

FILM REVIEWS

"CRY FREEDOM"

"Ghandi" (1982), directed and produced by British film-maker Sir Richard Attenborough in collaboration with the National Film Development Corporation of India, was such a great international hit at the box office that Attenborough's latest movie, "Cry Freedom" (1987), produced by Hollywood's Universal Studios, aroused extraordinary expectations.

The ubiquitous Apartheid policies of South Africa, and the circumstances surrounding the death of Steve Biko in police custody were enough to provoke enormous future prospects. Perhaps the questions to be asked are: Did "Cry Freedom" evoke the sort of emotional empathy and sympathy as had "Gandhi?" Did it really succeed in exposing to the world the full repugnance of Apartheid South Africa? Would it help in altering the views of the majority in Europe and the United States who believe that White ruled South Africa is a Democracy and that Black nationalist movements operating both within and without the country are mere terrorists or communist-inspired bandits?

Given Attenborough's track record, both as an actor and director, there was every reason to expect that "Cry Freedom" would provide answers to all these questions. It tries, but does not go far enough.

It is precisely against this background that "Cry Freedom" ought to be viewed. Given that both the minority White South Africans and the West in general benefit economically and socially from these Apartheid policies, and given Attenborough's reputation as a critical film-maker, the film, even before its release, had raised some political eyebrows in the capitalist world. There is evidence to suggest that there were many interest groups, both in Pretoria and Western capitals, who attempted to undermine the production of the film. As such, the fact that "Cry Freedom" was produced and released in movie theaters around the world with the exception of South Africa, is in itself a mark of immense artistic and political determination.

The film portrays the life and death of the South African Black Consciousness Movement leader Biko, played by Denzel Washington, and his friendship with Donald Woods, a liberal newspaper editor, played by Kevin Kline.

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Set in the slums of Soweto, the film opens with captivating footage. Woods is confronted by a Black female physician and challenged to go and meet Biko one on one, instead of condemning him unfairly without knowing the truth behind his political activities.

What follows is the first but important meeting between Biko and Woods. Together they tour the slums and Woods discovers that not all Blacks are "criminal". This experience helps transform Woods into someone supporting Biko's cause. But it is done in a less passionate manner, however, and seems to weaken the purpose of the sequence.

Biko's portrayal as a handsome, serious, articulate and sociable man would appear to do justice to the Black Consciousness Movement, he was also an intelligent and courageous man who commanded respect from both his admirers and ardent critics. The film, however, fails to bring out those traits. As a banned person under South African law, he seems to enjoy out-witting the police who have him constantly under surveillance and are trying to trap him.

In the meantime, Woods begins to write and publish stories favorable to the Black consciousness cause and employs some Black reporters to provide his newspaper with the true perspective about the social dynamics in the Soweto slums. Woods is interrogated by the Minister of Justice who first lectures him about how the government cares very much about its non-White population, and then sends his secret police agents to harass the editor at his home.

In the subsequent scene Biko is apprehended by the police and one brutal-looking captain punches him across the face and Biko slaps him back. This time, Biko gets away with it but the brutal captain cannot wait to get another chance at him. Eventually, the police capture Biko on a freeway and he is killed in custody. The official government version given for Biko's death is "suicide" but, at enormous risk, Woods and his photojournalist manage to get photographs of Biko's mutilated body that were later to disgust the international community and prove the absurdity of the "suicide" verdict!

Because of Woods' interest in the circumstances surrounding Biko's death, the South African security service intensify their pressure on him. He discusses the matter with his family and friends, disguises himself, and plans his final escape from South Africa to a safe exile in the United Kingdom.

Unlike "Ghandi", the powerful and compelling Oscar winning classic, "Cry Freedom" is not a great epic. Biko is seen only through Woods' eyes. We thus only see mere glimpses of him. Biko's character is not allowed to develop and mature into the great leader and thinker that he was. He comes out of nowhere and instantly begins to

interact with Woods and others. We know little if anything about his background and family. In fact, we hardly know anything about the social political forces that made him what he became.

Moreover, the film does not permit the viewer to identify with the two major characters. Clearly both appear as heroic figures, but their development into those roles leaves a lot to be desired. There are two significant high points in the film however. The poisoned T-shirts which nearly kill two of Woods' five kids, courtesy of the South African security service, demonstrate clearly that apartheid hurts both non-Whites and Whites alike, albeit to varying degrees. To put it another way, racial oppression hurts both the oppressed and the oppressor in South Africa. Biko's slapping of the police officer is symbolic of the Black South African's rejection of White brutality and oppression. While Woods' determination to get his book on Biko published overseas is certainly a courageous and admirable act.

The film ends on a hopeful note in the sense that Woods lives another day to continue publicizing the horrors caused by the repugnant system of apartheid in his country. Indeed, Woods eventually does get his book, Biko, published. "Cry Freedom" is largely based on this book and although the film may not stop or even ease oppression of Blacks in South Africa, it does make a necessary and welcome sociopolitical statement pointing a finger at the gross violations of human rights by the Pretoria regime.

"Cry Freedom" is technically, emotionally, and aesthetically superior to "Mandela" (1987), another movie on the subject of apartheid. The characters and the narrative of the former are much more convincing than those of the latter. Taken on its own merit as a film on Biko through Woods' lense of experience, it is a remarkable agent for those who believe in the need for fundamental social change in South Africa. If the film manages to provoke debate and inspires other artists to make more social statements on apartheid, "Cry Freedom", at least in my view, will have succeeded. Finally, it should be noted that due to political and technical problems in South Africa, "Cry Freedom", was shot on location in Zimbabwe. The total cost of the film, according to director Attenborough, was approximately \$20 million. It will be very lucky to recoup its production expenses and make a profit, and unfortunately the film appears to have flopped in the United States.

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