

A Better Life

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue

When the Italian director Vittorio De Sica helped craft the postwar cinematic movement known as neorealism, he was intent on finding lead actors who lacked any acting experience. He believed they were less likely to conjure up false emotions in such highly emotional films as *Shoeshine* and *Umberto D.* If you didn't know that the lead actor in *A Better Life*, Demián Bichir, was a star in Mexico, you might assume that director Chris Weitz and screenwriter Eric Eason were scrupulously following De Sica's blueprint, right down to trawling the corners of East L.A. in search of a tired-looking man to play Carlos Galindo, an undocumented worker who is struggling to make ends meet to help support himself and his teenage son, Luis (José Julián).

A Better Life eschews major plot twists in favor of small, realistic scenes of struggle. Carlos has been in the United States illegally for years, but all he has to show for it is a wife who has left him for greener pastures, an angry son who is being recruited by local gangs, and a low-paying gig as an assistant gardener. When he takes a leap of faith and goes into serious debt to buy his retiring boss's truck and his list of customers, Carlos sees a rare flash of light in a perpetually overcast sky. Anyone familiar with De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* can guess what happens next, as a desperate Carlos goes on a circuitous journey through L.A. in search of justice. But this journey also leads him back to his first days in the U.S., when he still had great dreams for the future.

Bichir is remarkable as Carlos, allowing myriad emotions to form on his handsome, if aged, face. Though Carlos works like a dog and has little to show for it, he knows that he no longer has the luxury of expressing his frustration, not if he wants to keep Luis from falling into the clutches of those who live and breathe anger and frustration. Some critics have complained that the goodness that emanates from Carlos is a weakness in the film, as if they're unwilling to believe that a person of principle could be caught in such a societal vise. But I believed Bichir from the first

shot of the film to the last.

His performance is so mesmerizing I even excused the occasional script foray into overly convenient plot lines: the filmmakers employ those coincidences to veer from Carlos's journey and make a larger point about the desperate things that desperate people will do to survive. A sequence at a Mexican rodeo is especially moving, as Luis, who is grudgingly helping his father in his search, comes face to face for the first time with the sort of pride that seems lost in the world of green cards and border crossings. It's a world that Carlos longs to hang onto even as he tries to make his way in the new world.