

12 Years a Slave: Movie captures attention of director's contemporaries

Written by Stacy M. Brown: Special to the NNPA from The Washington Informer



Famed film director John Singleton said when movies about African Americans debut, he's always the first to be called to lend insight.

Singleton, who directed the 1991 critically-acclaimed drama "Boyz in the Hood," said that recently his telephone hasn't stopped ringing.

"I'd like to talk about other movies, too," he said, but acknowledged that he doesn't mind weighing in on the recent avalanche of black films, including what many view as an Oscar front-runner, "12 Years a Slave."

"I've seen it and I can tell you it's a work of art," said Singleton, 45.

"Steve McQueen, who is black and from the United Kingdom, has created a raw and unflinching look at a black man's descent into one of the darkest chapters of American history, it's as authentic as it gets," he said.

Kasi Lemmons, who directed such films as, "Talk to Me," the 2007 movie based on the life of native Washingtonian and radio personality, Ralph 'Petey' Greene and the 1997 love story and drama, "Eve's Bayou," said "12 Years a Slave," and other African-American films have resonated throughout Hollywood and around the globe because of their frank portrayal of the various trials of blacks.

"It's really unlike anything I've ever seen," said Lemmons, 52, whose new film, "Black Nativity," will hit the Silver Screen next month. "These films are all different, comedies, dramas, historical dramas, musicals. It really is a whole range of movies primarily directed by and starring African Americans. It's pretty exciting," she said.

McQueen's "12 Years" film, which debuted on Friday, Oct. 18, counts as a harrowing and unforgettable tale that takes audiences back to early America where "a peculiar institution" proved to be the norm. The two-hour and 13-minute movie confronts the barbaric reality of this country's history as it pertains to blacks and slavery.

In 1841, Solomon Northup, a free man working as a violinist in Saratoga, N.Y., with a wife and two children, set out on a trip to Washington, D.C. Two strangers approached Northup when he arrived in the Nation's Capital, and claimed to be businessmen seeking to hire a musician. After

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dining with the men, Northup wakes up to find himself, bound and chained, captured by slave traders.

He's beaten and shipped to the South to be sold, ultimately to a man named Epps, portrayed in the film by Michael Fassbender.

The beatings proved to be so grotesque that Fassbender said that he couldn't watch the retakes during the editing of the film. "It made me sick, I nearly passed out, that's how real it was," said Fassbender, 36, who has appeared in such films as "X-Men: First Class," "Inglourious Basterds," and "Jane Eyre."

Violence and degradation dominate the film, including a hard-to-watch scene in which Northup stands all day with a noose around his neck as the ground sinks beneath him and other slaves, slave owners and every day folk pass by without acknowledging that he's even there.

"There should be Oscar nods for McQueen, screenwriter John Ridley, lead actor Chiwetel Ejiofor, who gives the performance of a lifetime; and, hopefully, Fassbender, who plays the most compelling big-screen villain this year," Singleton said