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GHOSTS OF MISSISSIPPI

★★★

Directed by Rob Reiner
Written by Lewis Colick
With Alec Baldwin, James Woods,
Whoopi Goldberg, Diane Ladd, Bonnie
Bartlett, Bill Cobbs, William H. Macy,
Virginia Madsen, and Michael O'Keefe.



THROUGH THE PAST, DARKLY

This story is true," reads the opening title of *Ghosts of Mississippi*, a movie about the murder of NAACP activist Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, in June 1963, and the conviction of his murderer, Byron De La Beckwith, which took a little more than 30 years.

"This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian," Arthur Miller wrote in a note prefacing his 1953 play *The Crucible*, which depicts events that occurred in 1692; and which has now been turned into a movie adapted by Miller. Miller went on to detail the ways he'd changed history—he sometimes fused many people into one character, and he made a central character, Abigail, older. He went on to say that the characters should be taken as "creations of my own, drawn to the best of my ability in conformity with their known behavior, except as indicated in the commentary I have written for this text." But, he added, "the fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar—and in some cases exactly the same—role in history."

For all the differences in these prefatory notes and in the stories that follow them, both movies are essentially making the same claim—that the gist of the events being shown is true. This means not that either film is accurate in every historical particular, but that what happens in both derives from an accurate assessment of what originally took place.

Like most viewers—including most reviewers—I have no special knowledge about either the murder of Evers and the conviction of Beckwith or the 1692 witchcraft trials held in Salem, Massachusetts. But like other viewers, I have plenty of feelings, notions, and biases about these events and how they pertain to the present. In the case of *Ghosts of Mississippi*, for instance, I'm especially grateful to the filmmakers for offering a full corrective to *Mississippi Burning* and *A Time to Kill* when it comes to representing everyday life in the deep south and to expressing some sense of civic responsibility in dealing with racist murders. These two virtues are closely connected; if

one believes the lurid imaginings of *Mississippi Burning* and *A Time to Kill* about normal life in a typical southern town, then the vigilante form of justice celebrated in both those films begins to seem more viable.

The problem is that *Ghosts of Mississippi*, like *The Crucible*, is a liberal movie—anything but fashionable these days. Of course *The Crucible* wasn't fashionable when it opened in 1953 either. In Robert Warshow's thoughtful essay attacking it titled "The Liberal Conscience in *The Crucible*," "liberal" is as much a dirty word (even though Warshow qualified as a cold-war liberal) as it is in today's culture. (The essay was recently quoted without much thought by critics as disparate as the *Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman and the *New Yorker*'s Terrence Rafferty as justification for why we shouldn't take the movie too seriously.)

Indeed, I can't recall a single period when Miller's liberalism has been deemed fashionable by the intellectual left in this country. Even when he

defied the House Un-American Activities committee in 1956 by refusing to name names—leading to a conviction of contempt of Congress the following year that was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1958—Miller was accused of having a martyr complex (like John Proctor, the hero of *The Crucible*) at least as often as he was praised or supported.

In fact, American intellectuals have always considered Miller something of a square and the buzz I've been hearing from colleagues about *Ghosts of Mississippi* makes it sound similarly tainted. I'm not just bringing up these objections to dismiss them: though *Ghosts of Mississippi* is worthy of both praise and defense, it also has a colorless and clichéd hero (a noble lawyer played by Alec Baldwin, complete with a conformist wife who leaves him when the going gets tough and a sympathetic, nurturing doctor who replaces her), and it depicts Medgar Evers's widow (Whoopi Goldberg) as such a Goody Two-shoes that she doesn't appear to age at all over the 30 years covered by the film. These are common problems for films that purport to represent people who are still alive—though James Woods's performance as Beckwith and Bill Cobbs's cameo as Charles Evers, Medgar's older brother (a local disc jockey who refused to testify at any of the trials),

are both so fine that they invalidate this criticism as an across-the-board principle. For that matter, just about all the secondary characters are handled with authenticity, humor, and grit, including some Jackson locals who reenact their own parts, and it is these individuals who are mainly responsible for the film's rich texture.

Ghosts of Mississippi lacks the pizzazz that made *Mississippi Burning* and *A Time to Kill* commercial and their hokum acceptable to many viewers; it's simple, corny, and decent, but not very exciting—unless you care about details of place and period or believe that long-term justice, the movie's subject, matters more than the less serious short-term goals of those other movies. There are moments in Reiner's film that brought tears to my eyes; the only tears I can imagine the other two movies provoking in me are tears of rage. But, hey, this is a square liberal movie, and provigilante sensationalism has always pulled in more customers, starting with *The Birth of a Nation*.

film ratings

- ★★★★ Masterpiece
- ★★★ A must-see
- ★★ Worth seeing
- ★ Has redeeming facet
- Worthless