

Truth Isn't in the Details

BY ERIC HARRISON

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In the current movie "The Hurricane," Denzel Washington plays Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a real-life boxer who is hounded for most of his life and finally jailed by an obsessed cop. Dan Hedaya plays the policeman as a malevolent force, an unyielding racist on a mission. But in real life, no such person existed.

In "Boys Don't Cry," a young woman who had been living as a man is killed in a farmhouse along with another woman. In real life, three people died that New Year's Eve, the third victim a black man who never appears in the movie. Another woman shown at the farmhouse denies having been there. She has filed a lawsuit claiming that the movie defames her and invades her privacy.

In "The Insider," the highly praised story of a tobacco executive who stood up to the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., a heroic producer for "60 Minutes" dominates the tobacco story, manipulates the legal system and spoon-feeds scoops to the Wall Street Journal. In real life, the newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize for its out-in-front coverage of the story, and the real-life tobacco executive, as well as others, say the movie greatly exaggerates the producer's role.

All three movies are among the most highly regarded films of the past year, likely Oscar contenders that have brought prestige to their respective studios for their high-minded grappling with serious issues. And, as was the case with "A Civil Action," "Summer of Sam" and some other true-life movies of recent years, they all have come under fire for the liberties they take with facts.

ADVERTISING

It's an old story: A movie comes out based on a real and highly publicized event, and straight away reporters who covered the event write stories debating its accuracy; participants turn up to say they've been wronged; and ideologues on the right or left embrace or vilify the film as propaganda, while other moviegoers merely shrug and sniff, "It's only a movie."

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The accuracy issue is looming larger than usual of late, in part because so many recent films have dealt with emotionally charged, true events. The debate--waged on radio talk shows and in newspaper and magazine articles--centers on fundamental questions about the limits of artistic license, the social obligations of film and the importance of factuality in art.

No matter how contentious the issue gets, however, filmmakers keep making fact-based films, and that's not just because they lack imagination. These are the movies that win awards. They have built-in cachet. A more personal film might speak truer of society, but who can dispute that "The Hurricane" matters? Movies like this validate Hollywood's sense of itself.

In defending themselves from attack, the producers of "The Hurricane" are quick to point out that they screened it at the White House, and when it was shown at the United Nations people stood up to applaud. Their movie is important, they seem to be saying. It moves people. It's petty to quibble over the facts.

Kimberly Peirce, who directed and co-wrote "Boys Don't Cry," agrees that factual accuracy should never be the goal of art. "It's important to distinguish between the facts and the truth," she said in an interview.

"I've always thought that the facts were in service to the truth. You can change facts, you can change characters, you can change everything, in search of the basic truth."

But what, one may ask, is the artist's obligation to history, to truth that can be verified?

"Boys," like "Hurricane," "The Insider" and many other movies based on fact, deal with real-world issues in a way that suggests the filmmakers take social responsibilities seriously.

"The Hurricane" and "Boys Don't Cry," in particular, derive part of their power from the iconic force of their protagonists--a black man wrongly imprisoned for murder and a woman persecuted and killed for being different. But the films also provoke tears and outrage for another reason--our awareness that Rubin "Hurricane" Carter and Brandon Teena really endured these injustices.

Given the emotions the movies generate and the political weight they carry, quite apart from whatever merit they may have as works of drama, viewers may understandably feel cheated to learn that a story element that particularly affected them was fabricated.

And what of the real-life participants? Might they not have even more reason to feel aggrieved?

Lewis M. Steel, one of a team of attorneys who represented Carter and his co-defendant, John Artis, on murder charges, criticized “The Hurricane” for giving the impression that a team of Canadian do-gooders uncovered crucial evidence and eclipsed the importance of lawyers in winning Carter’s freedom. But what bothers him more, he says, is that the movie trivializes a major societal problem--racism within the criminal justice system.

“When you tell the story in a soap opera fashion, when you create the one bad cop and then have the good white guard in the jail and the Canadians coming to the rescue and all that, you don’t allow the society to see what really happened,” Steel said. “You Hollywood-ize what occurred. The end result strays so far from reality that it does not allow mainly white people to come to grips with why so many black people have such suspicion of the criminal justice system.”

In response to an earlier Times article critical of the movie that Steel wrote, the producers published a Counterpunch in Monday’s Times calling him a self-promoter who deliberately misrepresents the film.

It’s the same charge they earlier leveled at a New York Times reporter. They took out a full-page ad in Variety and posted on the movie’s Web site an angry letter they sent to the New York Times rebutting accusations made about the movie by Selwyn Raab, who had covered Carter’s trial.

The letter, signed by executive producer Rudy Langlais, accuses Raab of numerous inaccuracies. He also accuses him of setting out to “lynch” the movie in part because he felt it should have acknowledged his role as a reporter who wrote articles important to the case.

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As for “The Insider,” when it came out in November, CBS newsman Mike Wallace protested mightily--without having seen the film--that the movie misrepresented him. Brown & Williamson also, predictably, denounced the movie as false. Among the things the company took issue with is the movie’s depiction of the firm waging a fear campaign against its former executive that included death threats.

“The Insider” has failed to ignite much enthusiasm with the ticket-buying public, but it has been lavishly praised by reviewers for its serious--some would say self-important--examination of corporate venality and cowardice. But the debate over its accuracy has received almost as much attention as the hosannas.

But Steel’s comments concerning the way the movie based on Rubin Carter’s life “Hollywood-ized” events raise another issue, one that applies to “The Insider” and other reality-based movies as well: Many people were less disturbed that the changes in “The Hurricane” fictionalized the story than they were that they cheapened it. They found the made-up characters one-dimensional and the plot concoctions contrived. They had no problem with artistic license; they just preferred that it be used artistically.

Movies based on real-life characters or events are, of course, released all the time.

Sometimes, as in David Lynch’s “The Straight Story” or the upcoming Julia Roberts movie “Erin Brockovich”--both based on obscure events--it hardly matters what inspired the film. We experience it simply as a story.

Similarly, we can sometimes view as fiction movies that are based on well-known events if the events happened far enough in the past. Wyatt Earp’s gunfight at the OK Corral and Eliot Ness’ Prohibition-era battles with Al Capone have passed into legend. Our reaction to movies based on these events--from John Ford’s 1946 classic “My Darling Clementine” to 1994’s “Wyatt Earp” and 1987’s “The Untouchables”--is uncomplicated by qualms over accuracy, even when we know or suspect that the stories have been embellished.

But other movies command our attention by announcing themselves as true. With “The Insider” or “The Hurricane” or past films such as “JFK” or “All the President’s Men,” everyone knows the story is based on actual events, even if we don’t know or remember much about what really happened. Because these were important events, or because they received so much media attention, we may even be emotionally vested.

This is why the uproar is so loud when inconsistencies with facts are found.

Should anyone wonder why Hollywood regularly would subject itself to the debate and criticism fact-based movies bring, the answer may have been on display at the recent Golden Globe awards. In a year when the most popular movie was a glorified cartoon sci-fi fantasy that came with a reported \$3 billion in licensing tie-ins, the nominated movies were oh-so earnest and worthy. No “Star Wars” prequels here. No cyberpunk head games (“The Matrix”). No scary ghost stories, no matter how well-told (“The Sixth Sense”).

With major awards going to both “Hurricane” and “Boys,” as well as to an HBO biopic about black actress Dorothy Dandridge, the show became a celebration of martyrs.

On award night--any award night--Hollywood wants to be taken, and to take itself, seriously. Even at the Globes, once considered something of a joke as an award, this meant honoring self-consciously “important” movies. The prominence given to based-on-fact message films conferred upon the proceedings the illusion that the event, the movies and everyone assembled actually mattered in the real world.

When Washington won his award for best dramatic actor, he grabbed the hand of the man he portrayed and led him to the stage with him. The black-tie audience gave Carter a standing ovation, his second of the evening.

When actress Hilary Swank accepted her award for her portrayal of the slain Brandon Teena in “Boys,” she thanked the murder victim in her speech for being an inspiration. “He has given me the courage to be myself and to look within to find myself and not to look to society to define me,” she proclaimed.

And when Halle Berry won the award for best actress in a TV movie for “Introducing Dorothy Dandridge,” she spoke tearfully of her identification with the late actress, who had suffered racial discrimination in the 1950s.

“As you honor me, who you really honor is the eminent Dorothy Dandridge,” Berry said. “She never got to stand here and be recognized by her peers, but because she lived, I am able to.”

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Now, almost everyone will tell you that the Golden Globes, aside from their presumed influence on Oscar voting, mean very little in Hollywood. But during the three-hour awards ceremony, the Globes seemed to mean quite a bit. They seemed to stand for justice and for inclusion and for human compassion. The awards meant something because the movies meant something, quite apart from whether they were any good. The show seemed to tell us that movies--important movies--and the people who make and award them, can make a difference.

And then the show was over, and the winners and losers flocked to Trader Vic's and the Beverly Hilton to party into the night.

Perhaps this was mere vanity. Perhaps the movies really don't mean that much at all. And maybe Hollywood's need to appear serious and important obscures the actual quality of the films in question. Aside from their social relevance and the air of importance that attends them, are these really among the year's most accomplished films?

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe, at this time of year especially, all that matters is how the movies make us feel--not only about the worlds depicted but also about ourselves. And maybe it matters not at all whether the feelings are based on truth or fiction.

Coming Monday

* Calendar examines the continuing battle over "Boys Don't Cry."