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Spielberg's chronicle of social justice

The statement refers to Adams, but will have resonance for present-day viewers. All along there are jokes about Spain's Queen Isabella (Anna Paquin), a pubescent still playing with dolls, who later continued to argue about the Amistad case with seven presidents.



HOPKINS

Though there are a number of trials, Spielberg shrewdly avoids the routine format of courtroom drama, instead seamlessly integrating the numerous characters and their particular stands on the case. Yet every once in a while one senses an inner tension between Spielberg the mass entertainer, with his assured command of camera and trademark pyrotechnics, and the genuine artist, pressing for the simple core of the drama.

Occasionally, the film succumbs to the level of an anthropological survey, viewing the Africans and their rituals as exotic curiosity, though Hounsou's dignified portrayal of Cinque as a man of outer strength and inner peace successfully counters this weakness. Regrettably, the always brilliant Freeman is totally wasted as Joadson, functioning as no more than a link among the various episodes, a possible result of the fact that his fictional character is a composite of several historical figures.

Cast against type, with shabby beard and big glasses to deglamorize his handsomeness, McConaughey renders a passable performance, failing to grab the opportunities of his substantial role. Playing a man older than his age, Hopkins shines throughout, and once he takes center stage he ignites the screen with a bravura 11-minute argument that results in the freeing of the slaves and crushing of the notorious Lomboka Slave Fortress.

The large, inspired ensemble hits its marks with small but succinctly drawn roles, with Hawthorne as the pro-slavery president, Paymer as the cunning secretary of state and Skarsgard as the decent abolitionist, among others.

Filmed in various locations in New England and Puerto Rico, technically "Amistad" is an aural and visual pleasure, due to John Williams' emotional score, Janusz Kaminski's vibrant lensing, Rick Carter's accurate production design and Ruth Carter's historically genuine costumes all contributing to an authentic experience, which is further enhanced by the Africans' use of the Mende language.

AMISTAD

A DreamWorks Pictures release in association with HBO Pictures. Produced by Steven Spielberg, Debbie Allen, Colin Wilson. Executive producers, Walter Parkes, Laurie MacDonald. Co-executive producer, Robert Cooper. Co-producer, Tim Shriver.

Directed by Steven Spielberg. Screenplay, David Franzoni. Camera (Technicolor, widescreen), Janusz Kaminski; editor, Michael Kahn; music, John Williams; production design, Rick Carter; art direction, Chris Burian-Mohr, Jim Teegarden, Tony Fanning; set decoration, Rosemary Brandenburg; costume design, Ruth E. Carter; sound (Dolby/DTS/SDDS), Ronald Judkins, Robert Jackson; visual effects, Industrial Light & Magic; visual effects supervisor, Scott Farrar; associate producers, Bonnie Curtis, Paul Deason; assistant director, Sergio Mimica-Gezzan; casting, Victoria Thomas. Reviewed at Amblin Entertainment, Universal City, Nov. 28, 1997. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 152 MIN.

Theodore Joadson Morgan Freeman
John

Quincy Adams Anthony Hopkins
Baldwin Matthew McConaughey
Martin Van Buren Nigel Hawthorne
Cinque Djimon Hounsou
Secretary Forsyth David Paymer
Holabird Pete Postlethwaite
Tappan Stellan Skarsgard
Queen Isabella Anna Paquin
Calderon Tomas Milian
Professor Gibbs Austin Pendleton



SELDOM-TOLD SAGA: In "Amistad" Matthew McConaughey portrays the lawyer who initially defends a group of Africans, led by Cinque (Djimon Hounsou, left), in their trial over a rebellion aboard a Spanish slave ship. The DreamWorks film is based on an incident that took place in 1839.

By EMANUEL LEVY

The forces of power, racism and justice momentarily clash in Steven Spielberg's "Amistad," an artistically solid, if not always dramatically exciting, chronicle of the 1839 rebellion on board the Spanish slave ship of the title. True story, which few Americans have even heard about, is presented as an international intrigue of a high order, one that involved the governments of pre-Civil War U.S., Great Britain, Spain and, of course, the 53 Africans held captive in the cramped cargo off the Cuban coast. Boasting a high-voltage cast, led by Brits Anthony Hopkins and Nigel Hawthorne, Americans Morgan Freeman and Matthew McConaughey and, most impressively, West African Djimon Hounsou as the rebels' leader, this second release from DreamWorks should sail safely as a message film that touches on the very fabric of the American social system.

Spielberg's second foray into African-American history is far more effective and moving than "The Color Purple," his compromised, sanitized rendition of Alice Walker's novel. Thematically, the new film is a logical endeavor following "Schindler's List," though stylistically the two films are very different. Aiming to instruct as well as entertain — and often

struggling to reconcile these two divergent goals — "Amistad" lacks the subtlety of tone and simplicity of form that made the 1993 Oscar-winning film so special in Spielberg's oeuvre.

The director strives a tad too hard to emphasize the universal el-

tral victim, a once-free rice farmer who suddenly found himself a chained slave. With Cinque (Hounsou), the filmmakers provide the audience a most sympathetic figure — and an emotional hook — to absorb the sprawling drama as it hops from one continent to another.

Aiming to instruct as well as entertain — and often struggling to reconcile these two divergent goals —

'Amistad' lacks the subtlety of 'Schindler's List' but is far more effective than 'The Color Purple.'

ements of the 19th-century case of injustice, using a deliberate visual style that accentuates (and often inflates) every idea and image. Spielberg skeptics will find ammunition to criticize "Amistad" as too solemnly earnest and too bombastic in its visual strategy.

In a powerful pre-credits sequence that evidences a conspicuously bold touch, Spielberg shows how Sengbe Pieh (called Cinque by the Spaniards) begins the rebellion when he breaks free of his shackles. This violent scene (partly responsible for pic's R rating) depicts graphically, with mega-close-ups and rapid montage, the impalement of an officer on a sword.

From this point on, David Franzoni's multifaceted script relates the saga from the perspective of its cen-

After the rebels are caught and thrown into a New England prison, story switches to Theodore Joadson (Freeman), a former slave who has joined forces with a businessman called Tappan (Stellan Skarsgard) in the abolitionist cause. When the Amistad incident breaks, the American press labels it "a massacre at sea," but Joadson perceives the Africans as freedom fighters. Attempting to enlist a decent attorney, he ends up with Baldwin (McConaughey), a shady property lawyer nicknamed "Dung Scraper."

For Baldwin, the case represents a property, not a human rights, issue. Indeed, in the trial, positioned against Holabird (Pete Postlethwaite), the nasty government prosecutor, Baldwin tries desperately to prove that the Africans

were not legally slaves, that they were "stolen goods" because they were born in Africa and illegally kidnapped from their homes.

Drama becomes intriguingly complex when broader political forces are brought to the surface. Fearing the wrath of the South, President Martin Van Buren (Hawthorne), who's running for re-election, overturns the lower court's decision, which had favored the Africans. He and his secretary of state, Forsyth (David Paymer), shamelessly pull strings behind the scenes and even appoint a new attorney.

The case goes to the Supreme Court, where the Africans are defended by none other than John Quincy Adams (Hopkins), the former president and son of founding father John Adams.

Neither an abolitionist nor pro-slavery, Adams is a reluctant hero, an astute, incorruptible puritan, enamored of flowers and plants, who initially refuses to help. A moralist at heart, he throws himself wholeheartedly into defending the Africans in a fervent speech that summons the Declaration of Independence and other tenets of the American Dream.

Looking at the case from a contemporary p.o.v., the script contains some astutely cynical observations about politicians, as when one official says, "Is there anything more pathetic than an ex-president?"

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