

# McFarland, USA (PG) USA 2015

17 October 2022

DIRECTOR: **Niki Caro**

Running time: 129 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Kevin Costner** (Jim White), **Ramiro Rodriguez** (Danny Diaz), **Carlos Pratts** (Thomas Valles), **Johnny Ortiz** (Jose Gardenas), **Rafael Martinez** (David Diaz), **Hector Duran** (Johnny Sameniego), **Sergio Avelar** (Victor Puentes), **Michael Aguero** (Damacio Diaz), **Diana Maria Riva** (Señora Diaz), **Omar Leyva** (Señor Diaz).

SCREENPLAY: **Christopher Cleveland, Bettina Gilois, Grant Thompson**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Adam Arkapaw**.  
EDITING: **David Coulson**. MUSIC: **Antonio Pinto**.

One of the production companies behind *McFarland* (as it came to be known in the UK, and one could write a paragraph about *that* cultural practice) is Walt Disney Pictures, which naturally carries certain expectations still, sixty years after it ceased exclusively making cartoons: wholesome family entertainment (check), an upbeat message related to American values (check), attractive and healthy-looking people (check). We also have the presence of Kevin Costner in a sports movie, when previous forays into baseball (twice), golf and football (the American kind) have turned him into a kind of John Wayne of the sporting arena.

If by this time you are reaching for your virtual airline sick bag, think again. The only commonality is the fact that this is exactly the kind of unsuspected pleasure you might encounter by forced cohabitation on a transatlantic flight!

Jim White is a principled, if somewhat testy, football coach, relieved of his post owing to some ill-advised rough handling of one of his players during a post-match postmortem. It is clearly not the first time, and he finds himself, in educational terms, with a 'one-way ticket to Palookaville', as Terry Malloy would say. In Jim's case it is *McFarland*, a small town outside Bakersfield CA. Except that his new school, where he is humbled to assistant coach, is the home not of tanned and seasoned white Californian players but the children of Mexican immigrant fruit-pickers.

'Oh, I get it', I hear you say. 'It's *The Bad News Bears* with inept Hispano football players!' Wrong again. Because Jim unknowingly takes a leaf from *McFarland*'s founder, an Ohio educator who moved west at the turn of the twentieth century to venture into real estate and ended up buying fifty acres of walnut trees. For it is in studying the extra-curricular lives of his charges that he discovers their true talent: running. To help feed their

families, they rise early to take part in the field work, then return at the end of the school day for more. Their means of transportation: shank's pony.

From this point on, Jim works with the immigrant community as opposed to outside, or above, it. His family, initially crestfallen at having to live among the urban poor, discover the true value of neighbourliness. Yes, there are setbacks; it wouldn't be a sports movie if there were not. But if I revealed that all of this actually happened, you might forgive the film's occasional recourse to formula.

*McFarland*'s strength is its young cast of unknowns, whom we get to know through their challenges and personal circumstances. And then there is the Mount Rushmore personage of Costner himself, who since graduating to paternal roles in *Molly's Game* and *Man of Steel* has forged an adept second career playing straight-as-a-die figures of conviction. Watch him and notice how little he actually does as an actor, with his face and body language. What made him seem shallow and limited as a young lead has now traduced to an advantage. Rather like his charges in the film, he has proved his worth over the long distance!

**David Clare**