

Riveting and Inspiring

continued ▲ from front

challenges of telling stories of the Civil Rights Movement include that the work is not finished, but we want to believe that it is. Fifty years after the events depicted in this film, there have not been biopics of black leaders of the movement, and most of the film treatments of the subject have been told from the perspective of white characters. Even non-film celebrations of Dr. King's legacy tend to focus on him to the exclusion of other leaders and to celebrate his oratory divorced from the context of his words.

But social justice movements are not born of single heroes. They always depend on the actions of scores of brave individuals—real people who alternate between fear and courage, between clarity and confusion—who take courageous action with no hope of recognition and no assurance of success. Leaders work among other leaders, and they make mistakes too. They may neglect their families, or minimize the contributions of marginalized members of their own group. Yet those same leaders also have mo-

on Bloody Sunday), DuVernay evokes the experiences of scores of individual citizens who sacrificed their bodies and sometimes their lives, all without recognition or reward. She helps you recognize the fear and trauma that these people, their ancestors, and their descendants carry in their bodies. This is their story.

Though the film is not strictly about Dr. King, it depicts him, too, as a flesh-and-blood man gifted with uncommon courage and anointed with the power to inspire, but also as a man whose burdens were too heavy, who was too often away from his family, and who sometimes failed those close to him. The film helps you recognize how remarkable it was for any man, and particularly one so young, to shoulder the weight of responsibility that Dr. King carried, and the burden of that anointing. And by opening with his Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and moving directly into scenes of life-and-death struggle in Alabama that occurred in the three months that followed, the film captures how the life of a great leader is likely to be filled with moments of applause and

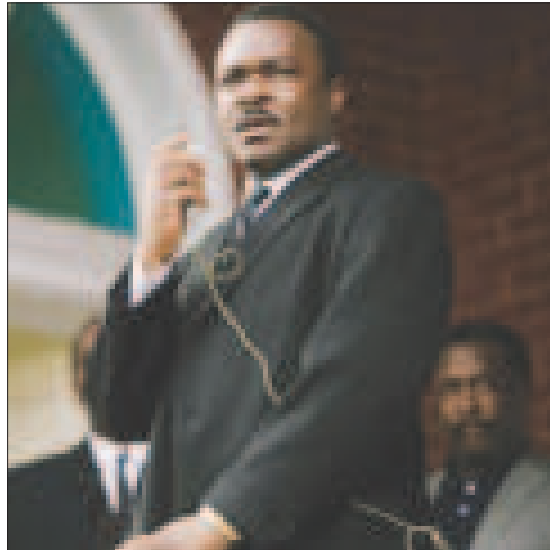


PHOTO COURTESY PARAMOUNT PICTURES
David Oyelowo as Martin Luther King Jr. in 'Selma,' a riveting biopic about the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and some of the pivotal moments in civil rights history to secure equal voting rights for African Americans.

that emerged for me was that Johnson wanted legislation on voting rights, but didn't think it could be accomplished as quickly as black leaders wanted and was intent on pursuing his Great Society programs first. To suggest that Johnson was the architect of the high-risk, non-violent resistance that ended up being necessary to arouse the momentum for such legislation, especially given that the participants received no fed-

eral protection and that the racially-motivated violence against them went entirely without redress, makes no sense and is troubling in ways that Califano and others don't even appear to notice. At the very least, when a powerful person who is part of the dominant culture demands that only he gets to tell the story, how can we trust the truth of the story he tells? The truth is generally a lot messier, and getting at it al-

ways requires making space for more voices.

The voices we can hear in "Selma" have not been given nearly the airing they deserve. A historical film will always reflect some compromises borne of everything from the difficulty of capturing what was true to the challenges of getting a film made at all; the question is only what drives those compromises and how faithfully the film manages to portray what is most deeply true.

In this case, for example, DuVernay could not get rights to Dr. King's actual speeches (they are held by another studio for another project), so she sought to capture their essence in other ways. Yet in capturing Dr. King's essence, and in depicting the work and sacrifices of countless others, DuVernay and Oyelowo and so many others involved with this soulful project have managed to keep their eyes on the prize, and have captured what is true more than what is accurate. The result is a transporting vision of what progress looked like in a particular time, with some wisdom for those of us who need it to face the challenges that continue to plague us.

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PHOTO COURTESY PARAMOUNT PICTURES

A scene from the new motion picture 'Selma,' starring David Oyelowo (left) as the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., Andre Holland as Andrew Young, and Stephan James as John Lewis.

ments of clarity, and their disagreements may help them to fumble toward bold strategies that succeed despite long odds. Director DuVernay works from a place of understanding these truths, and her position of relative disadvantage as a woman of color working in the film industry can only have helped her to grasp them.


The result is a film that is uncommonly wise. Though it cannot tell all their stories, it recognizes people around Dr. King who contributed to the movement's shape and strategy (Ralph Abernathy, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, John Lewis, Amelia Boynton Robinson) or who laid down their lives or suffered serious injuries in the struggle (Lewis, Robinson, Jimmie Lee Jackson). And in depicting scenes of violence (the bombing of the Birmingham church where four schoolgirls were killed, the unprovoked and brutal violence against black protestors

peril, sometimes in the same week, and how each victory often comes with renewed struggle.


The controversy that has arisen about the film's historical accuracy reveals some things about the difficulty of telling stories like the ones depicted here. President Johnson's top domestic aide, Joseph Califano, urged people in a December Washington Post op-ed to boycott the film because it failed to give President Johnson due credit for supporting and even devising the protests in Selma which led to passage of the Voting Rights Act. For the truth, he said, people should read Califano's own reports. A number of other critics and commentators, even while admiring other aspects of the film, have fallen into line with the view that the film unfairly shorts President Johnson of credit for the strategy employed by Dr. King and other black leaders in Alabama.

I feel like I saw a different film than these critics did. The picture


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-Martin Luther King, Jr.




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