

# Inspirational biopic beset by inaccuracies

By Kam Williams  
Sentinel-Voice

When a movie bills itself as "Inspired by a True Story," to what extent should it be allowed to take liberties with the truth to spin a heartwarming tale which tugs on the heartstrings?

That is the question that begs to be answered in the course of appraising "The Great Debaters," an inspirational biopic about a professor who, in 1935, allegedly forged the fledgling debate team at a tiny Black college into a nationally ranked powerhouse that took on Harvard University in a big showdown aired on radio live all across the country.

The film's most glaring, factual faux pas is that while Wiley College did, in fact, participate in the championship finals that year, its opponent was not Harvard at all, but USC.

This fabrication naturally makes one wonder about other aspects of this recreation. Was the original contest really broadcast live on radio? (Unlikely) Was it even the first time, as implied, that a Black college competed



Denzel Washington plays Wiley College Professor Melvin Tolson in "The Great Debaters."

against a White school in the debate tournament? (No) Etcetera... etcetera...

Furthermore, the picture propagated plenty of other tall tales. For instance, there's a scene where Professor Tolson (Denzel Washington) attempts to instill some self respect in his pupils by quoting from Willie Lynch's 1712 speech supposedly delivered to fellow slave owners about how to mold and control the minds of their slaves.

Well, the problem is that

the infamous lecture never took place, and has long been dismissed by academics and experts, some African-American, as an urban legend which first surfaced circa 1993.

There isn't any reference to the speech in any literature prior to then. So, how could a professor have lectured about it way back when?

Since I've criticized references made to Willie Lynch by other flicks, it would be hypocritical for me to give

"The Great Debaters" a pass just because it's such a well-meaning message movie.

There are considerable additional conceptual obstacles in the way of enjoying this consciousness raising costume drama. For instance, whenever the Wiley team debates, it invariably is conveniently assigned to argue the politically correct side of the issue, whether that be about welfare, lynching, integration, child labor, civil disobedience or whatever

else.

Isn't the mark of a skilled debater the ability to make a convincing case for either side, especially unpopular causes you don't believe in?

All of the above fibs and fabrications aside, there is still much to recommend here.

Denzel certainly delivers as the film's plucky protagonist, as does Forest Whitaker in his co-star capacity as his less-confrontational colleague, James Farmer Sr., Gina Rivera and Kimberly Elise capably play their wives, respectively, in support roles which aren't all that demanding.

The cast is rounded out by the quartet of gifted young actors who comprise the Wiley debate team. Only one of these four characters, lovesick 14-year-old James Farmer Jr. (Denzel Whitaker), is based on a real person. The precocious Farmer would later found CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, and go on to become a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

So, the other three debaters, feisty Samantha Booke

(Jurnee Smollett), her womanizing boyfriend Henry Lowe (Nate Parker), and hefty Hamilton Burgess (Jermaine Williams) are fictional.

This makes the closing credits a tad misleading, since it relates Tolson's and Farmers' subsequent actual exploits along with alleged later achievements of the others, even though they never existed.

One can only conclude that this movie was designed for youngsters, not adults. If that's the case, do we want impressionable young minds' understanding of history to be misshaped in this fashion?

Well intentioned and well executed, and recommended with reservations only because there's still something terribly troubling even about a feel-good flick packed with so many misrepresentations.

Does the truth matter, or is reality retroactively up for grabs?

Let the debating begin.

Good (2 stars). Rated PG-13 for profanity, ethnic slurs, mature themes, brief sexuality, violence and disturbing images.

## James Brown estate issues remains on bad foot

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - The self-proclaimed widow admits she's been a bit of a drama queen, and she's not about to apologize for it.

The lawyer feels brushed aside after more than two decades of dedication.

And the son is at peace, ready to continue his father's work.

Daryl Brown said keeping his father's band together is his priority, even as others focus on the money.

"We have some family members that really just eat and sleep the situation," he said. "I was more prepared. I already knew what my assignment was. He left me the Soul Gen-

erals and that's one of the last things we talked about."

He does believe Buddy Dallas, trustees and others handling his father's finances "totally forgot about the children."

Brown, who died Christmas Day 2006 at age 73, continues to be remembered for a larger-than-life personality, his voice and flashy footwork inspiring generations of entertainers.

As thousands attended public memorial services for Brown, the legal rifts surrounding his estate were forming. It took two months for him to be buried, his body at one point resting in a sealed gold casket inside



Tomi Rae Hynie, widow of James Brown.

his home.

After he was buried in March on one of his daughter's properties, his family said a more public mausoleum was planned. There's still talk of a Graceland-like mansion at his Beech Island home.

Tomi Rae Hynie, a former backup singer who claims to be Brown's fourth wife and the mother of his child, said she led the private funeral procession that day with her son. She's claimed Brown wanted her to have his home in the western part of South Carolina, near the Georgia state line, but was locked out.

"Everybody says I'm being a drama queen and I'm a great actress," Hynie said, alter-

nately sobbing and joking during a recent telephone interview.

"All I did was cry and fall to my knees and faint a couple of times. Isn't that how a wife is supposed to act at a funeral when she loses the man she loves?"

In October, *Forbes* reported Brown made an estimated \$5 million in the prior year alone. But attorneys have said Brown's accounts do not have the money they expected. One former trustee of Brown's estate, David Cannon, has repaid \$350,000 he was accused of misappropriating.

"When I married James he said it wasn't because I was the prettiest girl in the room," Hynie said. "He said it's because I was a fighter. And I'm going to fight."

"...I'm going to fight because every night, when me and that man were in bed together, all we did was talk about this day and what I was going to have to do and how if I wanted it I was going to really have to fight for it."

Dallas has spent the year immersed in that fight.

Brown's longtime attorney and adviser met the entertainer in 1984 and was "with him through thick and thin from then until now."

But after their father died, Brown's adult children moved to oust Dallas and two other trustees.

Dallas resigned in November but now claims the judge handling the disputes forced him out and he's trying retract his resignation.

For Daryl Brown, one of six adult children listed in his father's will, the estate and the money it holds is ultimately less important than his father's musical legacy.

## Peterson

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Billy Taylor called Peterson one of the finest jazz pianists of his time.

"He set the pace for just about everybody that followed him. He really was just a special player," Taylor said.

Born on Aug. 15, 1925, in a poor neighborhood southwest of Montreal, Peterson obtained a passion for music from his father. Daniel Peterson, a railway porter and self-taught musician, bestowed his love of music to his five children, offering them a means to escape from poverty. Oscar Peterson learned to play trumpet and piano at a young age, but af-

ter a bout with tuberculosis had to concentrate on the latter.

He became a teen sensation in his native Canada, playing in dance bands and recording in the late 1930s and early 1940s. But he got his real break as a surprise guest at Carnegie Hall in 1949, after which he began touring the United States and Europe.

He quickly made a name for himself as a jazz virtuoso, often compared to piano great Art Tatum, his childhood idol, for his speed and technical skill.

He was also influenced by Nat King Cole, whose Nat King Cole Trio album he

considered "a complete musical thesaurus for any aspiring Jazz pianist."

Peterson suffered a stroke in 1993 that weakened his left hand, but not his passion or drive for music. Within a year, he was back on tour, recording "Side By Side" with Itzhak Perlman. As he grew older, Peterson kept playing and touring, despite worsening arthritis and difficulties walking. "A jazz player is an instant composer," Peterson once said in a CBC interview, while conceding jazz did not have the mass appeal of other musical genres. "You have to think about it, it's an intellectual form," he said.