

Viva Zapata-1952: Heroic action by one of the legends of the Mexican revolution.

I recall seeing this one while still at school in 1954; I was much impressed by the battle scenes, the struggles of the Mexican peasants and, of course, the assassination of Zapata (Marlon Brando) at the hands of his betrayers (that's common knowledge and no spoiler for this narrative).

Seeing it again recently, those impressions still remain and are now reinforced with this repeat viewing so long after. Now, in addition, I can appreciate the fine script by John Steinbeck, the capable direction by Elia Kazan, the simple but so effective black and white cinematography and the quality of the overall production under the ever-watchful eye, no doubt, of Darryl F. Zanuck.

This is a film worthy to be called a classic: an epic story of the struggle for democracy during the turbulent times of the early 20th century and is, arguably, a depiction of the first great proletarian uprising of modernity which, as some would say, began in 1910.

Sensibly, the production team chose to portray a very human story about a visionary but simple man who was thrust into open rebellion to help his people achieve democracy. The fact that Zapata failed in his cause before he died is neither here nor there, because this is the story about the struggle and not the end.

As Zapata, Brando is nigh on perfect, even down to the large droopy mustache, wide sombrero and dark eyes (look up photos of Zapata on the web); Anthony Quinn as Zapata's brother, Eufemio, is mercurial, boastful, resourceful, arrogant and deadly; the lovely Jean Peters acquits her part of Josepha competently, looking radiant in white a lot of the time; and Joseph Wiseman as Acuirre provides the quintessential turncoat character, developing it into something almost Shakespearean.

Take particular note of the one-liners and sparkling repartee, most of which I'd missed or had forgotten after I first saw this film. The long scene when Zapata comes courting to the parents of Josepha is a sheer delight; the first meeting of Zapata and Acuirre is riveting –and funny; and, watch Acuirre's face, much later, when he prevents a messenger from delivering an urgent letter – because Zapata "is busy" disposing of a traitor who was once a close friend.

Add to all that the madcap innocence, even naiveté, of President Madero (Harold Gordon), the affable and unctuous Pancho Villa (Alan Reed) and the slimy and slippery general Huerta (Frank Silvera), and you have a film and story that begs to be seen and appreciated.

Highly recommended for all. Rating: 8

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