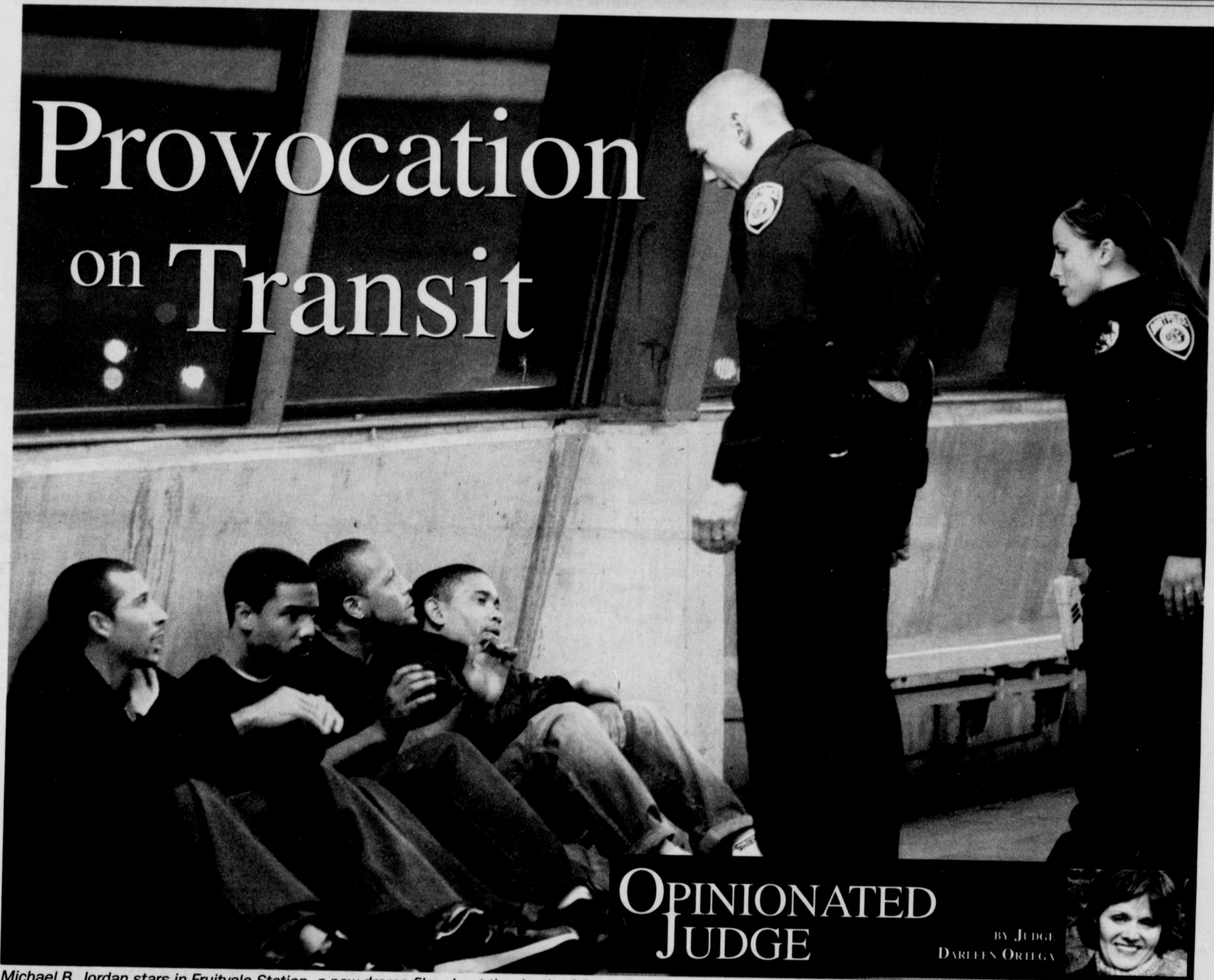


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# Provocation on Transit



OPINIONATED  
JUDGE

BY JUDGE  
DARLEEN ORTEGA



Michael B. Jordan stars in *Fruitvale Station*, a new drama film about the death of Oscar Grant who was killed in 2009 by transit police in Oakland, Calif.

## Film strikes a chord in African-American experience

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

In the wee hours of New Year's Day, 2009, an unarmed 22-year-old man lying face down on a subway platform in Oakland, Calif. was shot in the back by a transit police officer. Oscar Grant -- "Osc" to his friends -- died a few hours later, leaving behind a four-year-old daughter, a long-time girlfriend, and a family who loved him.

"Fruitvale Station," which opens in the Portland area on Friday, begins with grainy footage of the shooting captured by one of the many passengers who witnessed it and recorded it on their cell phones.

Although it's hard to make out exactly what is happening (and that is a matter of volatile debate), it is clear that several black men are being detained by white transit officers, and one in particular is being treated so roughly that the others are protesting. And then the shot.

The film, which has already won major awards at the Sundance and Cannes Film Festivals, arrives at an opportune time. Its story strikes chords that resonate with the national debate over the recent acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin -- but not because it analyzes or makes sense of events that feel all too familiar to many of us. First-time writer director Ryan Coogler, an African-American Bay-Area native who is now about the same age Grant would have been had he lived, does not set out to make a documentary or write an op-ed.

What he does instead is, in a sense, more unusual: He takes much of what is known about Grant and gives us a necessarily fictionalized but arguably more deeply true portrait of his last day. In this retelling, Grant is not just a statistic. He is not a hero, or a symbol, or a thug who brought tragedy on himself. He is a complex person with hopes and loves,

good intentions and yet real reason to doubt if he would live into them.

He has served time for dealing drugs and has been lying to his girlfriend Sophina and his mother about having lost his job, yet he is devoted to his daughter and still aims to please his mom. And there is real connectedness with Sophina that might yet have stood the test of time.

It doesn't really matter if all these details were really true of Oscar Grant. What Coogler succeeds in doing is to make you see a real person who, whatever his failings, did not deserve to die that night.

His portrait is a marvel of specificity, an insider's lived-in look at life for many African-Americans. We see his youthfulness, a mixture of good-heartedness and impetuosity, his tenderness and bravado. We also see that the world he lives in is treacherous.

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