Opinion
Culture



Hector, voiced by Gael Garcia Bernal, and Miguel, voiced by Anthony Gonzalez, appear the animated movie "Coco." (CNS/Disney)



by Rose Pacatte

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Miguel (Anthony Gonzalez) is very excited that the feast of the Día de los Muertos is here! There is to be a music competition in his village of Santa Cecilia in Mexico, but sadly Miguel's family does not approve of music. They stopped playing music years ago and opened a shoe factory instead. Miguel does not know why because music is the life of the village.

He looks at the *ofrenda* in his house, the table of offerings and memories that the family has set out to honor their deceased members. Miguel stares at one photo very intently. It is of his great-great-grandmother with her husband and daughter, Coco, as a little girl. The strange thing is, the father's face is missing, torn away. Miguel assumes it is his great-great-grandfather, Ernesto de la Cruz (Benjamin Bratt). He was a great musician. Miguel doesn't know why his face is not there but he wants to play music just like him, especially because there is to be a musical competition to celebrate Día de los Muertos.

Miguel's Abuelita (Renee Victor) becomes very angry when Miguel discovers a guitar that belonged to Ernesto de la Cruz. To Miguel's sorrow, she breaks it. Meanwhile his sweet *bisabuela* (great-grandmother) Mamá Coco (Ana Ofelia Murguría), rocks in her chair, seeming to be lost in her memories.

Miguel knows his family's rule against music has something to do with his great-great-grandfather. To replace the broken guitar Miguel goes to the cemetery and takes the one from the mausoleum where de la Cruz rests.

All of a sudden Miguel is swept away on a journey and crosses over to another reality. He meets the skeletons of his ancestors as he tries to find de la Cruz, who is about to give a concert of his own. Miguel learns that if your loved ones are not remembered after a certain amount of time, their memory will be lost forever. He also learns that there's way more to the story about his grandfather's missing image in the photograph on the *ofrenda*.

I interviewed Coco's director Lee Unkrich and producer Darla Anderson a few days ago by phone. Unkrich explained that it has taken six years for "Coco" to come to the screen and that he made it because he was "fascinated by the iconography of El Dia de Los Muertos, the odd juxtaposition of skeletons and bright colors and festivity. I wanted to learn more about the traditions and explore how family-centric the feast is to the Mexican people and the beauty of Mexico."

Trailer for Disney/Pixar's "Coco"

Anderson said that Disney/Pixar wanted to tell a story that everyone can relate to and learn from, one that would show reverence with humor, and how we can love our families and honor our elders.

The most memorable song in the film "Remember Me" is by Bobby Lopez. I think it is sure to garner some awards; it is a special love song that played in my head for days after I saw the film. As with "Frozen," "Coco" demonstrates that there is more to love than romance.

In keeping with Mexico's dominant culture, Catholic icons can be found throughout. I asked Unkrich if he and co-writer/director Adrian Molina realized that St. Cecilia is the patron saint of music when they began the project. Surprisingly, he said that none of them realized this but discovered it along the way. This must be what artistic inspiration looks like.

Over at America Gina Franco and Christopher Poore authored a beautiful essay in time for All Souls' Day this year, "Day of the Dead is not 'Mexican Halloween' — it's a day where death is reclaimed." They write that they are looking forward to seeing "Coco" and offer a beautiful reflection on the theology that underpins the traditions of El Día de los Muertos. In addition to tradition and identity, it is where Franco sees brightly colored skulls, not as something scary, but as "a metonym for the soul."

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The beauty of "Coco" is stunning. While keeping track of the four generations of Miguel's family may strain your inner genealogist, I suggest just going with the story and consider what immediate life after death might look like, as the filmmakers say they tried to imagine. I particularly enjoyed seeing a room in that "after death place" to resolve family grievances.

Maybe it really is never too late to forgive and celebrate life.

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