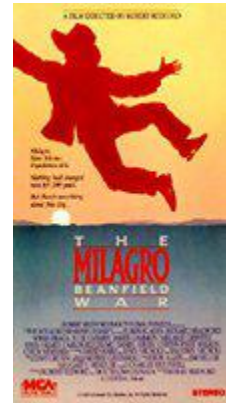


The Milagro Beanfield War

Reviewer: Mark Cabaj

I rarely see a movie more than once and I rarely buy them. Yet, I own a copy of the Milagro Beanfield War and I watched it the other night for the sixth time. If I ever get to design a course on 'community development through movies' - and I keep threatening that I will - this movie is going to have an important place on the curriculum.



The movie is directed by Robert Redford and is about Milagro - a small, generations-old sleepy Chicano town in the southwestern U.S.A. The community is a shadow of its former self, as many residents, unable to survive on scrabble plot farming, make their way to work as labourers in California's industrial agricultural fields. The remaining residents, who are, for the most part, seniors, struggle to make ends meet and do the best they can.

The community comes alive when the remaining local leaders realize that the town is threatened by a large-scale recreational development that will lead to such large increases in their taxes that most residents will need to leave for more affordable pastures.

I am not a movie critic so I won't comment on the acting or the film's cinematic technique, but I wanted to describe the three reasons I like it so much.

First, Milagro reminds us that while the decline of a community is often rooted in its failure to adapt to 'economic progress', its potential recovery is often prevented by people and organizations who - because they stand to gain economically and politically - conveniently and deliberately ignore, and, in some cases, actively resist, the best interests of a community standing in their way. I work in a world in which it is sometimes awkward to acknowledge this and I occasionally need a reminder like Milagro.

Second, the movie does a great job of showing how a community mobilizes to take care of itself. For instance: a seemingly small event - in this case a part time farmer using a little water to irrigate a small bean field - wakes people up to the fact that something in their community is not right. The tensions and fractures in the community are exposed as its citizens struggle to understand some of the real

reasons of its marginalization. The dramatic sacrifices that are often required to rally the community and to organize to save itself are also well documented. This movie could well be based on an unwritten novel by Paulo Freire - the great Brazilian community activist.

Finally, the movie superbly captures the spirit of rural small town life, at least as I experienced it growing up in the ethnically diverse town of St. Paul, Alberta.

Milagro is a community in which people's personalities are shaped more by their relationships than by their job or profession. A place in which the web of relationships is so thick that even the most annoying people are accepted and included simply because it is understood that everyone's destinies and humanity are so completely intertwined. And - most of all - how people relate: the quiet scenes of the graduate student from New York University and the 'oldest man in Milagro' spending time together is, for me, the sweetest two minutes of film because it is about two very different people enjoying each other's company. I have yet to make it through that section of the movie without a lump in my throat and moist eyes.

I am the Godfather for the grandson of a well-known CBC entertainment critic who recently dumbfounded me with his assessment that Milagro is not one of Robert Redford's 'better pieces of work'. Perhaps he has not read Paulo Freire.

Again, again and again - that is how many times I will watch the Milagro Beanfield War.

[More on the movie...](#)