



Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478
Friday October 13th 2017
Neruda (Cert 15)

dir: **Pablo Larraín**

Starring: **Luis Gnecco, Gael García Bernal**

Sponsors: **Paul and Helen Hancock**

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Synopsis: Chule 1948. Pablo Neruda, poet and communist party senator is forced to go into hiding when President Gonzales Videla, keen to align himself with the US's anti-Soviet stance, outlaws the communist party. On the run with his Argentinian wife Delia del Carril, Neruda is pursued by tenacious detective Oscar Peluchoneau - in fact a figment of his imagination. The government tries to discredit Neruda, bringing his ex-wife Maria Hagenaar to Santiago to denounce him as a bigamist and traitor, but the plan backfires. Hidden in a series of safe houses outside Santiago, Neruda completes his epic collection 'Canto General'. Making his way into Argentina through the Lilpela Pass, he is confronted by Peluchoneau, who perishes in the frozen Andean landscape.

Over the past decade, Pablo Larraín has made a series of films that have defiantly tackled issues of cultural memory, justice and political impunity. His trilogy about the Pinochet - years *Tony Manero* (2008), *Post Mortem* (2010 - shown by LFS in 2013) and *No* (2012 - also shown by LFS, in 2015) - explored the psychological make-up of the dictatorship, exposing the ways in which it fostered a culture of moral indifference that permitted a terrifying normalisation of violence. *The Club* (2015), while ostensibly set in the present, used the device of an outsider coming into a community of retired priests to further explore how societies close in to mask the abuses contained within them. While last year's *Jackie* may have taken Larraín out of Chile, the formal traits that make him such an electrifying filmmaker remain. The forensic focus on the widowed Jackie Kennedy was as intense as that bestowed on the murderous, disco-dancing Raúl Peralta in *Tony Manero*.

Neruda may appear to be altogether different - it is as epic as *Jackie* is intimate - but the two films have much in common. Both are about the crafting of myths that have endured into the 21st century. In *Jackie*, it is the first lady's recasting of the Kennedy presidency as a golden age of Camelot; in *Neruda*, the central figure is seen to be highly active in the forging of his reputation as national poet of the people during the brief period, post World War 2, when as an elected senator he opposed President Gabriel González Videla. It is here that Larraín begins his film, with Neruda speaking out against a president choosing to appease the US and in doing so cracking down on the communist party to which Neruda belongs.

In this respect, *Neruda* resembles *No* which similarly captured the dynamics of a pivotal moment in Chilean history. But whereas *No*, like *Jackie*, fused archival footage with newly filmed material, *Neruda*'s carnivalesque brothel sequences,



inventive shifts between location, and emphasis on ludic performativity infuse the film with a seductive artfulness. Fiction here is both the domain of political mythmaking and literary creation. Larraín has described Neruda as an 'anti-bio', and certainly there is little of the conventional biopic here. It is a playful tale, narrated by an enigmatic policeman (Gael García Bernal) who ultimately proves to be a figment of Neruda's imagination. Billy Crudup's line to Natalie Portman's Jackie Kennedy - 'this will be your version of what happened' - is equally applicable here. For this is Larraín's refraction of Chile's national poet in a hall of mirrors where history, fiction and legend collide to dizzying cinematic effect.

As with *Jackie*, reflections, cameras and windows feature conspicuously, part of a self consciously performative space where identities are forged and played out before an audience of self and/or others. In his first appearance, Luis Gnecco's smug Neruda walks through the winding corridors of power and makes his way into the senators' meeting room like a grand actor manager stepping onto the stage. He waves and salutes, glancing into one of the mirrors that line the walls, combing down his hair as he addresses the rowdy audience of fellow politicians. In a touch that evokes Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* (1974), urinals line one wall of the lavish chamber. This is life as performance, where fantasy infuses the real, and space repeatedly mutates from the literal to the invented.

The artifice on Neruda's performed identity is constantly evoked. In an early scene, he is being made up by his wife, the Argentinian painter Delia del Carril (Mercedes Morán) as he takes on the attire of Lawrence of Arabia for a fancy dress party. There he is called on to recite one of his most famous love poems, 'Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines', as partygoers who have been spinning, dancing and drinking in hedonistic delight pause to listen to a figure described by the - as yet - unidentified voiceover as "the king of love". But this king of love undergoes a makeover as the film progresses, the testing of his political conscience generating a series of radical social poems. One of these, 'The Enemies' from *Canto General*, written during the 13 month period from 1948-49 that the film covers, is used by Larraín to illustrate the cementing of Neruda's reputation as the people's poet. The process of writing from composition to

recital, is intercut with the voices of workers and prisoners layered over Neruda's, demonstrating how his verse operates as the rallying cry for those marginalised by Chile's move to the right.

One of the film's early sequences shows the defiant Neruda delivering soundbites from his legendary 'I accuse' speech of 6 January 1948, which established his opposition to the president he had earlier supported. Delia encourages him to perform with his "poet's voice" - Gnecco eerily capturing the inflexions of Neruda's distinctive vocal register - and his political persona is shown to be as constructed as his flamboyantly crafted speeches. When Neruda plots his escape to exile in Argentina, he creates an antagonist who will pursue him in a glorious cat-and-mouse chase across both a literal and metaphorical landscape.

This figure, García Bernal's policeman Oscar Pelucchoneau, appears to have stepped out of a noir novel. With his lean demeanour, slim moustache and tilted fedora, he is a contrast to the rotund, profligate Neruda. His surname evokes the Spanish for stuffed toy - *peluche* - and he is indeed a puppet of sorts, manipulated by a writer keen to fashion a worthy nemesis. He is defined by rulebooks and regulations, a lone investigator with an obsessive sense of moral purpose and an existential sense of self doubt. His face-to-face encounter with Alfredo Castro's glacial González Videla evokes the actors' relationship in *No*, but there García Bernal's ambitious advertising executive René outwitted his boss; here he acquiesces before a president who wants to see Neruda eradicated from the political scene.

The film shows, though, that Neruda's presence - spirited, roguish, sensual - cannot be easily erased. This is not to say the film idealises the wayward poet; his self-centredness, arrogance, impatience and obsessive womanising are as infuriating as his ideals are galvanising. His lavish tastes and verbose language are contrasted with the simple, direct vernacular of his bodyguard and the grassroots party members who come to warn him of the need to go into hiding. Neruda is at once the stuff of fiction - his escapes from the dogged Pelucchoneau might have been lifted from an adventure yarn - and a physical being negotiating the consequences of political allegiances with the US, which set up the wider schisms that will come into play with the devastating consequences in the Pinochet years. Tellingly, Pinochet is seen briefly in the film, a young captain overseeing the regime's brutal Pisagua detention centre,

This is Larraín's most epic feature, a symphonic work filled with larger-than-life characters - from Gnecco's effusive poet to Morán's regal Delia. But it is perhaps the fictional Pelucchoneau who proves the most beguiling. Forged from the imagination of the wayward poet, he is the illegitimate son of a former chief of police, a man who craves acceptance and respectability. He devours the detective novels that Neruda leaves out for him, but struggles to make sense of the clues the poet leaves in their pages. Pelucchoneau may be resolved not to remain a bit player in the film's escalating drama, but Neruda is always one step ahead of him, whether disguised as a priest to leave his safe house without attracting attention, or in the frozen landscapes of the Lilpela Pass as he makes his way into Argentina. It is here, a terrain as mystical and desolate as that of *The Searchers*, that the final confrontation with Pelucchoneau takes place.

Neruda is a film of ambition and verve, of bluish-purple hues, shady interiors, hazy exteriors and sombre lighting. The otherworldly characters emerge from and disappear into shadow. Government is opaque, often conducted through

propaganda - as with the political deployment of Neruda's first wife, María Hagenaar, brought to Santiago to humiliate the poet and silenced on national radio when she refuses to deliver the script prepared for her. Sergio Armstrong's camera spins, darts, swoops and dances; it is as restless as the errant poet, as meandering as Guillermo Calderón's deft screenplay, which flits deftly from road movie to chase thriller. *Neruda's* inventive contemplation of identity and branding can itself be positioned as Nerudian - at times even Borgesian - with fiction firmly overriding fact in the process of memorialisation.

Credits

Luis Gnecco	Pablo Neruda
Gael García Bernal	Police Prefect Oscar Pelucchoneau
Mercedes Morán	Delia del Carril
Emilio Gutiérrez Caba	Pablo Picasso
Diego Muñoz	Martinez
Pablo Derqui	Victor Pey
Michael Silva	Alvaro Jara
Jaime Vadell	Jorge Alessandri
Alfredo Castro	Gabriel González Videla
Marcelo Alonso	Pedro Domínguez
Francisco Reyes	Bianchi
Alejandro Goic	Jorge Bellet
Heidrun Breier	María Hagenaar
Director	Pablo Larraín
Written by	Guillermo Calderón
Director of Photography	Sergio Armstrong
Editor	Hervé Schneid
Art Director	Estefanía Larraín
Original Music	Federico Jusid
Sound Design	Miguel Hormazabal
Costume	Muriel Parra
	Chile/France/Argentina/ Spain/USA 2016. 107 mins

Our next film - Friday October 20th Dans la Cour (France 2014. Cert 15)

Antoine (Gustave Kervern) is too depressed to go on playing in his rock band. After wandering in the streets, he decides to seek an occupation. Though unskilled, he is lucky to be hired as the caretaker of an old Paris apartment building. He soon proves good at his job, even if he performs it a little eccentrically, and everybody grows fond of him. Antoine also develops a particular friendship with Mathilde (Catherine Deneuve) a recently retired woman who lives in the block and whose mental balance is deteriorating.

Dans la Cour is one of those French films that can make serious points as it makes you smile, while Deneuve and Kervern are exceptional as two lonely souls finding solace in each other's company during the twilight years of their lives.

Annual General Meeting

The Society's Annual General Meeting will take place after the film next week. All members are welcome and encouraged to attend. The meeting is not expected to take more than one hour.