

The Civil Rights Film “Selma”: A Phenomenon in the Midst of a Resurgent Movement

Paramount film ranks second during weekend of premiere

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Selma was distributed to a mainstream audience on January 9. The film has already been viewed by millions across the United States and the world.

During the Jan. 9-11 period of its opening, the Associated Press reported that “civil rights drama “Selma” moved from 22 to 2,179 theaters, arriving in second place at the weekend box office with \$11.2 million. The film chronicles the historic 54-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and stars David Oyelowo as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.” (Jan. 11)

The film has generated a tremendous degree of interests in both mainstream and social media. Interviews with the actors, director and the actual historical figures such as Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson and Andrew Young have generated broader publicity outside the official industry sources.

Directed by Ava DuVernay, with talk show host and network owner, Oprah Winfrey, serving as the producer as well as playing a supporting role depicting Annie Lee Cooper, this is the first feature film made for movie theaters that attempts to depict a key chapter in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. A made-for-television mini-series was done in 1978 featuring Paul Winfield as Rev. Dr. King and Cecily Tyson as Coretta Scott King.

Despite the success during the opening days of the film showings, the Golden Globe held on Jan. 11, awarded the movie only one of the four categories nominated. Songwriter and producer John Legend along with spoken-word artist and actor Common were given the top price for the Best Original Song, entitled Glory, the main selection of the soundtrack.

Nonetheless, DuVernay remained optimistic going into the Golden Globe Awards ceremonies. She wrote over twitter on Jan. 11 that “We’ve already won. We made a film we believe in, and now it’s out in theaters and moving in the world!”

John Legend said of his experience in working on the soundtrack for Selma,

“I was brought on at the last minute but I’m so honored to be part of this amazing film that honors such amazing people that did great work and is so connected to what’s happening right now. We still are in solidarity with those who are out there fighting for justice right now. We’re so grateful to write this song, hopefully as an inspiration to them.”

Controversy Over Historical Accuracy

Some of the most widely publicized disagreements over the film's accuracy surround the role of the-then President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a former Senator from Texas and Vice-President under John F. Kennedy. The film suggests that Johnson, played by Tom Wilkinson, categorically opposed the Selma campaign and the introduction of Voting Rights legislation in 1965.

One of Johnson's top advisers on domestic affairs, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., objected so strongly to the film's portrayal of the president that he wrote an opinion piece that was published in the Washington Post on Dec. 26. Califano went as far as to suggest that the Selma Campaign was LBJ's idea.

He asserted that "the film falsely portrays President Lyndon B. Johnson as being at odds with Martin Luther King Jr. and even using the FBI to discredit him, as only reluctantly behind the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and as opposed to the Selma march itself. In fact, Selma was LBJ's idea, he considered the Voting Rights Act his greatest legislative achievement, he viewed King as an essential partner in getting it enacted — and he didn't use the FBI to disparage him."

What is striking about the Califano editorial is that it is full of historical inaccuracies itself. The piece gives wrong dates that contradict the facts of the period and the chronological order of events that have been well documented by participants and historians over the subsequent decades.

Andrew Young, a former aide to King and leading member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), said during several interviews that the actual situation was quite different but he was not offended by this aspect of the film. Young rejected outright the notion that the Selma Campaign that brought SCLC to Dallas County in Jan. 1965 was Johnson's idea.

Young said that Johnson did not believe Voting Rights legislation could make it through the U.S. Congress only months after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which was signed into law by him in July of that year.

Young noted that he had traveled with King to Norway when the Civil Rights leader was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Dec. 1964. After the delegation returned to the U.S., they stopped over in New York City for a reception and celebration. (Interview with Roland Martin, Jan. 5)

Later the group went to Washington, D.C. for a meeting with the Justice Department and it was only then that Johnson invited them to the White House one evening. However, the crisis created through the arrests, beatings in Selma during Jan. and Feb., followed by the police shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson in neighboring Marion, Alabama on the night of Feb. 18 prompted activists to organize a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery.

Of course the first attempt resulted in the Alabama state police and local law-enforcement vicious attacks using clubs, cattle prods and teargas on 600 demonstrators at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Sunday March 7, known as "Bloody Sunday." The beating of the demonstrators prompted a national mobilization in cities throughout the country, many of whom traveled to Selma two days later for yet another confrontation with authorities.

Amid legal challenges over an injunction not to march to Montgomery on March 9, King and

SCLC decided to turn 2,000 demonstrators around heading back to Brown Chapel A.M.E.

Church, the center of the Selma Campaign. This move caused confusion and debate within the movement, as some felt they should have refused to disperse again which could have sparked another beating by the police just two days later.

A favorable federal court ruling several days later saying that there was a constitutional right to march paved the way for Johnson to nationalize the Alabama National Guard which provided protection for demonstrators to initiate and complete the final march during March 21-25, 1965. Nevertheless, on March 9, Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from Boston, who traveled to support the Selma Campaign based on a national appeal, was severely beaten by white racists in Selma and died of his injuries the following day.

Later, on the day the Selma to Montgomery March concluded, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, portrayed in the film by Tara Ochs, who was a volunteer activist from Detroit, was murdered in her vehicle while transporting demonstrators through Lowndes County. It was later revealed that she was killed due to a conspiracy by the Ku Klux Klan.

It was during this period that Johnson came out in favor of new legislation that worked its way through Congress over the next five months.

Although it has historical inaccuracies and other problems, many feel that the film can play a progressive role in light of the resurgence of the anti-racist struggle since July-Aug. that has manifested through rebellions and mass demonstrations in response to the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in Staten Island and Tamir Rice in Cleveland.

The fact that these tremendous events unfolded five decades ago illustrates how far the struggle against national oppression has to go in this country. At the same time the developments over the last five months reveals the capacity of African Americans and their allies to create new methods of agitation aimed at the state and the corporate structures of the racist capitalist system.

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