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White Man to the **RESCUE**

by brian burke

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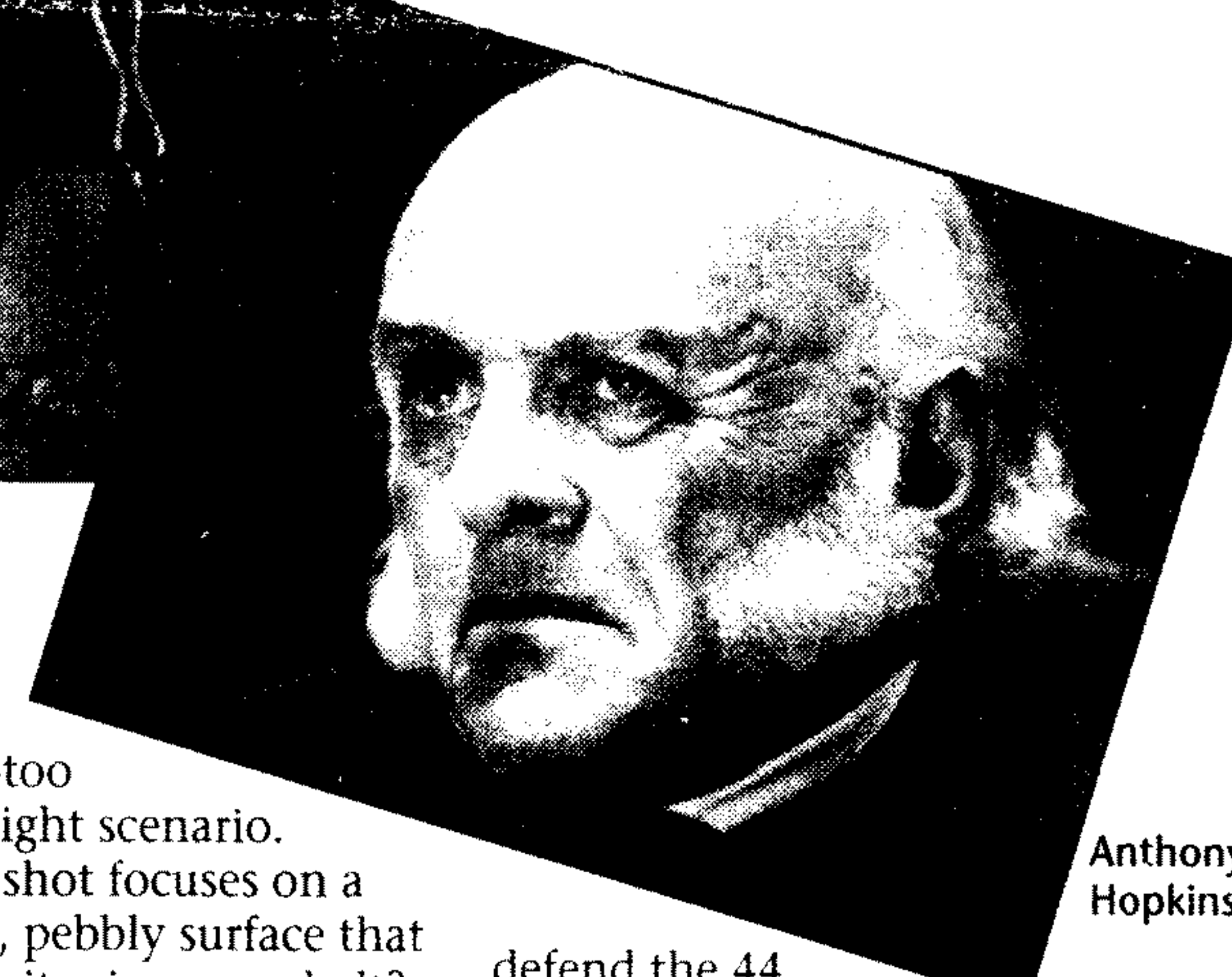
MOVIE
REVIEW

AMISTAD
★★★★
(based on four-star rating)

Opened Wednesday: In limited release
Stars: Matthew McConaughey, Morgan Freeman, Anthony Hopkins, Djimon Hounsou
Director: Steven Spielberg
Rated: R for violence and nudity



Djimon Hounsou, center



Anthony Hopkins



Matthew McConaughey

Steven Spielberg's new film is a powerful reminder of American injustice but it drifts into familiar terrain.

If visitors from another planet wanted to gather data on the American civil rights movement and the only source available was Hollywood movies, the results would be a little askew.

Movies like "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Mississippi Burning" and "A Time To Kill" all feature oppressed blacks who are rescued from the jaws of bigotry by well-meaning, liberal whites.

Nowhere is heard the thunder of a Frederick Douglass; nowhere is seen the steely resolve of a Rosa Parks. And not even in school books is there any mention of Cinque, a Sierra Leone native who led an 1839 slave-ship revolt that ruffled the coattails of American justice.

Debbie Allen ("Fame") stumbled upon the story in 1984 and shared it with director Steven Spielberg, who explored similar, albeit Semitic, terrain in "Schindler's List," in which a gentile came to the rescue of Jews in the Holocaust. Together they have created the important, impressive "Amistad," which tries

but doesn't quite transcend the all-too-familiar white-knight scenario.

The opening shot focuses on a coal-black, rough, pebbly surface that is dripping wet. Is it rain on asphalt? No, it is the determined, sweaty face of the shackled Cinque (Djimon Hounsou). His fingers are bloody from tugging on the stake that binds him, but he can taste his freedom and that of his fellow African captives. In a horrifying homage to rage, Cinque and company turn the Amistad into a ship of blood.

But their victory is short-lived. The ship is seized, and the passengers are shackled once again, this time in a New Haven, Conn., prison. They are charged with murder and piracy.

It is here, in the legal horse latitudes, where this riveting ride through some of the darkest waters in our history drifts back into the doldrums of Hollywood cliché.

The free black abolitionist Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman) hires green lawyer Roger Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey, *deja vu*) to

defend the 44 prisoners. Baldwin argues that the case is a property-rights issue and that they were not chattel because they were not born into slavery. But the prepubescent Queen Isabella II of Spain (Anna Paquin) and her minions assert that the 44 were Cuban slaves and therefore the property of Spain. President Martin Van Buren (Nigel Hawthorne), who is up for re-election, would rather side with Spain and not alienate the South.

To do battle with tart-tongued prosecutor Holabird (Pete Postlethwaite), Baldwin seeks extra ammunition in the form of the former President John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), who is neutral on the slavery issue. At first, his ace in the hole looks like more of a joker.

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Adams, a crotchety puritan forever in his illustrious father's shadow, is the laughing stock of Congress. It is only after Joadson goads Baldwin and Adams onto the right path that Cinque and the others have any chance of ever seeing their home again.

Surely, they want to return, but not the way they came. Spielberg's vision of the Middle Passage, the slave ship journey from Africa to the New World, is as terrifying as anything he's ever filmed. To balance a food shortage, women, children and the infirm are chained together and tossed overboard. Men are whipped routinely. They beg for scraps like dogs. Adults and children

alike are stripped naked, manacled and forced to lie face down in rows in the belly of the ship.

One of the many ironies in the film is that McConaughey must prove that the 44 blacks are people, not chattel. And yet Spielberg only fleshes out one of the slaves. Beninese-born Hounsou, who has a magnificently muscled body, as displayed in Janet Jackson's video "Love Will Never Do Without You," proves to have an equally fine gift at acting. He plays a man who singlehandedly killed a lion. And indeed he makes for a ferocious, charismatic hero who just wants to

be free.

The other black characters, while not developed, often make funny observations in subtitles about McConaughey, who appears incompetent to them, and the New England starched-collar society.

It is also odd that while Spielberg seeks to emphasize the black struggle for liberty, the black character with the most wherewithal, Freeman's Joadson, is fictional (the authorship is the focus of a legal dispute), bland

and often peripheral to the action. It is the whites who are etched with the most detail. Postlethwaite, Hawthorne and Arliss Howard as John C. Calhoun all deliver nuanced performances. McConaughey is the only dud. He seems uncomfortable.

But it is Hopkins who brings down the house. Creeping about like a crotchety, half-blind crab, Hopkins,

known for his personal demons, obviously enjoys the tortured, eloquent role. His speech before the Supreme Court, in which he finally redeems himself, is truly a marvel. Too bad David Franzoni, who penned some scintillating repartee, didn't leave but scraps for the slaves. It's a gorgeous and powerful film but, alas, it's the same old story.