

## THE GREAT DEBATERS \_\_\_\_\_ 6.5/10

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### *Ghandi + eloquence vs. lynch law mob mentality*

*Written by Robert Eisele*

*Directed by Denzel Washington*

Denzel Washington ... Melvin B. Tolson

Nate Parker ... Henry Lowe

Jurnee Smollett ... Samantha Boone

Denzel Whitaker ... James Farmer Jr.

Jermaine Williams ... Hamilton Burgess

Forest Whitaker ... Dr. James Farmer Sr.

*"The state is currently spending five times more for the education for a white child than it is fitting to educate a colored child. That means better textbooks for that child than for that child. I say that's a shame, but my opponent says today is not the day for whites and coloreds to go to the same college. To share the same campus. To walk into the same classroom. Well, would you kindly tell me when that day is going to come? Is it going to come tomorrow? Is it going to come next week? In a hundred years? Never? No, the time for justice, the time for freedom, and the time for equality is always, is always right now!" — Samantha*

Watching the *The Great Debaters* gives everyone, white and black, a stark and unforgiving picture of what racial or ethnic oppression and intimidation is all about—and the obscenity of lynch mob rule (aka lynch law) practiced predominantly in the American South into modern times—this short article states the last publicly known lynching occurred in 1969. From the several references I've read, the origin of the practice of lynching was not racially specific, but through the 19th century and especially following the Civil War lynch law was most common in the South and disproportionately applied to blacks.

So why am I bringing up all this business about lynching in the South? Because these acts of arbitrary mob murder by ubiquitous white trash, often with the blessing of church and political leaders, upon blacks created an overwhelming psychological trauma among these poor people. So much so, that their spirit of resistance against such "torture/murder under cover of law" fuels every manner of public expression... including arguments for justice in academic debate forums.

*The Great Debaters* begins telling the story of Melvin Tolson (Denzel Washington) assembling a first-rate debate team from a tiny black college in Marshall, Texas, in the 1930s. As these students gel into a debate team, we could be watching any film about educational achievement against tall odds. But in the course of their struggle, they encounter instances of racial intimidation culminating in the accidental witness of a brutal lynching under cover of darkness. The youngest member of the team, James Farmer, Jr. (Denzel Whitaker), is so deeply scarred by the experience that he channels his energy into superior debating performance on the national stage.

This is a small cause-oriented movie, obviously a labor of love for Denzel Washington, that breaks out of the black justice "niche" in unexpected ways. One's interest is immediately piqued in the opening scenes, where the brash, brilliant young Henry Lowe (Nate Parker), crashing a rural roadhouse party, barely escapes the wrath of a jealous husband. Turns out that Tolson, who has a night life as a tenant-farmer organizer, is highly regarded among the participants; thus he intervenes and Lowe lives to carry on as a smooth operator another day. So right away, the Henry Lowe character provides, forgive the pun, color.

Then the plot shifts to the surroundings of Wiley College, and begins its setup of the environment for black scholars and learned preacher men. We're given to see this world mostly through the eyes of the young James Farmer—he really looks like the youngest college student in history (though IMDb says he's 18)—as he becomes interested in joining the debate team largely because of his attraction to Samantha Boone (Jurnee Smollett). Farmer's stern and accomplished father Dr. James Farmer Sr. (Forest Whitaker) is the picture of integrity and strength, doing his best to negotiate a life under the resentful conditions of a psychotic subculture of menacing, illiterate whites. [There's no doubt these whites are from the same gene pool of unconsciousness that regards George Bush as a fine president. :)]

As a period piece, the film captures perfectly the time and place... and pace of the pre WW2 era in East Texas, and what it must have been like to grow up black with aspirations therein. Not easy. And we see so many quiet acts of heroism in the conduct of a few of these exemplary people's lives. I would, however, expect that in the reality of those times, more than a handful of Southern whites in the Marshall, Texas, area would have sympathized with these victimized Negroes; we don't really get the impression that any whites at all in leadership roles in the South were interested in racial integration and equality. I suspect that's a distortion of how it was.

It's fairly easy to stereotype, so perhaps Washington and the producers fell into a trap or two in that respect. Another area where I feel the moviemakers err is giving viewers the impression lynching was originated exclusively for whites against blacks in the South. IMDb even points out the error in one of the more inflammatory quotes about lynching, that has proved to be nonauthentic. I think we are all better served to stick to the known facts and not to take the easy way out by misrepresenting what some particular individual said. The dramatic impact of the lynch law universe, itself, is frightening enough without pockets of exaggeration.

So I give Denzel the director and his producers a C for historical accuracy. Indeed, the C might even turn into a D if the debate transcripts have been Hollywooded up. As eloquent as the speechifying is, I also balk at believing we are getting a literal rendering of the debate verbiage. My recollection of academic debate is that the passions are rarely excited, and in many of these screen debates—e.g. Samantha's quote at the beginning of this review—the emotions are stirred without qualms. It's all right, because this is a sort of movie where poetic license is understandable and even desirable. But I think the movie would have been great instead of good if played historically more exact. [Plus, no way Samantha is nearly so hot as Jurnee Smollett.][1]

Denzel the actor is in top form and delivers a performance that befits his Academy Award (*Training Day*, 2001); same with Forest Whitaker. And the younger actors acquit themselves well, especially Nate Parker as Henry Lowe; he's definitely a screen presence to reckon with.

In January I wrote a column defending Kelly Tilghman of the Golf Channel, who in her haste to come up with a term had said words to the effect that if the younger players want to beat Tiger Woods, they'll have to "gang up on him and lynch him in a back alley." [Clearly, she meant to say "jump" instead of "lynch."] I still stand by my argument in that column, but now I recognize more completely the atrocity of lynching, and its role in social control and dominance— it brings to mind the ritualistic tortures and killing by Catholic Church clerics against all those uppity individuals during the Dark Ages and Inquisition—and why it is particularly sensitive to the black community.

Fundamentally, what I think we need to start recognizing as a species—and to which movies like *The Great Debaters* contribute however modestly—is a profound need for growth in individual consciousness, no matter what our genetic composition.

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[1] It turns out Samantha Booke is based on the real person Henrietta Bell Wells. (Other details of the reality of the Wiley College accomplishments were altered or embellished in the movie, but I haven't had time to check it out.) The real Henrietta died just recently in March 2008 at the age of 96; she and Tolson were real (and heroic), as was James Farmer, who became the leader of Congress for Racial Equality (CORE).

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*The Great Debaters* | *Denzel Washington* | *Forest Whitaker* | *Racial Justice*