

Research paper on 'amistad'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

HBO and Dreamworks' socially and morally charged movie, Amistad is produced by Debbie Allen, Steven Spielberg and Colin Wilson, directed by Steven Spielberg and was written by David Franzoni. It stars Morgan Freeman, Anthony Hopkins, Djunon Hounsou, Matthew McConaughey, Nigel Hawthorne, Stellan Skarsgard, Harry Blackmun and Anna Paquin. It was released late 1997 and did not do outstandingly well in the box office (Amistad Film) although the movie is making waves through home video distributions. This is highly due to the fact that the movie's theme and storyline is so historically, educationally and socio-politically charged that it is recommended to many educational institution nationwide as a multi-media supplement to curriculum.

Synopsis

The story revolves around the events that befell the passengers and crew of La Amistad, a two-masted American schooner that was owned by a Spaniard. On July 1839, Sengbe Pieh (also known later in America as Joseph Cinque) led the slaves being transported in La Amistad against their captors. All of these Africans were kidnapped from their homeland and was supposed to be sold as slaves. Two crew members were kept alive to navigate the ship back to Africa, however, they tricked Cinque and his people and brought the ship to the US coast where it was caught by the US Navy and all were imprisoned for their violent deeds on the La Amistad (Harvey). A widely-publicized court case would then ensue, dredged in politics and emotions, regarding the situation of these so-called slaves. The Amistad legal battle would then go as high as the US Supreme Court given its national and international value, but in 1841 it was ruled that the Africans were illegally transported and

kidnapped and therefore cannot be called slaves but as individuals who are fighting their rights for freedom against oppressors and were ordered to be freed. (Ham)

Analysis

Amistad can be credited for being one of the few movies that dealt with a pre-civil war event on slavery. It also delves into the same era's notion of slavery in America but there is a twist. This is not about American slaves but of men who almost became American slaves through no fault of their own. In the process, it manages to present the issues of racism, human rights and moral awareness, set in a time where slavery was allowed to a certain degree. This is probably one of the very few, and latest movie that delve on this topic using a historical event. The one other movie that uses this approach is "Glory" directed by Edward Zwick, which alludes to the same issue of racism and bigotry of Amistad although it's subject is the civil war and its effect on the characters. (Chapman)

Historical movies are defined as movies depicting a real past event with a historical degree of accuracy allowed and limited by available actual historical reference. (Best Historical Movies). But it is also true that while the movie Amistad is based on the historical account of the La Amistad mutiny and the rifts it created internationally, it has made a number of changes to the screenplay wherein many scholars have shown disappointment over its historical portrayal of facts. With this in mind, you start to wonder at the amount of leniency in portraying historical details in the movie Amistad. If it is truly a movie based on the actual account of the mutiny of Amistad and the effects it had on the times, how much of the movie followed the true

account? Should a movie that has taken so much liberty in portraying a historical event, be given importance and credit such as it is presently being given now in the study of slavery, abolitionists and historical accounts of the actual incident?

Points of Contention

Spielberg's *Amistad* portrayed how much the La Amistad case affected the blossoming conflicts of the abolitionists and slave owners in the US at that time, even referring to the possibility of civil war when in fact it would happen two decades afterwards. It should be clarified though that what the events of La Amistad historically affected is the movement to eliminate the international slave trade route and not the abolition of slavery in America. In the movie, Cinque tells the horrors of his kidnapping and the trade route's Middle Passage, which is a true area in the Atlantic Slave Trade where slaves, and slaves-to-be suffer at the hands of kidnapers and slave dealers. Do notice that even at that point in the story, nothing is mentioned of the injustices done to the domestic slaves, and yet the movie is connected to the abolition of slavery in the history of America. (Historical Accuracy, 3)

Amistad took too many liberties in its screenplay to be considered as a main source of historical education with regards to slavery and its abolition in America. The introduction of it being an educational tool through a study guide that is being distributed to a number of schools in the country have led to students "believing" the actuality of Theodore Joadson (played by Morgan Freeman), one of the characters in the story; when in fact he is just a fictitious character that's inserted into the screenplay to "augment" the movie's plot value. As a matter of fact, Theodore Joadson is the

representation of the black man fighting for the black man and against bigotry. Clarification of this fact should be made clear to students before they watch Amistad if they truly intend to use it as an educational tool.

Historians and educators are not given the proper credit in the creation of this film and they are even slightly reproached for not including the details of the La Amistad in school curriculum for awareness of slavery and as historical account for slavery abolition in the US. Meanwhile these scholars are offended and reprimand the movie for its use in some educational levels as historical source when there are a number of historical incongruities in the movie's storyline. (Foner) This situation adds doubt regarding to the use of Amistad in educational and historical aspects.

I don't agree with these scholars saying that it would have been better if books were printed with the money used to produce the film, which amounted to a whopping \$75 million (Foner, 74); since film has its advantages over printed literature and they are two different mediums. But I do agree with them that this movie should not be used in American schools as a visual aid to show historical fact for the incidents concerning La Amistad, nor should it be used as an introduction to abolition of slavery in the US. Though it can be an educational tool for moral awareness, human rights, film appreciation and critique, racism, or at the very least present the effect the La Amistad incident had on the elimination of the international slave trade route at that time. But to use the movie as historical gospel to the actual incident and the series of events that were brought about by the La Amistad murders is as bad as people believing that the Blair Witch is real just because of the movie "The Blair Witch Project" (Mythology).

Allow me to point out that the producer and director are not historians but they have done their jobs wonderfully. They managed to show their version of history on screen for the right reasons and with proper application of their medium's tools such as cinematography, costumes, acting, direction and cinematic representation. One of the highlights of the movie is the use of original language from the actual incident, Mende a West African language, and presenting it in scenes that need no translation, since not all audiences appreciate subtitles. The portrayal of the actors in the first scene is enough that no translations is needed for the audience to be captivated purely by the visual and auditory aspects and not of dialogue; a truly genius move by Spielberg because it allowed the audience to partake of the scene through empathy and nuances. This is something that is hardly used in movies today and is truly highly commendable (Leong), but historically speaking that movie is still bound by that same directorial interpretation which should credit the movie as a cinematic rendition and interpretation of the La Amistad affair and should not be used as for presenting historical facts.

Conclusion

Once again, Hollywood is guilty of presenting entertainment over information via this Spielberg movie. All the actors presented sterling performances, the camera work is very prolific, the plot smooth and easily understood and the movie's message manages to reach the emotions and hearts of its audience. This is indeed a signature among all Spielberg historical and even fictional works such as Schindler's List, The Color Purple and A. I (Steven Spielberg) The movie, Amistad the movie, can also boast as that it is one of the most singular movies that are recommended by many educational, socio-political

and historical groups and organizations with regards to civil rights, bigotry, racism, social and moral awareness in an international scope. But the fact that it is regarded for its historical value is quite problematic. There are just too many changes made from actual historical data made in the movie for it to be a proper curriculum supplementary material. And though it remains one of the foremost films that deal with slavery with magnificent film approaches and acting skills, it must be credited for what it is: a mind-opening, social awareness cinematic great that placed more attention on entertainment than factual information to reach as many people, races and countries as possible. That alone is quite a feat for any film and that is highly commendable and praiseworthy. It has proven very effective in this goal and should not be praised for or given historical credit more than it its due.