



'Gone With the Wind' at 75: Celebration, Censure

Celebration with censure as 'Gone With the Wind' approaches 75th anniversary

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As its 75th anniversary approaches, "Gone With the Wind" is again being celebrated as a timeless movie classic. But now, even the film's distributor acknowledges the Civil War epic's portrayal of slavery is dated and inaccurate.

"Gone With the Wind" will be screened this weekend in 650 theaters nationwide, broadcast Monday by Turner Classic Movies and reissued Tuesday in a lavish home-video box set, including a music box, an embroidered handkerchief and more than 8 hours of bonus features.

To produce something new for yet another "GWTW" box set, Warner Bros. Home Entertainment brought in filmmaker and historian Gary Leva. "'There's been a ton of stuff about the making of the film,'" Leva recalls the studio telling him. "'Can you give us a deeper look at how the movie portrays the Civil War?'"

Leva responded with the 30-minute documentary "Old South/New South," which drew a surprisingly frank conclusion for a studio-commissioned commemorative project: One of the world's all-time great films also has great shortcomings.

In the documentary, which is included in the box sets out Tuesday, historians discuss how the film has perpetuated mythology dubbed "The Lost Cause," which proposes Southern involvement in the Civil War was solely for noble reasons, including defense of states' rights.

"But when you get right down to it, what state right are you talking about?" asks University of North Carolina history professor David Goldfield in the Leva film. "You're talking about the right of individuals to own slaves."

Based on Margaret Mitchell's 1936 best-seller, "Gone With the Wind" is fiction, about a spoiled Old South socialite, Scarlett O'Hara. But the real-life war that serves as her story's backdrop looms too large in the film for many to overlook.

"(Slavery) is such a component of the movie, and the characters who you are rooting for are oblivious," noted film critic and TCM host Ben Mankiewicz.

Actress Hattie McDaniel, who played Scarlett's devoted nanny Mammy, a slave, became the first African-American actor to be nominated for and win an Academy Award.

Nevertheless, the film's portrayal of black characters has been criticized ever since the world premiere in Atlanta on Dec. 13, 1939.

"In 'Gone With the Wind,' slavery is portrayed in the most benevolent terms," Leva said. "Characters like Mammy are looked at like family members. And there's no hint at any sort of wrongdoing ??? the slave masters do nothing in the film that seems inappropriate."

At least the movie got one thing right: Tomorrow is, indeed, another day; Hollywood is finally offering a grittier, more honest view of slavery in films such as "12 Years a Slave" and "Django Unchained."

"Compare 'Gone With the Wind' and 'Django' ??? very different films about the same period of time, with a lot of the same imagery, dealt with in very different ways," observed actress Kerry Washington.

The "Scandal" star is one of the leads in 2012's "Django," Quentin Tarantino's violent pre-Civil War saga, which includes such scenes as an owner forcing his slaves into gruesome death matches.

Washington said the final scene in "Django," a plantation in flames, is a direct reference to "Gone With the Wind." But she added "GWTW" "has a really important place in the history of filmmaking, and in the history of African-Americans at the Oscars, in the history of messaging and how we portray history. And all of that is worth talking about."

Leva, a Texan who said he considers himself a Southerner, acknowledged he's conflicted over "Gone With the Wind."

"For me, as a film, just looking at it cinematically, it is a masterpiece," said Leva. "But politically? ... If you were to do the film today, you wouldn't make the film nearly as romantic. You'd make the film much grittier. And you could show, I think, in a balanced way, that some Southern slave owners were, perhaps, kind human beings, and some of them were brutal."

And that's precisely what director Steve McQueen did with this year's best picture Oscar-winner, "12 Years a Slave."

"The fact that the 75th anniversary of 'Gone With the Wind' comes in the same year that '12 Years a Slave' wins ??? it makes it, for a change, a little bit simple," Mankiewicz said. "Like, 'Look what kind of progress we've made?' And if somebody has, what, 6?? hours to view both? That's a pretty good way to get a little cross-section of studying America and studying Hollywood simultaneously."

So what is McQueen's take on "Gone With the Wind"?

"I haven't seen it," he said.

Online: <http://www.gonewiththewindmovie.com/>

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