



Caesar fights Washington: A mirror image of race prejudice in a segregated Army

Black Vs. Black Vs. White

Most of the guts and power of *A Soldier's Story* are focused in the face of Adolph Caesar as Sgt. Vernon Waters. The face is clenched in perpetual anger, a black bomb waiting to go off. Caesar gives a fierce, clawing performance that seems to draw blood from every other actor in the strong cast. We've seen the tough drillmaster in countless military movies: Richard Widmark, Randolph Scott, Louis Gossett Jr.—lean, mean s.o.b.'s who turn putty-spirited kids into stainless-steel soldiers. But Waters is different. A black man in the racially segregated U.S. Army in 1944, he's filled with a poisoned pride, a self-hatred that spills over into savage scorn for the blacks in his charge. He especially despises the "geechie," the easy-smiling country blacks who, he thinks, confirm white stereotypes about "yassah-boss niggers." In the racial tensions of a Southern Army post in World War II, with bigoted white officers in the barracks and the Ku Klux Klan in the nearby town, it's Waters who triggers the passions that lead to his murder and its investigation by a young black captain (Howard E. Rollins Jr.) whose presence pours more fuel on an explosive situation.

As "A Soldier's Play," Charles Fuller's drama won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982. Produced by the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, it wasn't so much a whodunit as a whydunit: Fuller exposed the crossbreeding of prejudice that created pathology in both races. The movie version retains a good deal of this powerful theme, but its complexity has been thinned out. Director Norman Jewison has nudged the story toward the melodramatic tone of his Oscar-winning 1967 movie "In the Heat of the

Night," in which Sidney Poitier played a black detective investigating a murder in redneck country. Poitier's character, Virgil Tibbs, showed those cracker cops that he was as good as they were. Rollins's Captain Davenport does the same. He even has some of Tibbs's cheeky asperity: when a white officer demands that he remove his stylish sunglasses, Davenport replies, "I like these. They're like MacArthur's."

But the point of Fuller's play was not that blacks are as good as whites, but that blacks could be driven into a mirror image of white prejudice. Sergeant Waters, who boasts that he has destroyed "geechie" wherever he has been stationed, is a more terrifying scourge to his men than the white soldiers, from smoothies to slobs, who patronize or humiliate the blacks.

Twisted Spirit: Fuller's screenplay retains most of the texture of his play, with its flashback revelations. But he has wounded his own work with a jarring, rah-rah ending in which the eager blacks at last go marching off to war. In the play this was the final irony: Davenport revealed that the entire outfit was wiped out in Germany. Here war heals all wounds, to the proud pounding of drums. Jewison deserves credit for struggling to get this script made, but then why tack a Hollywood tag onto a writer's courageous vision? That vision lives in the strength and style of actors like Rollins (his first film since his notable performance in "Ragtime"), Art Evans, Denzel Washington, Larry Riley, David Alan Grier and above all Adolph Caesar, whose portrait of a tragically twisted spirit is exact, uncompromising and indelible.

JACK KROLL

'Soldier's Story' Earns Entertainment Stripes

'A SOLDIER'S STORY'
— Shepherd Twin (PG)

"A Soldier's Story" is the kind of film that makes this job worth it.

From the Pulitzer-Prize winning play and screenplay by Charles Fuller through the flawless acting to the finest details shepherded by production designer Walter Scott Herndon,

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there is nothing here to criticize.

"A Soldier's Story" is not going to ignite the cult followings of films like "Ghostbusters" or "Indiana Jones," but don't you dismiss it.

If you let this one slip by, you simply will be missing one of the best films out of this (or any other) year.

Producer-director Norman Jewison's newest product is simply a little mystery, a perspicacious look at a tiny slice of life. Its greatness is the fact that it is superb entertainment at every turn.

The tale revolves around the shooting death of a black sergeant on a country road between a small Louisiana town and the nearby Army base in 1944.

Who shot him? Were they white? Black? Klan? Revenge? The questions pop to the surface with annoying regularity as we learn about Sgt. Vernon Waters through a series of flashbacks.

But, even more so, the film is an illuminating look at a contorted American society, going through an adolescence if you will ... stepping out of its sheltered, rich existence on the North American continent and fighting for its life against a diverse, some-good and plenty-bad world.

Sure, America seemed to have things under control, but underneath whites were learning the old ways were not going to stay forever. And blacks were twisted, too, wanting to break out of their generations-old routine but not being sure if the way out was to be what the white man was or to be true to their black heritage.

Howard E. Rollins Jr. cheered for his performance in "Ragtime," plays a black captain — an attorney — sent from Washington to ferret out the details of the mysterious incident that left Sgt. Waters dead by the side of road, dead with two huge .45-caliber bullet holes in his body.

And Rollins is outstanding. Sporting his Douglas MacArthur aviator sunglasses, he cuts a striking military figure. A "Would you look at that" rarity in the Army world of 1944, Capt. Richard Davenport is stern and uncompromising in his approach.

Adolph Caesar recreates stunningly the role he played to acclaim when the Negro

Ensemble company first took Fuller's "A Soldier's Play" to the New York stage in 1981.

Cocky, abrasive and inwardly tormented, Caesar's Sgt. Waters is convinced the way out of the black stereotype is to do the white man's ways ... even better than the white man if need be.

Waters has no patience with the easy-going, get-along style of many of his Southern troops. And his spit-and-polish, foe-the-line bent vents into a savage demeaning approach with his men.

Denzel Washington, who now shares an ensemble role on TV's "St. Elsewhere," is powerful and eloquent as the soft-spoken private who is not going to be a "shufflin, yas sir nigra" but also is not about to surrender his soul the Sgt. Waters' slavish favor for the white ways.

Larry Riley, who sports impressive stage credentials, is beautiful and sensitive in his portrayal of C.J. Memphis, the farm boy black caught in this changing Army and changing society.

Jewison cast Riley as a "Billy Budd" character "... a total innocent .. who has a great gift and a love for life ... good looking, a wonderful musician and a good ball player."

But Riley comes headlong against the relentless Waters and finally is goaded into striking the sergeant. Facing a lengthy brig

term and goaded even more by Waters, Riley's C.J. finally hangs himself.

And it is the loss of this gentle giant that galvanizes the action of the film ... the player's "revolt" ... and finally the boiling over of the rancor that costs the sergeant's life.

Other ensemble players deserve mention: Art Evans is terrific as Waters' lackie, once a sergeant himself and busted by Waters. Evans still hews to the view a black will do best acting like the white man acts and doing what the white man wants.

David Alan Grier, another talented black player, is touching as C.J.'s buddy. And Dennis Lipscomb is a convincing white captain once content to sweep the murder inquiry under a rug but who is slowly won to the cause by Rollins' dogged digging.

There are so many to cheer.

Jewison's direction kept the sterling writing brightly polished. Characterizations are nicely brought into focus and the story line is kept as tantalizingly taut as a Stradavarius' string.

Cinematographer Russell Boyd has deftly photographed the entire story keeping a keenness in his images even when the action dissolves into misty country roads at night.

Jewison could not win the megabucks support

to make this film as he possibly could have with stars like Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy, but the film became a labor of love for a bevy of enormously talented folks and the end product makes their concern manifestly clear.

Ronald Schwary, who joined Jewison and Patrick Palmer to produce, has a few good marks on his record — he produced "Ordinary People" when superstar Robert Redford made his film debut and then was picked by director Sydney Pollack to produce a pair of biggies — "Absence of Malice" with Paul Newman and the megahit "Tootsie" with Dustin Hoffman.

Jazz great Herbie Hancock kicked in with one of the niftiest movie scores we've listened to in a long time. Funky, bluesy and always there when you need it, Hancock's work never overwhelms. And stir in singer Patti LaBelle as Big Mary, owner of the black soldiers' favorite bar, and you've got a top-notch mix.

Jewison has a long tradition of remarkable films — comedies like "The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming!" mysteries like "The Thomas Crown Affair" and even films with taffy-thick racial tension like "In The Heat of The Night."

Here he has skillfully drawn bits from a long directorial career and brought high polish to another cinema gem.

— Glen Phillips