

Will the Mandela Movie Even Win an Oscar Nomination?

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The whole world recognized and paid tribute to South African icon Nelson Mandela when he died at age 95. 91 Heads of State attended his funeral. The UN General Assembly organized a special tribute. His legacy is secure in official circles, but will there be recognition in the place that seems to matter to the media even more: Hollywood?

The Oscar nominations are due any day, and early on, it seemed, as if the epic movie about the world's most revered icon was a sure thing for Oscar consideration. Most of the main big newspaper reviewers loved it and, and its distributor Harvey Weinstein has specialized in influencing Academy decisions.

But of late, it lost its buzz, and is buried by the hype machine, almost being treated as an also ran. The entertainment media no longer seems to take it seriously. All the focus is on other films and the big US stars.

The producers of the movie, made in South Africa, albeit with a British director, Judson Chadwick, and Oscar celebrated screenwriter William Nicholson, were earlier hopeful that they had a good chance of winning at least one of the statuettes that quickly translate into a place in cinema history and more bang at the box-office.

For them, making this film was always far more than a commercial endeavor. In my book, *MadibaAtoZ: The Many Faces of Nelson Mandela*, producer Anant Singh shares his passion for the subject and explains that it took 16 years and as many as 50 versions of script to put together the money and the cast. He was making it not only to honor Mandela but also tell the story of his country's liberation. They worked as independents with no major studio behind them.

They were also very commercial in their calculations, doing what they they had to do to get it made and get it out, also conscious of deferring to Hollywood formula, by focusing on the love story between Nelson and Winnie and, in effect, depoliticizing the story of a very political figure once known for saying, "The Struggle Is My Life."

On the left, there was disappointment as the review in Britain's *Counterfire* expressed this way: "This absence of ideological perspective is probably to be expected but the concluding effect of the film is to produce a sanitized and depoliticized Mandela that does not help us comprehend his massive impact. The apolitical Mandela in the film is the one neoliberal warmongers like Blair, Bush and Obama are happy to eulogize."

I am sure if the filmmakers had tried to please ideologues on all sides, the movie probably wouldn't have even been made, much less released, with the small fortune in marketing monies required to be considered competitive.

That said, it did make news with lots of star-studded attention grabbing premieres and some media attention, especially, after Mandela died, while a Royal screening was underway in England.

The movie itself got less attention than its stars and connection with a well known leader.

And, yes, there was also sympathy in Tinsel Town, where commerce, grosses and celebrities, not newsy issues, are always topic #1.

Years ago, one of my Mandela documentaries was passed over for Oscar consideration, but the Academy, out of interest I am sure, hosted a screening in LA under their auspices. I was pleased to be there and got lots of positive comments from the audience. That was the closest I got to an Oscar.

Movies about the great and the good have an uphill battle in challenging Hollywood product that, this year again, seems more mesmerized by big time crime dramas like American Hustle and the Wolf of Wall Street that make con men appear cool and groovy. Their only morality is amorality.

Those movies feature better-known stars and more made in the USA storylines, aided and abetted by even bigger and more recent advertising budgets. Mandela Long Walk To Freedom didn't have the deep pockets to compete when the film went into "wide release" on Christmas Day. By then, it was already being considered old.

The Golden Globes did give Mandela three nominations—one to Idris Elba, the male lead, and two for music—one to the Irish band U2 for the hardly political up-beat end song. Getting the band to the awards ceremony will enhance its appeal, but everyone knows the Globes reflect the picks of many self-styled foreign correspondents, not died in the wool movie industry Americanos.

The NAACP image awards also honored Elba as one of their own. In Britain, their academy nominated Mandela for the best British film of the year, even though it was primarily made by Videovision, a South African company.

Curiously, the nationalism and racial identity embedded in those awards were the very values that the real Mandela rejected.

"12 Years a Slave" is the "black" movie expected to win, if any does. In that drama, a white man played by superstar Brad Pitt freed the slave, not a people's revolt. Its appeal may have had more to do with the lack of attention finally paid to slavery in the land of slavery—but by a British director—and the guilt the movie plays to, as well as its pervasive violence, which, as black activist H Rap Brown once observed, is "as American as Cherry Pie."

Mandela features violence too—but oppressive state violence, more than individual bad guys that you can hate. Apartheid may be a more recent crime than slavery but the latter is part of a U.S history that some Americans—not all, for sure—are ashamed of.

Slavery as a subject is also presented only as American while Mandela dramatizes a freedom struggle in Africa that has not been front and center much lately in a news system that routinely treats Africa as a continent of wars, massacres and coups.

Mandela was one of the few African leaders even reported here and the fact that his death occasioned considerable coverage may have reinforced the idea that his story has been over exposed. Why see a movie versions when the real man was on TV. ‘

That’s not true, but that’s a perception that certainly cut into the film’s ticket sales.

If Mandela Long Walk To Freedom is not on the Oscar list, it will be gone from theaters quickly, probably to return on TV movie channels and video. See it while you still can. You will be glad you did!

Danny Schechter made documentaries about the making and meaning of the movie Mandela Long Walk to Freedom. He also wrote the book, MadibaAtoZ: the Many Faces of Nelson Mandela (Madibabook.com) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

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