading in their country and western repertoire for Motown. Eventually they land in Melbourne, where the sisters seek out their light-skinned cousin Kay (Shari Sebbens)—taken by the government years earlier as part of the Stolen Generation—who is now selling Tupperware to the white middle class.

An audition and a name change, from the Cummeragunja Songbirds to The Sapphires, all accomplished rather smoothly and breezily, propel Dave and the girls off to Vietnam, where they hone their musical skills and engage in romance in the midst of war.

While the amusing and charming *The Sapphires* has no malicious bones in its body, the question is how many bones of any kind does it have?

The film's best segments involve the coming together of the group in Australia. Irish comic and actor O'Dowd is hilarious and irresistible. Mailman, Mauboy, Sebbens and Tapsell are tough-mouthed and endearing—perfect foils for O'Dowd. Furthermore, the film is enhanced by a lively soundtrack featuring Soul and R&B classics.

The scenes in Vietnam are inevitably more problematic. The bigger and more fraught the issues, the less the story is light-hearted and amusing. Moreover, although the problems of the oppressed Aboriginal community are sanitized in the movie, they easily take precedence over those of the oppressed and victimized Vietnamese. It is difficult to put one's brain entirely on hold when the film shows The Sapphires entertaining the soldiers (Australia's contribution to the war is never mentioned) of an invading, imperialist army.

It is interesting to note that in real life only Laurel Robinson, then 21, and her sister Lois Peeler went to Vietnam. They replaced their cousins Beverley Briggs and Naomi Mayers, also sisters, who refused to go in protest against the war.

All that being said, it is rare to come across a movie with such sweetness, a movie in which one roots wholeheartedly for the characters and wishes them only the best.



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