

Emilio Estevez's *The Public*: The homeless refuse to freeze to death

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Emilio Estevez

The Public is preoccupied with the problem of homelessness in America. Written and directed by veteran actor and director Emilio Estevez (*Bobby*, 2006), the movie is thoughtful and heartfelt.

Libraries are community and cultural resources and, according to Estevez, should be a sanctuary and safe haven for the homeless.

According to the American Library Association, libraries promote “equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America ... Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies.”

It is this sentiment that informs Estevez's movie.

In *The Public*, set in Cincinnati, every morning the public library opens its doors to a waiting group of homeless men and women who avail themselves of computers and books, even performing their ablutions in the library's bathrooms. The giant posters of Frederick Douglass and Percy Shelley adorning its walls are a reminder of the great literary and historical battlers of the past.

Estevez plays Stuart Goodson, the chief librarian destined to lose his job because of his empathy for the library's homeless patrons. His co-worker Myra (Jena Malone) is sweet, but more concerned about the environment than she is about these human outcasts.

During a frigid cold front, Cincinnati's emergency shelters are filled to capacity and several homeless people die in the streets. On a particularly bitter night, some 100 homeless people refuse to leave the library at closing time, barricading themselves on the third floor. At first resistant, Stuart eventually joins the occupation.

Police set up a “war room” in the library, manned by their expert negotiator, Detective Ramstead (Alec Baldwin), whose drug-addicted son has gone missing and is undoubtedly homeless himself. A crude and careerist public prosecutor (Christian Slater) wants to take a “law and order” hard line, while the library administrator (Jeffrey Wright) works to avoid a confrontation.

The media joins the fray, with a reporter (Gabrielle Union) on hand to lie about and distort the situation and blackguard Stuart and the occupiers, who are led by the sly and sharp Jackson (Michael K. Williams). When the SWAT team arrives, the protesters find a provocative, innovative way to forestall police violence and a potential bloodbath.

Somewhat light-hearted in its tone, *The Public* is clearly a labor of love for its extraordinary cast. But while Estevez offers a rational outcome to the crisis in his movie, how such situations actually end in America is generally not so pleasant. Estevez hints at this in his portrayal of the politicians and police who want to resolve the homeless occupation by arrests, guns and cracking skulls. The director also makes a pointed comment about the role of the media, which has no compunction about inventing a narrative for its own various dirty purposes, whatever the human cost.

Meanwhile, as Estevez's movie shows, it is ordinary people who are the true allies of the homeless.

In a *Hollywood Reporter* interview about *The Public*, Estevez explained that he saw an article in 2007 in the *Los Angeles Times* about “how libraries have become de facto homeless shelters and how librarians were no longer doing the work of librarians. These guys were now first responders, and that's gone to a whole other level just in the last 10 years. Librarians are now trained to carry Narcan [a medication used to

counteract the effects of opioids] because there are so many overdoses in urban libraries.”

Indeed, the opioid crisis has become so desperate for librarians that in October 2018, Emergent BioSolutions, which had recently completed its acquisition of Narcan maker Adapt Pharma, announced—according to *Time* magazine—that it would “provide a free kit including two doses of the nasal spray, as well as educational materials, to each of the 16,568 public libraries and 2,700 YMCAs in the U.S.”

The Illinois Library Association, in July 2018, posted an article, “How the Opiate Epidemic Came to the Library,” which noted that the epidemic was “not an issue libraries can ignore. Across the country, from New York to Denver to San Francisco and in hundreds of small towns, libraries are sites of overdoses. ... In April 2016, a man died from a heroin overdose in an Oak Park Public Library restroom. At Decatur Public Library, a library staff member administered NARCAN® until emergency services responded to an overdose at the library.”

In the *Hollywood Reporter* interview, Estevez continued: “Sadly, it’s more relevant now than when I started on this in 2007. The homelessness crisis has been with us for some time, but it does seem that there are more people falling through the cracks. It’s an issue that is especially pressing with the new tax cuts and with Social Security and Medicare on the chopping block.”

During the 2018 Toronto film festival’s question-and-answer session, several of *The Public*’s cast members spoke convincingly about their commitment to exposing the ever-growing problem of homelessness. Estevez credited his father, actor Martin Sheen, as his inspiration for the new film. Sheen has been arrested some 68 times for protesting against homelessness, nuclear proliferation and other social ills.

Estevez: “The core issue is homelessness. Close to 1 billion people—15 percent of the world’s population live in slums. Five hundred fifty thousand Americans and 230,000 Canadians have been homeless at some point this year.”

Christian Slater talked about the veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder, adding, “If we can bail out Wall Street, we can deal with the homeless.” Alec Baldwin noted that “homelessness is really back in

New York City ... One missed rent payment and you’re out on the streets.”

Michael K. Williams added: “Drug addiction, mental issues, joblessness, working homeless. How did people get there? I was becoming desensitized to people laying on concrete on the street.”

Tellingly, however, Estevez explained that the film’s ending was going to be darker under George W. Bush, but as *The Public* was finished under the Obama administration, its ending became more hopeful. This left-liberal perspective no doubt accounts for some of the film’s softened focus.

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