

“Detroit”

By Helen Lutz

Hollywood loves to tell stories. Some movies reflect actual historical events while others fill in the blanks with what “might have been” due to a lack of available information; kind of like filling in the dinosaurs’ DNA in Jurassic Park. James Cameron told the story of the sinking of the Titanic; historically it sunk after hitting an iceberg. The fact that the ship sank is not what kept people returning to theaters time and again to see it over and over. Cameron’s draw was the underlying love story, beautifully told – he filled in the story’s DNA.



Kathryn Bigelow offers movie goers everywhere her rendition of the story of police brutality in the 1967 assault on Detroit’s Algiers Hotel in her new film “Detroit.” Bigelow draws the audience in by introducing us to young black men hoping to be discovered by Motown. Their singing group, the Dramatics, waits patiently back stage for their turn to perform. Unfortunately for the young men, riots break out in Detroit’s streets and the police close the theater sending everyone home – the boys missing out on their big chance.

With the rioting in the streets, fires, gunshots, and the looting going on, the boys first try to get home on a city bus. That works well until it, too, comes under attack. Getting off the bus puts the boys in the middle of a war zone. They seek safety in the Algiers Hotel.

Bigelow portrays the hotel as a party establishment, an oasis of safety from the warring elements just a few blocks away. There’s music, food, drinking and a swimming pool, it’s a nice getaway. Tensions still run high and when mixed with alcohol stupid stunts begin to take shape. When the boys join the crowd and step up to get something to eat, one guest threatens another with a hand gun – and shoots him. Stunned the singers don’t know what to do until the laughter begins – the gun is nothing more than a starter’s pistol. That noisy little starter’s pistol, however, is enough to cause the police to descend on the hotel looking for a sniper.

Things don’t go well at the Algiers Hotel that night and several young men lose their lives. The Detroit police are shown to enjoy exercising police brutality led by Krauss (Will Poulter) the meanest and most bigoted cop on the force. He enjoys terrorizing and torturing the young, scared black men in his custody.

Like her husband’s rendition of “Titanic,” Bigelow takes lots of liberties filling in the DNA. We care about the characters and feel for them as the abuse is meted out by the police. In her film she graphically takes the fight for civil rights over the top showing the abuse of the black people at the hands of the white bureaucracy.

I remember the 1950’s and saw firsthand the drinking fountains and bathrooms that were just for colored people. When my grandmother would take me downtown on the bus, I always wanted to sit on the back seat, but she wouldn’t let me – the back was for the colored people. I heard bigotry from my parents and grandparents as well as the parents of my friends. As a child it was difficult to comprehend, it just didn’t make much sense to me. I was in high school during the Civil Rights movement and saw the many riots on the news. The entire country was on edge the day of Martin Luther King’s assassination – our high school released early so everyone could get home safely.

If you take time to look at people, almost all have two arms, two legs, two eyes and a nose, ten little fingers and ten little toes, it’s a shame that color and religion and ethnic background make us turn on one another. I understood the fight for civil rights, however, I think Bigelow’s violent portrayal of the story will enhance the current bigotry in our country and stir the pot. The young black lives of today have never experienced slavery, nor are they forced to drink from colored drinking fountains, and films such as this do nothing more than unnecessarily stoke the fire of prejudice. On a scale of one to four Hart Beats I give “Detroit”... TWO 1/2 Harts.