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Chiwetel Ejiofor stars as Solomon Northup in the new film '12 Years a Slave.'

PHOTO COURTESY FOX/SEARCHLIGHT

'12 years a Slave'

Focused and realistic film enriches a neglected truth

It's hard to imagine a film that the world needs more profoundly than "12 Years a Slave."

For the first time -- 150 years after the abolition of American slavery -- a major motion picture devotes focused and realistic attention to an American slave narrative, without mitigating the story with a white hero or cheapening it with overly easy, dramatic resolutions of the

problems served up by that story. It's the most important film to be released this year and a master class in how film can enrich and deepen understanding of a neglected subject.

The film is based on an actual memoir that was briefly a bestseller after its original publication in 1853 before fading into obscurity. In that memoir, Solomon Northup (who was born free and lived

with his wife and two children in upstate New York), describes the circumstances under which he was kidnapped and held in slavery in Louisiana for 12 years.

The memoir was published around the same time as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" -- but, chances are, you've never heard of it, though you've likely heard of the more sentimental and far less insightful "Uncle Tom." We Americans seem to have little appetite for Northup's type of truth-telling.

The film's British director Steve McQueen (who is of West Indian descent) has said that he is attracted to neglected stories that have not managed

to find the audience they deserve. That description certainly fits Northup's story.

An educated African-American who came to slavery only after having lived to adulthood as a free man, Northup apparently brought a quality of consciousness to his experiences that enabled him to narrate slavery's effects on his humanity with remarkable insight.

Helped by an insightful screenplay, McQueen's unsparing direction, and an intense performance by Chiwetel Ejiofor, the movie depicts not only slavery's physical brutality, but also its psychological

continued ▼ on page 18