

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Remember the Amistad?</b>
Author(s)	Bruce Newman
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1997 Mar 28
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	F1, F21
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Amistad, Spielberg, Steven, 1997



Photos by ANDREW COOPER / ©DreamWorks

Steven Spielberg, left, sets the scene for Morgan Freeman in 'Amistad,' his first directing project for DreamWorks.

# Remember the Amistad?

The slave ship revolt that history books forgot gets a Spielbergian chapter.

By BRUCE NEWMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**W**hen Steven Spielberg first heard the name of the African slave whose shipboard uprising his current film, "Amistad," is based upon, the director's association was with a more recent episode in U.S. history.

"The last time I heard the name Cinque," Spielberg says, sounding out the African name Sengbe as it was pronounced by Spanish slave traders (sin-KAY), "it was not in relation to the man who led the revolt on the Amistad and found himself redefining American civil liberties. I thought of the name in association with the SLA and Patty Hearst."

That Cinque was the notorious bank robber, urban terrorist and Symbionese Liberation Army leader (a.k.a. Donald DeFreeze) who died in a fiery shootout in Los Angeles in 1974.



On the set: Henry Louis Gates, left, Cinque Henderson, Derrick Ashong, Debbie Allen and Spielberg.

As a black revolutionary, he had taken—or, depending upon your view of history, misappropriated—the name as a tribute to one of the most heroic figures of the 19th century, now almost completely forgotten.

Still, if there is one thing that would make you more famous than dying in a hail of gunfire on the evening news, it is being cast as the hero of a Spielberg Christmas movie. This one stars Anthony Hopkins as former President John Quincy Adams, Nigel Hawthorne as President Martin Van Buren, Morgan Freeman as a leader of the abolitionist movement and Matthew McConaughey as the attorney who first presses the slaves' legal case.

Those names were touchstones of the history Spielberg had been taught in school. But he had never heard of the Spanish schooner Amistad, which set sail from Cuba on June 28, 1839,

Please see 'AMISTAD,' F21



# 'AMISTAD': New Film to Open Christmas

Continued from F1

with 53 Africans as cargo. On the third day, a Spanish seaman taunted Cinque with the threat of being killed and eaten upon their arrival.

That night Cinque led a bloody revolt against the crew, keeping only two Spaniards alive to sail the ship back to Africa. Instead, the *Amistad* wandered up the North American coastline for two months, finally anchoring off the tip of Long Island and being boarded by the U.S. Navy. What followed was an even longer voyage through the early U.S. judicial system.

"When I first heard the story of *La Amistad*, it was news to me," Spielberg says. "I guess my reaction was, 'Really? Did that happen?'"

The story of the *Amistad* uprising is John Wayne meets John Grisham, action on the high seas and in the high court. The reason few people have ever heard of it is that it was a drama about the fate of black slaves. And in America, the story of the African slave trade has historically been viewed in what is essentially a white context: First, as the original sin of the Founding Fathers, and then as the cause of the Civil War.

Producer Debbie Allen, who spent 10 years unsuccessfully trying to get the story made into a movie before connecting with Spielberg, attended predominantly black Howard University in the '70s and never heard about the *Amistad* incident even there. "This film is going to create a dialogue about the very nature of history, the way in which people are taught," Allen says. "Whether you're talking about art, or literature, or music, the real history has just been castrated—left out—and great historians have done it. It's beyond racism, I think. It's just one culture wanting to be dominant, and not really acknowledging the contribution of a culture that was far beyond and centuries ahead."

Spielberg fell in love with the story as soon as Allen told it to him, and always intended to direct it, though the project took on some historical heft of its own as the first movie he has directed for DreamWorks, the studio he founded with David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg. But Spielberg never intended "Amistad" to serve as a morality tale.

"It's not a sprawling indictment of slavery," Spielberg says. "To indict slavery is more powerful if it's more personal, and so this is a much smaller, more focused story than I think people are expecting."

It will surely be one of the first feel-good movies about slavery. "The bad guys are vanquished at the end, and the good guys are able to sail home and live happily ever after," Dr. Henry Louis Gates, a professor in the department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard

and one of the film's many consultants, says in a telephone interview. "That's remarkable. It's rare when you see black people participate in violence to defend themselves, be vindicated by the American legal system, and be recognized as the true patriots they are, like Patrick Henry."

"I think it's important for all of us to realize that people just didn't go willingly into slavery," Gates adds, "and that the American legal

**'I think it's important for all of us to realize that people just didn't go willingly into slavery and that the American legal system was not immune to appeals for justice from black people.'**

Henry Louis Gates  
Harvard African American Studies  
professor and consultant on "Amistad"

system was not immune to appeals for justice from black people. There were times when the legal system worked for black people, though by and large it didn't."

In fact, it was only 16 years after the Supreme Court's ruling in the *Amistad* case that the infamous Dred Scott decision was handed down, making it possible for escaped slaves to be returned to their masters.

Again and again, the film provides reminders that there was never one black history in America—much less one that could be confined to a single month. The slave ships were melting pots of a different order, African tribesmen who often spoke different languages and occasionally had no multicultural love for each other, confined to a hold just 4 feet high. This was the devil's own diaspora, intended to keep the captives, quite literally, on their knees.

Almost all of the dialogue spoken by the African captives in the movie—the word "slaves" is subtly but strenuously resisted on the set—is in Mende, and will be presented with subtitles. This, as it turns out, is no small feat even for the African actors, almost none of whom spoke Mende before filming began.

"Instead of forcing Cinque and his people to speak in broken English, like, 'Hel-lo de white man,' the way Hollywood typically does," Gates says, "they let them speak in their own languages. And these are not dialects, they're beautiful, complex languages. Using subtitles, just as they would do with people speaking French or German, is important. That's showing that the men who were captured in West Africa weren't Africans in their own sense of identity. They were Ebo, Mende, Yorba, Congo—the names of a people."

In the absence of any Streep-like

dialecticians in the picture's primary roles, the job of making sure that America's native Mende-speaking audiences can understand the dialogue was assigned to Dr. Arthur Abraham, the film's "cultural adviser." Abraham is a world-renowned Mende scholar who helped create Freetown University in the West African country of Sierra Leone. Two decades ago, he worked at the *Amistad* Research Center in New Orleans, while serving as a Fulbright Scholar. Few of those accomplishments challenged him as much as administering remedial Mende to actors.

"It has not been that easy," Abraham says, sighing. During his weeks on the Universal lot he was rarely seen without a set of headphones, walking in circles and periodically shaking his head. Occasionally in the middle of a scene, he would raise his index finger at some phonic outrage—as if making a bookmark for himself in the manufactured studio smoke—then launch himself toward the offending actor for an impromptu seminar.

"When we began, half of the class was just not serious about it," he says, referring to the cast. "After a few days I lost my temper, and told them if they continued not to learn, I would begin to single them out. Then some who had been faltering began behaving themselves."

This was never a problem for Djimon Hounsou, the actor from Benin who plays Cinque. Hounsou once called Abraham in the middle of the night to clarify the meaning of a word in Mende, a language in which an almost imperceptible shift in emphasis transforms the word for "love" into the word for "shirt." "Steven Spielberg asked me when I auditioned if I thought I would be able to learn another language," Hounsou recalls. "I said, 'We can give it a try. I think it's way possible.'"

Whether it is way possible to attract an audience in the usual Spielbergian numbers may be another story. "Schindler's List," his last historical drama, was an enormous box-office hit. "The Color Purple," an earlier attempt at black history, was his least successful film until "Empire of the Sun's" release two years later in 1987.

"I think it's very important that we're demonstrating that this kind of film can be done mainstream," Debbie Allen says. "The bottom line is, the movie industry is still a business, it's not a cultural foundation. And in the midst of it, you might be able to do something that has real impact."

"This is an American story," she says. "This is not just about the African people, it's about the American people. This situation challenged America to become what we are today, the leader in human rights and civil rights for the world. That's who we've become. We were not that in 1839."