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Review

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had happened earlier). It may be difficult for a two-hour film to grapple with the subtle complexities of the past; again, perhaps all we can ask is if the basic thrust of the film has been true to history. *Glory* easily passes this test.

The applause and commendation won by actors Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman are deserved, although this reaction stems in part from their symbolic presence as African-Americans playing a decisive role in the war. W. E. B. Du Bois was not the first but was one of the most eloquent historians to detail how black labor abandoning the slave South and joining the Union military was a turning point in the conflict. *Glory* does detail the militant black objection to being discriminated against in pay, although it could have done a better job of illuminating how the 54th fought for eighteen months before they were paid wages equal to those of white soldiers. History and art could have been served better if attention had been paid to attorney Nelson Mitchell of Charleston, who risked his practice fighting for the black soldiers captured at Fort Wagner to be classified as prisoners of war and not shot as insurrectionists or sold back into slavery.

In the context of the glory that is *Glory*, the force of its antiracist theme, these quibbles pale into insignificance. Only 125 years after the Civil War, millions in this nation finally are seeing a more complete version of its military history. *Glory* merits the plaudits it has garnered and deserves much, much more.

Gerald Horne

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*Eight Men Out.* Produced by Sarah Pillsbury and Midge Sanford; directed by John Sayles. 1988; color; 120 minutes. Distributor: Orion Pictures. Video Distributor: Orion Home Video.

**F**rom its opening scene, *Eight Men Out* signals its difference from recent versions of *The Baseball Movie*. There are no fathers playing catch with sons, as in *The Natural*, none of the offbeat sweetness of *Bull Durham* or *Field of Dreams*, and (best of all) no cornfields. Rather, director John Sayles presents us with a pointed montage of spectators at Chicago's Comiskey Park—two star-struck boys, two cynical sportswriters, and two scheming gamblers—watching the 1919 White Sox finish off their pennant-winning season. There is little ballplay in Sayles's account of the famous "fix" of the 1919 World Series by eight "Black" Sox; what there is takes place on a dry, dusty field, shot in flat, uninviting light. For this is less a movie about playing games than about watching them, paying for them, and controlling them. It is about the forces that surrounded the ballfield, like those different spectators: forces that elevated baseball into "the national pastime" and that threatened, in the 1919 series, to destroy it.

Here, baseball is played and displayed on the field of history. Indeed, *Eight Men Out* is as smart and subtle in its handling of American cultural history as any recent movie I have seen. Based on Eliot Asinof's exhaustive book, it portrays the Black Sox scandal with fairly scrupulous accuracy (albeit with some elisions to which I will return). It is wonderfully attuned to the larger contexts within which the fix and the World Series unfolded. Sayles gives us a knowing glimpse of the "sporting life" of rough male sociability and vice that brought ballplayers and gamblers together; he captures the mass cultural world of newspapers, street lore, and athletic spectacles that transformed city folk into die-hard fans and paying customers; and he vividly portrays the class conflicts that underlay baseball's growth as a commercial entertainment. Most important, Sayles's historical imagination comes through in the theme that frames his rendering of the Black Sox story. What preoccupies *Eight Men Out* is less the moral condition of its protagonists than the social construction—the making and meaning—of their actions. The movie seeks to unpack the contending interests and motives that produced the scandal and determined its trajectory; to

recover sympathetically the experiences of the anti-heroes at its center; to explore the desires, grievances, and inequities that formed and deformed their choices. The result is a poignant work of demystification: a case study in the fall of culture-heroes and a meditation on the limits (to use the jargon of historians and big-leaguers) of “free agency.”

Given its subject, *Eight Men Out* could hardly avoid being anti-heroic. Yet it does more than simply debunk the romance of baseball as a boys’ pastorate, a refuge of timelessness and innocence. Sayles in fact shows enormous affection for the mystique of the game, but he historicizes it, rooting it in the mass media and mass fantasies of twentieth-century urban life. This is why those pairs of sportswriters and adoring boys, whom we follow throughout the film, are so important: they are the Greek chorus of *Eight Men Out*, producers and consumers of the heroic myth Shoeless Joe Jackson and the others betrayed. The (fictive) boys in particular represent the voice of baseball’s innocence; one of them gets to speak the most famous (I almost wrote “timeless”) line of the story—“Say it ain’t so, Joe”—to Jackson outside the Cook County Courthouse. Yet Sayles goes out of his way to place them *within* the realities of working-class street life and urban commercial culture; they earn their “two bits” for bleacher seats selling the daily papers in which their idols’ legends have been fabricated. The two sportswriters, Hugh Fullerton and Ring Lardner (historical figures who helped to expose the scandal), are similarly ambiguous: disillusioned insiders who cannot quite expunge their own boyish infatuation with the game. *Eight Men Out* thus presents big-league ball as a game whose heroism has always already been commercialized, an institution that strategically promotes but then passionately consumes its own mystifications.

Unsurprisingly, then, Sayles depicts the throwing of the 1919 World Series as both a betrayal and an outgrowth of baseball’s ascendance. On the one hand, the Black Sox betrayed a national rite; on the other, they simply played “hardball” in what had become by 1919 a big and fiercely contentious business. It was pecuniary conflict, pure and simple, that produced the fix: the players’ revolt against White Sox owner Charles Comiskey’s almost incredible parsimony. If anything, *Eight Men Out* mutes the degree to which “Commy” (ironic nickname) underpaid the best team in baseball, while profiting extravagantly from their success. The movie also mutes the larger class conflicts within professional ball that made the players’ actions so predictable. “Commy’s” draconian labor policies depended on legal and institutional controls—most of all, the infamous reserve rule—which gave team owners monopoly power over their players’ mobility and market value. Conversely, the Black Sox’s bribetaking was only the most shocking episode in forty years of player resistance that also included union drives, wildcat strikes, and intermittent collusion with gamblers. Particularly in the Chicago of 1919, scene of a bloody steel strike, it is hard not to read the throwing of the World Series as a form of labor sabotage.

Yet, as the movie makes clear, it was a poignantly self-destructive act of rebellion. The gamblers with whom the Black Sox dealt had even less solicitude than Comiskey for their well-being. With its own hierarchy of small-timers, stars, and money men—even its own “Commy” in Arnold Rothstein (“AR”), the financier and main profiteer of the fix—the gambling underworld simply constituted another form of big business: pro ball with the romance and publicity stripped away. Not surprisingly, very little of the promised cash found its way into the players’ pockets; Rothstein and company merely repeated the exploitation that drove the Sox to deal with them in the first place. By the end of *Eight Men Out*, “Commy” and “AR,” the legitimate and illegitimate businessmen, have converged on one another; they collude together to fix the 1921 extortion trial of the players that followed exposure of the scandal. When the Black Sox are acquitted—in part, because key evidence is removed from the state’s attorney’s files—the one preserves his baseball property, the other his profitable secrecy. Both remain, in Sayles’s populist version of the story, parasites on the skills of those they cheat.

Against these adversaries, the Black Sox exercised what control they could muster—control that grew progressively weaker throughout the story. It is here, in tracing the effects of their choices and their powerlessness on the players themselves, that Sayles’s exploration of agency is most interesting and most moving. He makes *Eight Men Out* the drama of their

shrinkage as historical actors. The process begins with the World Series itself; by the last game, with several players having second thoughts, pitcher Lefty Williams is coerced into completing the fix by a threat against his wife. Yet it is in the shift from ballfield to courtroom—where the players are pawns in an arcane struggle among Comiskey, Rothstein, the baseball establishment, and the state—that the movie best portrays their diminishment. The legal scenes are filled with vignettes of marginalization: an attorney's smug claim to being the Babe Ruth of the bar; the crabbed, awkward "X" with which Joe Jackson, the most masterful athlete among the Black Sox, signs his confession. Despite the verdict of innocence, the extortion trial merely prefigures the players' ultimate exclusion from the field of action: baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis defeats Comiskey by banishing them forever from the game.

It is not clear that the players were in fact quite so adrift. Judging by the original book, their collusion was more active and less ambivalent than Sayles presents it; their legal maneuvering, both during and after the trial, was more cunning and tenacious. Yet these are matters of interpretative portrayal. And Sayles's portrayal is a powerful one: it was the players' loss of agency, not their loss of innocence, which made the scandal so sad. For baseball is, above all, a game that lionizes personal agency: its narrative logic, its capacity for suspense and heroics, is rooted in discrete tests of skill and clear contests for mastery. The game's jargon underscores this celebration of the personal contest and the decisive action: "control" pitching, "power" hitting, "strikes," "hits," "steals," "runs." The Black Sox were in the 1919 World Series because, more than anyone else, they embodied the capacity for controlled interventions and masterful action—on the field. Yet, in throwing the series, that is precisely what they bargained away. They used their only source of authority against itself, placing it under the dictates of others.

*Eight Men Out* thus captures the pathos of a certain kind of "people's history": the spectacle of popular heroes colluding, shrewdly and foolishly, in their disfranchisement. For what the Black Sox lost was not baseball itself but the social franchise—the wages and prestige and adulation—that came with it. They lost their place in the big leagues. Sayles ends the story with a wonderful emblem of this loss: a dream-like sequence, shot in bleached, nearly monochromatic tones, in which the viewer watches Joe Jackson come to the plate one more time. As in the opening scene of the film, he cracks a triple and turns to acknowledge the cheers of the fans—a hundred or so. He is playing semipro ball under an assumed name. Ironically—and cannily—Sayles has returned us to the romance world of *The Baseball Movie* he began by subverting. He leaves us with a vision of the boy-hero as a refugee from the burdens of his past, playing on a field of dreams. Yet this is hardly an image of transcendence. Shoeless Joe is an exile. He can play ball but not as a public person, not as a means of marking his "X" on the world: not on the field of history. History goes on elsewhere, and the games are fixed.

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