



VOCES INOCENTES (INNOCENT VOICES) is a January, 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Here's Kino Ken's review of that lacerating drama.

13 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

Mexico 2005 color 111 minutes subtitled live action feature war drama BB Entertainment Marketing / Slow Hand Cinema / Altavista Films / Lawrence Bender Productions / Santo Domingo Films / Muvi Films Producers: Lawrence Bender, Luis Mandoki, Alejandro Soberón Kuri, Oscar Orlando Torres, Tery Lopez

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance (j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

2 Direction: Luis Mandoki*

(Uncle Beto), Ofelia Medina (Mama Toya), Daniel Giménez Cacho (Priest), Jesús Ochoa (Chofer), Jorge Angel Toriello (j) (Fito), Adrian Alonso (j) (Chele), Paulina Gaitan Ruiz (j) (Angelita), Andrés Márquez (j) (Marcos), Alejandro Felipe Flores (j) (Ricardito), Ana Paulina Caceres (j) (Rosita), Xuna Primus (j) (Christina Maria), Alan Chávez (j) (Antonio), Gustavo Sánchez Parra (Lieutenant Ruiz), Héctor Jiménez (Raton, the “Mouse”), Guillermo Rios (Soldier), Lourdes Villareal (Dona Celia), Ania Yarasech (Teacher Carmen), others

In an outlying village of urban San Salvador called Cuscatanzingo, an eleven-year-old boy named Chava tries to survive intermittent gunplay between guerilla forces and federal troops trying to root out and exterminate insurgents. El Salvador’s civil war has been raging for years with no indication of either cease-fire or decisive resolution anywhere in view.

Chava’s father left home years ago for a haven in the United States. He hasn’t communicated with wife Kella or his three children since.

In his absence, Mother and grandmother share child maintenance duties. With only a single sewing salary between them and Mama Toya’s emergency savings they must feed and clothe Chava, his sister Rosita, and five-year-old Ricardito. As well as themselves.

Thanks to ever-present financial worries and opposing armed forces zeroing in on their region, Kella must make a wrenching decision about whether to stay put or relocate. Building by building, her district is being destroyed by bullets, burning, and shells.

Add to that government squads periodically conducting roundups of what they consider eligible child soldiers, raiding schools and

undefended hamlets for reinforcements. Any boy twelve or older is fair game for compulsory recruitment at gunpoint.

Chava's approaching his twelfth birthday. Though still playing imaginary bus driver and war games with plastic soldiers, he's already acquired a girlfriend and even a job collecting fares and announcing stops for a real city bus. Both would be sacrificed if he opts for an indefinite stint in some military unit. Or is forced into one.

While perched on a rooftop for privacy, classmate Christina Maria and her bashful beau observe teenage girls being abducted in broad daylight by soldiers. Back in school the two witness fellow students being surrendered to army intruders by an administrator without protest.

On a daily basis, children and women in Cuscatanzingo are shot for being likely sympathizers or future replenishers of campesinos, land-owning farmers who seek expansion of holdings through legislative property redistribution.

But judicial inquiries and legal reforms have been discarded as a waste of time.

Chava must often walk past dead bodies to reach his home from classes. Once there, safety is still jeopardized when evening meals are interrupted by firefights with no respect shown civilians.

Using mattresses, tables, and metal sheeting torn loose, his mother, siblings and he himself attempt to stay alive amid growing chaos and devastation.

Gardens are trampled, fences demolished, roads permanently rutted by tank treads.

Curfews intended to save lives get routinely discounted by children who see no reason to curtail paper firefly displays, farewell

osculation, or fruit-picking raids just because male elders want to practice nocturnal extermination rituals. This carelessness culminates in the shooting death of Rosita's best friend Angelita, caught outside after dark when she fails to end a jump roping session in timely fashion.

Time and again, Chava also overextends daylight activities into dusk and beyond, placing himself at risk despite maternal scoldings. He's also fond of playing full blast on his transistor a banned song called "Casas de Carton." This radio, a gift from Uncle Beto delivered during one of his rare evening visits, is temporarily confiscated by Kella because its misuse endangers her son, a cheeky showoff who cannot resist baiting patrollers by singing it loudly in public accompanied by sideways hoppings as if guided by a suicidal obsession. When the parish priest defiantly amplifies Chava's favorite lyrics to nettle guards stationed within earshot of Cuscatanzingo's church, his action is abruptly halted by a shot cutting through loudspeaker wire which promptly sends detached audio equipment tumbling into the street.

Later on, a compassionate friend nicknamed Raton (Mouse) who belongs to FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion) forces acting subversively in the neighborhood furtively informs the film's point-of-view narrator of an imminent government raid the following day to collect boys for battle training.

Chava ponders an ideal response. He hits on the idea of male friends and playmates clambering walls to corrugated tin roofs when a warning signal of hostile approach sounds. There, under burning tropical sun, they must bake, flat on their backs, until searchers depart. His scheme works surprisingly well.

Yet bloodshed, ruination, and scholastic invasions continue unabated.

Until one night two friends rouse a grieving Chava, asking him to accompany them on a trip to a nearby encampment where they plan to volunteer for home front duty with the FMLN. That suggestion gets welcome reception from an undersized patriot looking to wreak personal vengeance against people mistakenly believed killers of his sweetheart.

Before daybreak, this trio and Marcos, a buddy unexpectedly discovered already camping at their destination, awaken to sounds and gunsmoke of an ambush which rapidly eliminates adult protectors, leaving weaponless minors in enemy hands.

Through pelting rain, Chava and schoolmates are marched to the bank of a river. En route, terrified boys see mentally challenged pal Ancha's lifeless body hanging from a tree limb. Arriving at a designated execution site next to rushing water, they are compelled to kneel with faces turned away from pitiless liquidators. Two friends are fatally shot from behind while Chava and pudgy Marcos await their turns ...

VOCES INOCENTES is to some extent based on childhood recollections of writer Oscar Orlando Torres. Either Torres himself or screenplay collaborator Luis Mandoki insert more than generous dollops of toilet humor and several episodes showing schoolchildren beating up one another quite independently of adult inducement. Though intended to underline vulnerable humanity, such missteps dilute a thematic message of adult brutality's traumatic effect on "innocents." The writers sidestep issues of who financed and armed FMLN combatants. This results in a bias against authority prevalent

throughout the drama, once again deflecting attention from the basic story involving corruption of minors by individuals who are supposed to be safeguarding them, civil conflict being merely pretext for sadistic savagery. Viewers are treated to repeated violations of human rights by gunmen on both sides of the war. However, only El Salvadoran uniformed regulars are portrayed as kidnapers and rapists.

Not helpful either, are a slow motion death march and Chava's final spurning of an opportunity to himself become a participant in bloodletting. These are overdramatized, rather than photographed in a neutral documentary style which would have generated stronger revulsion.

Scenes at dinner table and twilight doorway are unduly prolonged because someone judged them charmingly cute. Cuteness and manipulation are inappropriate here, given the film's subject matter. They should have been scrupulously avoided.

However, these cavils ought not to be inflated into perceived fatal flaws, only minor imperfections pushed into the background by more notable accomplishments in other technical areas. Night conflict sequences are harrowingly recorded, if sometimes annoyingly underlit. Juan Ruiz Anchia's camera tracking is often absolutely stunning in impact.

Nor can acting of any juvenile or adult cast members be faulted. At the center of an ensemble contributing uniformly praiseworthy support, Carlos Padilla's Chava emerges in a classic characterization skillfully combining mischief, romanticism, resourcefulness, and agony with dashes of foolhardiness. Each of these traits gets memorably imprinted in audience memory by ten-year-old Padilla in his first leading film role.

Kella's obdurate unwillingness to lose either home or offspring hides profound love for three offshoots of her suspended marriage. This contradiction is realized beautifully by Leonor Varela, quite an impressive feat considering she herself had no children at the time this movie was made and therefore no personal experience of maternal behaviors.

Indeed, it is mainly acting, music, and sound recording which elevate INNOCENT VOICES to a respectable level of creative artistry.

Chava's song-and-dance routine, created for the benefit of a radiantly appreciative Christina Maria, is an especially felicitous union of CRIA CUERVOS-style childish extemporaneous choreography and peppy melody. Incorporating numerous Mexican pop tunes does no harm to the picture, since its putative village is in El Salvador's "Mexican" community.

Recording and mixing dialogue with sound effects for this film was no easy assignment. A plethora of contrasting juvenile and adult voices alone guaranteed a difficult sound department task ahead. In addition, a generally somber orchestral score, intermittent exuberant Latin American songs, and faithful reproductions of noises ranging from whispers to explosions had to be integrated into a cohesive and intelligible soundtrack.

Nothing persists in memory from undistinguished conversations and conventionally bellicose oratory. The screenplay is adequately functional and no more.

Editing resulted in rhythmic unevenness, with some sluggish passages plainly in need of acceleration.

While production design is top-notch with regard to sets and makeup, it lacks adequate visible detail relative to props and costume textures.

Winner of Mexico's Ariel Awards for Best Makeup, Best Supporting Actress (Ofelia Medina as Mama Toya), and Best Special Effects, VOCES INOCENTES didn't get richly merited recognition for cinematography or amazingly overlooked lead players. However, it did pick up Audience Awards at numerous international film festivals and was selected as Mexico's official submission for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar® in 2005. At the same year's Berlinale International Film Festival in Germany, it earned a Crystal Bear as Best Film in the 14 plus age category.

Graphic violence and vulgar language earned the film an R rating from the Motion Picture Association of America. It contains far too much carnage for viewers under the age of twenty-one to watch comfortably or instructively.

Two DVD bonus features include a thirty-minute subtitled documentary focused on how the film was produced. It's equal parts entertaining and enlightening. There's also a two-minute trailer expertly capturing the essence of its contents.

This drama is very highly recommended for adult viewing in spite of the above specified reservations about aesthetic and political weaknesses.