

SUNDANCE 2014

# HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

James Chressanthis, ASC on *Cesar's Last Fast*.  
by David Geffner / portrait by Nicola Goode

The image I took away from the Sundance premiere of *Cesar's Last Fast*, a documentary feature directed by Richard Ray Perez and photographed by James Chressanthis, ASC, is of a packed room of stunned and engrossed filmmakers, gently wiping away tears as workers' rights icon Cesar Chavez accepts a piece of bread from Ethel Kennedy to end a 36-day hunger strike. This moment, and many more like it in the film, comprise not only an emotional history of California's modern labor movement but a call to arms for a new generation of American workers growing up with more economic inequality than in Chavez's heyday. In his first trip to Sundance, Chressanthis says he was so moved by the quarter-century-old footage, he almost had to leave the screening. I say the tears flowing in Park City (and likely many more times during a platform release) were inspirational: as Chavez, the quiet hero, would have wanted.

**ICG: How did you get involved with shooting Chavez's 1988 hunger strike to protest the use of pesticides in California's Central Valley, and then return to the project so many years later?** James Chressanthis: Somebody told Lorena Parlee, who was the United Farm Workers' press secretary and an Oscar-nominated documentary producer, about a cinéma vérité project I was shooting at the time. She called me, out of the blue, really, as I had no ties to UFW, and I shot the middle of the fast through the very moving conclusion. She always intended to use the footage as

part of Cesar's life story. In 2005, she got back in touch with me to do some contemporary interviews, but passed away from breast cancer before we could begin.

**Oh no...** JC: Yeah, really tragic. Her parents were looking for help, and I said the film needs a young Latina or Latino filmmaker, who is truly connected to Cesar's life. As it turns out, in Lorena's possessions was a note about Richard Ray Perez, instructing her parents to have him take over the film should anything happen to



James Chressanthis, ASC photographed by Nicola Goode, Topanga, CA, February 2014



Cesar Chavez finally breaks his hunger strike at mass in 1988

her. Richard, along with producer Molly O'Brien, worked on the film for seven years, all the while struggling to finance it. He was the perfect choice.

**How did the footage you shot of the fast come to form the story's core?** Well, that footage had never been seen before. So when Richard went through everything Lorena had, he realized this last act by Cesar – of personal penance, civil protest, everything his life stood for – would be a great narrative spine.

**The fast felt so intensely personal – inside his darkened room with family members and the physician: how long did you shoot for and what was that like?** I shot over the last 16 days, and there's a cool story that preceded my arrival. I was working in Syracuse, New York, and was ticketed to return in about a week. But Lorena needed me in Delano, California in two days. So I went to the United Airlines ticket agent, who was a union member, and explained my story about needing to photograph Cesar Chavez. She disappeared for a few minutes, and then came back with a first class ticket to L.A., on the next plane!

**And the event itself?** Filming Cesar, and particularly his breaking the fast, was the most significant thing I've ever done in my career. It was so challenging, the essence of vérité moviemaking, really, to capture the emotions of the event as it unfolded, but not alter it with my presence. I remember how he broke the fast under this big tent, outdoors. It was a very hot day, and everyone was growing impatient. I had staked out the best camera position in front, and when I turned back, I saw this row of hardened journalists covering the event suddenly just go silent, obviously so moved by his presence. Cesar could not walk and had to be carried in by his two sons.

**Could you light anything or exert any visual control during the fast?** Absolutely not. He was so weak and sensitive to light. I shot on

the original version of Betacam, which was the best video you could shoot in those days. I made the decision to push the gain, which I knew was not going to be pretty. Seeing it later, I realized the grain and noise actually underscored the gravity of what was happening, and looked great.

**What was that iconic moment [Cesar breaking the fast] like from a filmmaker's perspective?** Honestly, I wasn't emotionally prepared. The pain and suffering was breathtaking, and I had to say to myself to be very present as an operator, and not blow it! I was crying, like everyone else. But I kept it together, doing a slight rack focus as Ethel Kennedy leans in with the bread as part of the action, and he whispers, "Thank you." I am very proud of the operating in that moment.

**Many years later, you helped set up [with Panavision] a large set for contemporary interviews in front of a huge photo image of Chavez.** Yes. But I was called away to a feature right before, so Byron Shah shot all of that footage, and he lit the subjects beautifully. In 2012, Richard and I went back to the Salinas Valley to film contemporary farmworkers, and the conditions were not much better than what Cesar was battling 30 years ago. We also went up to shoot the peach harvest, 50 miles above Sacramento. My operator, James Takata, and first assistant Darin Miller came, and we had a Steadicam, a Canon C300 and a Canon 5D Mark III – all available light. It was so lovely. Richard ended up using it for the ending sequence.

**What was your first experience at Sundance like?** The great thing about Sundance is they do multiple screenings, so I saw this with five different audiences. The premiere was emotionally difficult, but overall, the audience response was incredible. For the younger generation it was a revelation, for those who lived through it, it was a reminder to be ever more diligent and active. The climate for working people is much worse today than during Cesar's time. ☘