



PHOTO COURTESY FOX SEARCH LIGHT PICTURES

Armie Hammer (from left) portrays Samuel Turner, Nate Parker portrays Nat Turner and Jayson Warner Smith portrays Earl Fowler in a scene from "The Birth of a Nation," opening Friday, Oct. 7.

## Review: 'Birth of a Nation' bluntly tells tale of Nat Turner

Film opens Thursday in local theaters

BY LINDSEY BAHR  
AP FILM WRITER

"The Birth of a Nation" has had more expectations placed on it than any movie could reasonably bear.

When the film about Nat Turner and his 1831 slave rebellion premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, it was held up, unfairly or not, as everyone's great hope to save us from another year of #OscarsSoWhite. Some handful of months later, it became representative of something else when the focus shifted to the then little-known fact that its creator and star, Nate Parker, had a past that involved not only a rape allegation, but the eventual suicide of the accuser.

Neither is a fair lens through which to judge "The Birth of a Nation." Complicated people have

and will continue to make films. We'll all have to reconcile with that in our own way. #OscarsSoWhite, meanwhile, will never be solved with just one film — and certainly not by the first to screen after another year of homogenous nominees.

The fact is, "The Birth of a Nation" is a fine and promising debut from Parker, who also co-wrote and produced. It also feels very much like a first film, too, unable to reach the lofty artistry that it's striving for in juxtaposing unimaginable human injustices with both lyrical spirituality and shocking violence.

Parker follows Nat Turner from childhood to his death at age 31. Turner was hanged for the Virginia rebellion. Under the cloak of night, he and his fellow slaves went house to house slaughtering every man, woman and child who had a white complexion. It lasted 48 hours and over 50 people were killed. The incident was an early catalyst to the Civil War.

Out of necessity, "The Birth of

a Nation" takes a lot of liberties with truths and unknowns about Nat Turner, fleshing out the skeleton of what the history books tell us.

Instead of having Nat being sold a number of times throughout his life, Parker keeps him with the same owner — the Turner family — throughout. Matriarch Elizabeth Turner (Penelope Ann Miller) takes a shine to Nat and helps to teach him how to read. While that part is true, keeping him with the same family allows Parker to show a young Nat (Tony Espinosa) being friends with his eventual master Samuel (Armie Hammer) from youth. He also gives Nat a lifelong nemesis in a slave tracker (Jackie Earle Haley), who, by the end of Nat's life, will have run down his father and hurt his wife Cherry (Aja Naomi King).

Ultimately, it makes "The Birth of a Nation" less a good faith attempt at reconstructing Nat Turner's life leading up to the rebellion and more a stylized fable, loosely rooted in an extraordinary true story.

Parker does, through a skillfully internalized performance, show the evolution of a radical through unthinkable dehumanization. Nat, who has taught himself to preach, travels from plantation to plantation with Samuel reading scripture to other slaves. It's there he sees that not all are as relatively benevolent as the Turners. The images haunt him — from the a little black girl being led around on a leash to a man having his teeth hammered out. The horrors build inside the once docile Nat until erupting in a passionate sermon, and, eventually the uprising. It's all juxtaposed with imagery of

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Olin 301

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Agnes Flanagan Chapel

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