

P. Leonard, John

## The movie budget

Guevara, Ernesto  
Ortiz Under Sec.

is bigger than Castro's was

# Che!—The Making Of a Movie Revolutionary

By JOHN LEONARD

PONCE, Puerto Rico. "Che!," a 20th Century-Fox Production, stars Omar Sharif, Jack Palance, Cesare Danova, Robert Loggia, Woody Strode, Barbara Luna, Linda Marsh. Sy Bartlett produces—with Richard Fleischer directing the Michael Wilson screenplay, adapted from material researched by Producer Bartlett. The story deals with the dramatic era of Che Guevara's life, from his landing in Cuba with Fidel Castro to his capture and death at the hands of the Bolivian Army. It is being filmed in color and Panavision by cinematographer Charles Wheeler on locations in Puerto Rico.

(PRODUCER'S NOTE: The film unveils in documentary style, with narration by persons who knew or had met Che Guevara at one time or another during the fiery revolutionary's tumultuous career as a rebel-guerrilla. These narrators report from both pro and con viewpoints so that an impartial, objective story line is established. Fictitious names have supplanted those of actual living persons in order to protect the latter.)

—FROM THE STUDIO PRESS KIT.

HE once wrote: "Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism. Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons." The hands hold cameras now; the weaponry is myth; the guerrilla merchants march upon the movie houses. . . .

They were playing a myth game last month in the mountains of Puerto Rico. It was called "Will the Real Che Guevara Please Stand Up and Die for Our Popcorn?" and it cost \$6-million. Almost anyone could join: Fly from San Juan to

Ponce on the southern coast of the island. Check into a resort hotel on a hill overlooking the Caribbean. (There may be in your elevator a bearded guerrilla, wearing green fatigues and cosmetic scowl, but ignore him for the moment. For the moment, he is out of context; later on, you will be.) Waste the evening shooting craps in a Government-licensed casino. Rise at dawn, put on boots, enter a rented car and . . . hang tight.

The climb to Adjuntas and beyond

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is 3,000 feet up, 23 miles on the speedometer, two hours on the clock, two centuries backward psychologically. The road is a snarl of curvas peligrosas, a paved snake in a snit repeatedly biting its own back. The country it climbs through is wholly alien to San Juan (Miami Beach with a slight Spanish accent: ointmented, sea-scared, Midwestern vacationers slumped around the swimming pool getting fricasseed and soused) and alien, too, to the Puerto Rico of the industrial brochures (tax exemptions, rum distilleries, petrochemical plants).

There are farmers, dogs, children, chickens, plunging vistas and sudden rainbows. The farmers raise coffee beans, bananas, pineapples and flowers. The children wear uniforms color-coded according to their grade at school. The dogs lie in the shade under disemboweled automobiles as the caravan of rented cars honks by. (Horns are more important than brakes on the road to Adjuntas.)

It seems an appropriate prelude to the search for Che. According to Fidel Castro in his introduction to

the Bolivian diaries, "Che had numerous contacts with the peasants. Their character—extremely mistrustful and wary—didn't surprise him, as he knew their mentality perfectly. . . . He knew that prolonged, patient, arduous work was required to win them over to the cause." According to Omar Sharif, who plays the part of Che in this production: "I don't think he particularly liked the people he was fighting for. He despised the peasants for not helping him, for not helping themselves." Of course, the peasants in Bolivia tried to turn him in for bounty money.

When at last you reach the location site, you realize how like the waging of a war is the making of a movie. The logistical problems are similar: transport, communications, supply lines of food and matériel, the disposition of the troops. A convoy of more than 50 trucks, cars and buses carries the company to the site. There are bulldozers available to plow new paths; porters to haul bags of gravel; trailers to house stars; catering vans and mobile kitchen units shipped all the way from Hollywood to stoke the stomachs of more than 200 people in less than half an hour; walkie-talkies to warn of takes, to silence the set, to summon reinforcements. There is also the standing and waiting, the listlessness of momentarily unemployed *barbudos*.

the extras and the superfluous, on call but not needed, nosing on their rifles, playing Scrabble, drinking chocolate milk, smoking too much. One suspects that 20th Century-Fox could take over quite a few small countries with a minimum of retooling; certainly their budget is bigger than Castro's was. But then, it costs more to make a movie about a revolution than it does to make a revolution—if you don't count people. It costs Fox about \$10,000 an hour.

**T**HIS is supposed to be the Sierra Maestra. Director Richard Fleischer ("Doctor Doolittle," "The Boston Strangler," "Fantastic Voyage," "Compulsion," etc.) has a passion for authenticity. While Fox's Century Ranch at Malibu, Calif., is considered a suitable setting for the Bolivian scenes in "Che!," the Cuban part of the story presented a problem. Where to go? There were feelers and inducements from the Philippines—like Greek shipping magnates and munitions makers, film companies negotiate directly with foreign powers—but it was decided that the Philippines were too humid and the Filipinos too Oriental-looking. Brazil and Mexico were brooded about. However, says Fleischer, "we had to find a place that likes Americans. That narrows it down. We needed a location far from political upheaval. That ruled out South America."

Among the several advantages of Puerto Rico, one in particular should not go unnoted, since it so pleased the legal department at Fox. By setting up a Puerto Rican dummy corporation to produce the film, Fox automatically entitled itself to an exemption from Federal taxes on profits, and local corporate taxes, too. In exchange for that exemption, Fox would pump an estimated \$1-million into the island's economy during shooting.

Therefore: The company staged a Cuban student riot in Calle Cristo in Old San Juan; trained guerrillas to land in a 65-foot facsimile Granma at Boca de Cangrejos; engaged Fulgencio Batista's army of impersonators in the sugarcane fields near Manati; entered Havana triumphantly by way of the Ponce and, near Adjuntas, rebuilt the 26 de Julio's Sierra Maestra bivouac.

To reach that bivouac you must slog up several hundred feet of muddy mountainside. It rains at least twice a day in the central range, making the way to the top treacherous; tumbles are frequent, as are tangles in the slithery cabling for the lights and cameras. On achieving the summit, you must seek reliable footing among nine different six-packs of people pressed into an area the size of your living room. There are cameramen, propmen, soundmen, stuntmen, make-up men and A.D.'s (assistant directors, notoriously the relatives of studio execs). There are freelance photographers hired by the studio to snap promotional stills. There are publicity reps for the East Coast, West Coast, Latin America and Europe. There is a three-man team from New York filming a short documentary on the filming of the long "documentary," for subsequent TV syndication in the States; a four-man crew from the B.B.C., and a half-dozen shaggy-blond young men in sport shirts, toothy and tanned, whose function seems principally decorative, as though they were ambulatory advertisements for Southern California orange juice. And, on any given day, there might be Joseph Morgenstern from Newsweek. Or Pete Hamill from Eye. Or the Ladies Home Journal looking for Omar. Or Life magazine researching its forthcoming feature on Lalo Schiffrin, the "Mission: Impossible" musician borrowed by Fox for "Che!" It's exactly as if something important were going on.

**Y**OU are assured that beyond this body scrummage—somewhere, fixed in the pitiless circle of five Panavision cameras—are the actors. Right now, the eye can't penetrate to them. The company stands, staring into the sky, like an apocalyptic sect searching for a sign. Several of its members peer through colored filters at the lazy strike of clouds. They are waiting for light, for a sunswath. The sky obliges. The bullhorn barks down the mountainside for silence. The roll-call of the cameras begins. The "take" slate ups and suddenly, through a miraculous parting of the flesh, you see them: Che Guevara (Omar Sharif) is vanishing out a Fidel Castro (Jack Palance) tooth, with a bottle of Metaxa

or a substitute for Novocain (Authenticity: Fidel drank es in any part, not only his Metaxa.)

To one side stands guerrilla nurse Anita Marquez (Barbara Luna), wearing earrings. (Authenticity: "Cuban women," she says, "would no more go out without their earrings than without their clothes, even in the jungle.") To the other side stands little brother Raúl (Paul Bertoya), perfectly reflecting that unformed face, that unformed mind—the resemblances in every part are uniformly astonishing. Petitioning Fidel is a liaison from the Cuban professional classes (Abraham Sofair), a sort of parody Manuel Urrutia—the President whom Castro would provisionally propose, then depose for insufficient revolutionary zeal—who wants to exchange men for the promise of a Cabinet post. They are all, with the exception of Sofair, a symphony of green fatigues, a hirsute fantasy: It might be Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley.

They run through the three-minute scene six times. During one break, an A.D. cries: "Tree shadow!" and an aide comes running with a branch. During another, Palance's nose must be fixed. During a third, someone must scurry down to the compound to fetch cigarettes. During a fourth, Sharif refuses a bloodied piece of cotton proffered by a propman: "This is all out of the shot. Do you see that camera? That's a 4-inch lens. It puts my face—only my face—all over the screen. You're so excited about the blood, aren't you? That's because you're young. The blood makes you nervous and excited. You're having a great time today, aren't you?" "No, I am not," says the propman.

Palance employs the breaks to mutter his lines and practice his gestures; he seems a restless loner, totally chitchatless, and is rumored to have asked for script changes reducing the "buffoonery" of Castro as originally characterized. Sharif, on the other hand, superintends almost every aspect of the technical busy-ness: suggesting rehearsals, playing traffic cop among the wayward clouds, insisting on comparative take times—a watchful eye in the middle of an almost arrogant relaxation. There is a crouch even in his slouch upon a chair, a

right to approve script changes in any part, not only his own. ("I am satisfied with my part now; I know what to do. But for the first time I'm not just doing my part. My concern is watching over the whole picture. I want it to be fair in every particular.")

For the sixth time, Che looks beatific among his dental tools. Sofair is dismissed. Castro bites down on his cigar and growls: "Every pig in Miami wants another chance at the trough." And finally the call comes: "Print it! All right, let's eat." We all slog down the hill to lunch.

There will be other scenes shot in the central mountain range of Puerto Rico. Che will have to choose between his medical kit and ammunition—opting, of course, for the latter. Castro will give him command of a guerrilla detachment. Survivors of an abortive engagement will straggle back to base, to be told by Jack Palance that the next man losing his gun will be considered a deserter and punished by death. The propmen will rush through the mud with fresh cigars or with meat bones for Fidel to gnaw on, then fling furiously into the ravine. Make-up will prepare itself, on receiving the nightly call sheet, to "beard 20 guerrillas" in the morning. (Palance must rise each morning at 5:30 for two hours of puttying and penciling.) And there will be other lunches where the cast can complain about San Juan (pants suits, silk cravats and white turtle-necks couldn't get into the restaurants or casinos there, ladies must wear dresses and gentlemen, ties); about Ponce (a gourmet's version of solitary confinement, Howard Johnson's with castanets); about the rain ("The only one who doesn't get wet is Omar; it never rains on God").

**B**UT—why do I feel a qualm before this *Sturm und Drang*? There's something wrong. The authenticity of specifics does not add up to a general truth. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote of a Hollywood back lot that it was "30 acres of fairyland—not because the locations really looked like African jungles and French châteaux and schooners at anchor and Broadway at night, but because they looked like the bare books of childhood, like fragments of stor-

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ies dancing in a never lived in a house with an attic, but a back lot must be something like that, and at night, of course, in an enchanted distorted way, it comes true." Puerto Rico isn't a back lot; the locations look like what they are supposed to be; but at night, around the swimming pool, it all comes false. Why?

Well, why does a major capitalist enterprise sink \$6-million into the cinematic mythologization of Che Guevara? To edify consumer zombies in a balconized America? To annoy Mr. Nixon? The idea seems as paradoxical as, say, the Vatican bankrolling a TV series on The Pill: "The Egg That Didn't 'I.'" Or Mark Rudd celebrating the dialectical prowess of Grayson Kirk in three Panavisionary reels. Or Rap Brown sending valentines to Louise Day Hicks.

It all began as a gleam in Darryl F. Zanuck's eye late last year, after Che's death on Oct. 9, 1967. Zanuck, president and chairman of the board of 20th Century-Fox, was on a European junket at the time and, according to a press release from Fox, became aware "of the tremendous appeal and colorful impressions that the life and death of Che Guevara had established with the people of European countries." He asked the executive vice president in charge of worldwide production for 20th-Fox "to check out the possibility of documenting on film a biographical story of the infamous guerrilla fighter." The executive vice president, hap-

tant, feeling "that a picture based on Che's life could turn into a favorable propaganda platform for Communists and the Communist." But the Zanucks convinced him that "the unwavering dedication of the Argentine doctor, whose heroic exploits in the Cuban revolt were legion, and the ultimate hardships suffered by his obdurate campaign to spread revolution and violence throughout Latin America with his resultant failure and death—all these were of great significance and possessed tremendous potential for a good dramatic theme." (Who writes these press releases? A committee of malapropadeutic computers?) Forty-five days after the Zanucks convinced him, Bartlett delivered "two voluminous reports," which were then presented to a screenwriter for a "treatment." (Director Fleischer says: "No one had ever heard of Che Guevara until he died." Where were all these people? Locked inside a projection booth for eight years?)

The first treatment proved unsatisfactory. Michael Wilson was brought in to do a second one. Wilson's credits include "A Place in the Sun," "Five Fingers," "The Men in Her Life" and "Border Patrol"; Hollywood's discredits include the fact that for years Wilson was blacklisted, forcing him to write at low pay under several pseudonyms. (Fleischer says: "There wasn't any trouble about Wilson as a screenwriter. That's all over now. The only trouble came from a couple of members of the board of directors at Fox. After all, the subject is controversial.")

Bartlett and Fleischer immediately agreed on Omar Sharif as Che. Omar immediately said no. "I've always tried to avoid controversy," Sharif explains. "Controversy in general and politics in particular. Perhaps it's because I've always had an easy comfortable life. [His father made money in Egyptian lumber.] But Dick Fleischer convinced me that this would be an honest, objective film. It would tell both sides of Che. Finally, I said yes. Since then, reading about Che, I've become aware of the issues, the needs of people, the unsatisfactory situation in the world. Now I'm grateful to be doing the picture because it made me aware of the political conditions."

ALMOST everyone associated with the "Che!" production has opinions about the man, and will betongue them at the drop of a question mark. Che is the ideal fantasy figure, 150 pounds of imaginative Silly-Putty onto which we press our private images and see them set. For Fleischer, for instance, Che was "a handsome, sexy guy. That's the secret of his appeal. He had animal magnetism. He was beautiful. In a way, his relationship with Castro was like Trotsky's relationship with Lenin. One wanted to spread the revolution everywhere, in every country; the other wanted to develop it at home. An American college professor said that Che was not really a man of today, but rather a medieval knight."

Omar Sharif sees Che as much like Lawrence of Arabia. "He was a nonconformist," says Sharif, "an antiestablishment figure, incorruptible, true to his ideal from beginning to end. He thought the world was a lousy place, particularly his part of the world. And he knew that he could do nothing about it. But he tried. He wouldn't give up everything at the start. He was active, not passive. Knowing that he couldn't change the world, he knew also that he was going to die. He wanted to die—fighting. He was obviously quite masochistic; he liked to punish his own flesh. A very difficult man to approach, with very little affection in him. Totally un-Latin that way."

According to Sharif, "Che deserves to be the hero of the young people. He was totally honest. Not like Mao. Mao writes for 10-year-olds. And the opposite of Castro. Castro was a great actor, always turning it on. Che was an ascetic. He admired Fidel because of Fidel's natural ability to lead men—the masses, Che could lead men in battle, but he couldn't arouse the masses."

66'Che, in a way, was something like Vince Lombardi.

Vince Lombardi! How's that?'99

I believe Che must have felt that somehow Fidel wasn't up to the ideal. Fidel used Che's brain and dedication—Fidel was the producer and Che the director — but Che must have worried him. Che was like having a conscience always hanging around you. Fidel must have feared him—that's my opinion; there isn't any evidence on this—and I think Che must have in some way despised Fidel. That's why he left to go to Bolivia."

(Sharif also finds in Che a kind of antiself: "I am terribly emotional and sentimental. Self-pitying. I would not sacrifice my comforts. We are opposites in many ways, but I consider our differences defects in me, and therefore qualities in him." Although he has now become interested in the issues, he cheerfully admits that his interest extends only to "reading the newspapers. I never read the newspapers before.")

Jack Palance, as Fidel, has a different view. (It should be noted parenthetically that Palance could be one of the finest comic actors in America; that he wants comic roles; that he is usually cast as a villain; that he has been punished in Hollywood for various iconoclasm; that he deserves better, and that he didn't say so to me and would deny he even thinks it, but I think it and want to say it; end parenthesis.) Palance considers Che "a narcissist and a vagabond," without the appetite or aptitude for the hard work of nation-building: "He left when the going got rough."

Palance pretends at first that Castro was a part like any other part, and acting is a job like any other job, and you do what they pay you to do. But by the end of dinner he reveals perhaps the only sophisticated political intelligence on the "Che!" set. His children will have to grow up in this world. To develop his characterization of Fidel, he looked into the history of Cuban - American relations, and while he doesn't know what's going on in Cuba right now, he sympathizes with

66'For Fleischer, Che was 'a handsome, sexy guy.' Sharif sees him much like Lawrence of Arabia —'not like Mao.'99

what Castro did (Approved For Release 2005/01/13 : CIA-RDP88-01365R000300040023-8) picture," he says, "is just an attempt to capitalize on the name of Guevara and make a lot of money, then it's criminal, and I'd be sorry to have been associated with it. But if it's an attempt to open doors on the screen, to talk honestly about history and the issues while they still matter, then it's a very good thing and I'm glad I'm here."

**N**OW take Robert Loggia ("T.H.E. Cat," etc.). In the movie's pro-con, flashback, documentary scheme, Loggia plays the part of Faustino Morales, a Cuban lawyer and sometime guerrilla who becomes an anti-Guevara spokesman. Loggia's off-camera feelings are quite different. "He was a saint," he says. "A Christ figure. I'd like to play the part myself. As a matter of fact, I'd like to play all of Omar's parts! The relationship between Che and Castro is like the relationship between Christ and John the Baptist. Castro's the kind of rough, physical, fleshy guy who'd shout out: 'There's the Son of God!' Castro drinks and sleeps with women; Che didn't drink and didn't sleep with women. The difference between a picture like this and a television series is that here there's revelation. In TV, there's never any revelation. This is real. Che appeals to young people because he forsook the body for action, black and white commitment. Che, in a way, was something like Vince Lombardi. Jesus Christ and Vince Lombardi! How's that?"

Or Cesare Danova ("Cleopatra" ["I thought I'd never get out of it"], "Garrison's Gorillas," etc.). Danova plays the part of Maj. Ramon Valdez, a pro-Che spokesman in the film. As in performance, in private life Danova twiddles dum to Loggia's dec: "Che was a bum wandering around Argentina wondering what to do with himself." Danova, who once studied medicine himself before Dino de Laurentis plucked him up, especially resents Che's "violation of the Hippocratic Oath. The vocation to save and the vocation to kill human life—there's something wrong. He turned into a cold-blooded killer. He didn't even work for his own country. The doctor-guerrilla split just doesn't work. It's a zle that won't fit together."

the company. Abraham Sofaer calls Che "an opportunist who would have been assassinated, probably by Castro, if he hadn't gone off to Bolivia." Woody Strode (ex-football star and veteran of John Ford Westerns) says, "He was unique. He had an ideal and he had the guts to do something about it. It doesn't matter whether he was right. All nations, all people, think they are right. He got killed because nobody else cared; he should have stayed with Castro."

Rudy Diaz (former Los Angeles police detective, star of "Bandalero") objects that Che "believed in the Communist ideal. He was a threat to our country. This picture is going to tell the truth; it's going to wake up a lot of people."

Even the extras and the superfluous play the myth game, usually on rides back to Ponce or in the bar at night, occasionally choking on too much tongue in the cheek: "Omar sees Che as a gambler." "An existential gambler?" "No, a casino gambler." (Omar won \$5,200 at the crap table his first night in San Juan.) Or: "Che was a man looking for publicity. For a while he thought he could get it in Cuba, but his clipping service advised him that if he went to Bolivia, they had a sure-fire scheme to put him on the front page of every newspaper in the world." (Publicists are cynics because they have been hired to sell, and because, like statesman, they are selling immaterial products.) Or . . . but isn't that enough? Reporters are publicists, too. In the modern electronic village, the Big Picture is so low-definition that a wart is as good as a beauty spot, so long as you can spell it properly.

**I**T is not enough. They are going to peddle Che like toothpaste, and I don't like the taste of it.

We weren't allowed to see the script, and it is therefore presumptuous to judge what will finally come out of Puerto Rico and Malibu. But I presume anyway, on several grounds:

(1) Begin with the fact of Richard Fleischer, the director. He has been a director ever since he graduated with an M.A. from Yale Drama School in 1942. He is, personally, one of the most engaging and civilized men I've ever met—

face, clear eyes, boyish grin, seeks) and what he settles for shy wit. He is also serene, a (and sells). He has a vision, tank of unfathomable serenity, and if he's worth a damn he a serenity sufficiently viscous loathes each clumsy image of to resist all (galling) stones of it and claws on angrily to the doubt. With him, it's skim or skip.

Oh, he must endure what a technician is the difference he describes as "anxiety between an obsession and a dreams . . . whole sequences job."

where I mistakenly left in the (2) By casting Omar Sharif slate; or arriving on the set as Che Guevara, Fox automatically find a scene I hadn't known ically fouls its "objective" was in the script." But his nest. You cannot cast, say, anxieties are smooth enough Audrey Hepburn as Eva Peto seem a style; so casual rón without distorting a few is his self-assurance that it basic values. Sharif's own adorns him without splurge, publicity people are at present more a breast-pocket handker- trying to sell him to magazine chief or a boutonniere than zines as the Great Lover of crosses and epaulettes. "I our time, and they are such have never," he says, "printed ceeding; grafting that image a take with which I wasn't onto the image of revolution-satisfied. Of course, it's all in ary saint makes an imaginative editing. But I am pre- tive sandwich only the mind- pared to take full responsibility for every film I ever made. I believe in them." (3) The film begins with

I believe he does—from ends with his death in Bolivia. "The Vikings" to "The Big What drove him to join a Gamble." He is the consum- revolutionary movement is mate technician, admitting no left out: the wandering over preference as to subject; re- Latin America, the peculiar fusing to admire competitors attraction-repulsion for the past or present (save "Citizen leper colony where he worked, Kane," "the greatest movie etc. In other words, an im- ever made"); sublimely con- portant personal and psycho- tent with what he has done logical dimension is simply and is now doing. His content- omitted.

ment communicates itself to the company. There was very little rancor on the Puerto the Bolivian scenes. Tania, Rican sets, no clashes or ca- the East German-trained K.G.B. tastrophes, just people doing agent assigned to spy on Che their job as Fleischer quietly in Bolivia, and possibly re- instructed them to do it, sponsible for his capture and smoothly and efficiently. murder, is reduced in the script to a peripheral love interest. ("Debray," says Fleischer, "wasn't that important. And Tania's story was just too corny.") Which means that an important political dimension is also being omitted.

He therefore becomes, I regret to say, the neutralizer of his subject. For Che was not content, civilized, smooth, engaging. There were enigma in him and stigmata on him. Fleischer and the Fox publicity machines congratulate themselves on grappling with the "controversial," and yet he as a director is a ground for all the available electricity. His idea of Che as "a handsome, sexy guy" applies a romantic gloss over all the bloody questions. (Just as producer Sy Bartlett's "documentary" approach—scene snatches, positive and negative statements, flashbacks, avoiding a story line and "a point of view"—turns revolutionary politics into Ping-Pong.) A subject like Che requires some kind of commitment. It also requires an artist. An artist isn't serene; he lives the movies play with.

between original conception and ultimate consequence, the gap ion and not a little naive. To

say that our imaginative lives are a repository, or a vomitorium, of the images thrust upon us; that there is a Gresham's law applying as much to the currency of imagination as to money (cheap images drive out good ones); that the result of making myths into cartoons and selling market-tested symbols with the popcorn is bound to be a dislocation between imagination and experience, leaving us as little more than the dull receptacles of bright lies—is to come down with a bad case of Agee. Unbecoming. What can one more irrelevant movie matter? The industry, like the drug trade, has been cutting and diluting its product for years. Don't waste, but hoard your outrage, to lavish it later on something that counts.

Not wanting to be naive, I wind up with what someone said in Ponce, again beside the swimming pool: "By 1970, 'Che!' will be an Off Broadway musical." I believe; I've been to so many movies that I believe anything. ■