

**"MANDELA":
A Commentary**

Any biographical aspect of Nelson and Winnie Mandela's life has all the necessary ingredients needed for the production of an excellent film, which can absolutely be accomplished by a good writer with a solid political understanding of South African history and the African National Congress, combined with a good director who possesses a vision for truth and simplicity.

However, in the case of MANDELA, an HBO docu-drama and the first of television's Apartheid movies, the producers decided to ride the soft edges and opted to present a supposedly semi-true account of Winnie and Nelson's "love story". But, in so doing, they projected a skimpy semi-realistic depiction of Nelson Mandela's role in fighting for his people against the South African white minority racist regime.

We first meet Mandela (played by Danny Glover) in 1952. The hero emerges from a locomotive train, at first glance, looking like an insurance agent. Carrying a briefcase, he pads the rugged township streets, going from shack to shack knocking on doors as if looking for clients - their version of Nelson Mandela, Attorney At Law, what a misrepresentation! Throughout the film, Mandela is portrayed as an ambitious, all-knowing, never-fearing, almost pompous African National Congress Leader. Omitted is the reality that Mandela is a leader and hero for millions of South Africans - a loyal freedom fighter with convictions to the struggle. However, his leadership was not self-induced as depicted in the film, but, rather encouraged by his people.

Out of nowhere, we are introduced through "mug-shots" to Mandela's comrades and political partners, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo, as they are targeted by white South African police officers for surveillance. Historically both were prominent leaders in the struggle. Tambo, however, is fleetingly seen and cast away never to be dealt with again. What a waste of history and facts!

As the three freedom fighters embark on a political journey of resistance against the injustices of Apartheid they are portrayed as dandy-dapper intellectual "mob" members stepping out from the back streets of a Hollywood version of 1940 Chicago.

Mandela's life is dedicated to the entire struggle of dismantling white supremacy. In order to thoroughly and truthfully portray the life of this man, there must be a portrayal of Mandela and his functioning role within the political events of the time. The "tight-lipped" utterance of Winnie on her husband's departure echoes Mandela's ever-prevailing ambience: "I didn't marry a man, I married a struggle."

In further contemplating the thematic nuance of the Mandela "love story", the evidence is clear and vivid that Nelson Mandela is left politically unexplored. Granted, there are familiar fragmented glimpses of semi-accurate political events, themes and provocative speeches which jolt us from time to time by Mandela: "...I will not leave South Africa, nor will I surrender, Amandla!", and emotionally moving speeches by Winnie denouncing educational dogmas: "...If the children of South Africa must learn in Afrikaans, then the Prime Minister must learn to speak Zulu!" Governmental abuses and harassments in the name of anti-communism, angry blacks protesting and singing freedom songs, then there are the horrors of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre (depicted more like a "shoot-out" as opposed to the MASSACRE it was), a quick meaningless ball of fire symbolizing the 1976 uprising in Soweto, all presented without exploring Mandela's philosophy in relation to these political events, and all explored without any depth.

The film totally ignores any interrogation of Mandela who shudders at the thought of being sent to the infamous Robbin Island, portrayed in the film, by the way, as some type of "Paradise Lost", birds fly over blue skies and the coziness between Mandela and Walter Sisulu as they rejoice in Winnie's release from prison over a painted bone-china cup of steamy hot coffee. Please!

Who is Nelson Mandela, the man? What did being kept away from his family and the struggle do to him? How does he view the political struggle as a man behind bars? Of course, one assumes many things, even assumes that he might have contemplated suicide. But did he? Did he sit in a the cold dark cell, naked, praying to his forefathers?

Through narrative, the film "tells" us that Mandela missed his family, and that Winnie misses him too. However, one basic rule for good movie making is to show the audience, but not to tell them! We must see the pain on Mandela's face and hear the pain in his voice.

There is also an absence of cultural environmental believability. The language of the people is uttered in a few songs, but only as token renditions, such as, "Ngiya Kuthanda" memorized by the actors to be murmured on occasions. But, not enough to make an impact on the viewer. As a matter of fact, they are so minute one might discern a slight mistake in the actor's dialogue.

Then, there is the contrived first meeting scene (maybe not well presented?) of Nelson and Winnie (played by Alfre Woodward) the heroine, a young social worker, who shows interesting character development as she carries the audience from a timid, almost non-speaking passive character, to an out-spoken, aggressive freedom fighter.

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There are children whose growth we never witness. One moment they are "wet behind the ears" and the next, they are delivering their father's speeches to the world - WOW! It may be difficult to cram twenty-three years into two and a half hours, but, then again, that's what "movie making" is all about.

There are incredible moments in the film regarding the white South African police. Instead of portraying their merciless brutality, as it is widely known, they are presented as sympathetic humanitarians (male versions of "Mother Theresa"). After twenty-one years, physical contact is allowed for Nelson and his family. The camera focuses on a whimpering white guard, touched by the reunion. In reality, the guard would probably have shoved them apart shouting: "nie so teen mekaav nie!" meaning, "Not so close!" Instead of being viewed as supporters of an oppressive regime insisting as quoted in the film that "Apartheid is divine wealth" they are portrayed as being law abiding officers under the Apartheid law, which gives a misleading impression that Apartheid is some kind of undefined ghost phenomena - just there, hovering over black and white South Africans alike, everyone a victim, everyone oppressed.

Actual chuckles from the audience were evoked after authorities gave some tongue and cheek definition for communism, then brands Mandela as such. Winnie Mandela is able to shout derogatory words at white officials who ignore her. Moreover, she is able to slap white officials as they uproot her and her family to new living quarters, again they ignore her. If these actions could exist in South Africa today without serious consequences, Apartheid would be history. Instead of disturbing one's nerves in the film, the white South African police tickle one's "funny bone". They are portrayed as a group of side-line comics.

Needless to say, the film is an attempt to introduce the Mandela family to the western world. Those behind the scenes tried to depict the South Africa situation the way they perceive it to be. However, Apartheid is an ugly existing governmental system. I give HBO credit for their "attempt" at reality but, it is impossible and misleading to describe "Hell" from a dead, unrepenting sinner's point of view. One is only left with hypothetical suppositions. Please, go to the source!

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