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The Butler

Carol Miles
carolmiles@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Butler*, directed by Lee Daniels.

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While the movie The Butler is set against historical events, the title character and his family are fictionalized. --Lee Daniels in the forward to *The Butler: A Witness to History*.

Lee Daniels' fictional film, *The Butler*, is the story of Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker), an African-American man who leaves the cotton fields of the south to escape consignment to a permanent underclass. The caste system under de facto slavery would have ensured this.

Under the tutelage of an older, wiser mentor (Clarence Williams III), Gaines becomes skilled as a butler: the technical aspects of which are only a part of the job. The real mastery takes the form of a heightened prescience. As the boss tells him, "Look through their eyes. See what it is they want. See what it is they need. Anticipate. Bring a smile to the principals' eye."

Cecil takes pride in his work and comes to the attention of a staffer (Jim Gleason) who hires him to work in the White House during the Eisenhower Administration. This position is a blessing and a curse for Cecil, who sacrifices quality time with *his* family with long hours in service to the First Family. In part, due to loneliness, his wife Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) turns to alcohol and a philandering neighbor for companionship and consolation.

In the interim, Cecil's elder son Louis (David Oyelowo) grows restless and distant from the father who seems the black man of yesteryear and to be out of step with the emerging civil rights movement. As racial tensions mount across the country, the strained relationship between father and son fractures, leaving both bewildered and un-reconciled. Cecil, however, remains steadfast in his duties, gracefully navigating through eight presidential administrations. He retires during the Reagan Administration. Through it all, he exudes a finesse and genialness that is no respecter of party affiliation. Yet the highs and lows of his personal life depict a man who has

“two faces, ours and the one we got to show the white man.” These faces narrowly converge, but never crisscross.

Daniels aptly presents, with stylized synchrony, the paradoxical issues of race. The intertwining scenes of a White House dinner, in which the black butlers prepare and serve white guests is juxtaposed against the Woolworth sit-in scene in which black students refuse to occupy their station amidst hostile white locals. The visual contrast evinces a reality so harsh and disconcerting that remarks made by President Kennedy (James Marsden), while viewing another similarly disturbing news report, summarizes the disbelief and naiveté of many Americans at the time: “Sometimes I wonder what country I’m living in.”

As his professional career draws to a close, Cecil’s ideology evolves. He realizes that his son’s involvement in the movement made him “a hero fighting to save the soul of our country.” Cecil, who had always loved serving, now recognizes that he has spent the better part of his life, afraid. In an attempt to reconcile with his son, he joins him in an anti-apartheid protest, an overt act of defiance. Their reconciliation seems to indicate that father and son have at last come to appreciate each other’s subversive nature and method of service to the country. By the film’s conclusion, Cecil has come full circle. He returns to the White House. This time, however, he is an honored guest of the first African-American president elected to serve.

Theologically, Christianity is referenced throughout the film, but not touted. The cross, the most visual and recurrent symbol, presents a false dichotomy. But its use is multifaceted: jewelry to adorn a necklace, a charm to bless and protect the home, a sign marking death, a symbol of the promise of resurrection, a burning pennant to instill fear and an ensign of hate on the robes of Klan regalia.

The cross first appears on a small necklace worn by Miz Annabelle. After witnessing her son violate Cecil's mother and murder his father, she removes Cecil from fieldwork and teaches him to be a "house n*****" in an attempt to mitigate the irreparable harm and make recompense.

Cecil is not portrayed as an overtly religious man. Before leaving Georgia, he pays his respects at the grave of his father, marked by a simple cross. Beyond this, we only see him in church after the death of Gloria where he sits alone facing her casket in quiet contemplation, a cross in the foreground. Still his home is adorned with the icons that were common in many African-American homes of the era. Above the fireplace mantle in the living room are three crucifixes. On the wall near the front door is a framed depiction of a fair-haired, fair-skinned Jesus, which viewers might want to carefully note as the film nears conclusion. A cross is also centered on a wall above the bed in their bedroom. Post retirement, it is a much older Cecil, with time to spare, who chaffs at the thought of being late for church. Surviving in the present was the central concern when he was in the prime of life. For Louis' generation, life "with liberty" or "death" becomes the uncompromising stance and preference over surrender.

Beyond Cecil, the film invites broader reflection on black domestics in American history. Ours is a twenty-first century gaze. Looking back, one can hardly grasp the resoluteness that would have been required to survive. One can scarcely imagine having to daily maneuver through a penumbra that mandated being all things to all people while remaining so invisible that "the room should feel empty when you're in it."

The physical violence that was inflicted on civil rights protestors was undeniably painful and often fatal. But the daily, repeated and incontrovertible indignities that marked everyday life were equal to if not greater in taking a toll on the human psyche. Gloria painfully reminds her

elder son with a hard slap across the face when he disrespects his father's station, "Everything you are. Everything you have is because of that butler."

This all-star cast is excellent and delivers. Whitaker carries the lead role with ease. The standout performance is given by Oprah Winfrey. She breathed life into Gloria Gaines and imbued her with a spirit that was captivating to watch. With a gaze, she spoke without uttering a word. Her facial expressions were so communicative that her thoughts and feelings seemed audible. She was: salty, sassy, fun, tragic, lonely, angry, vulnerable, defiant, maternal and resilient. Winfrey delivers an authentic, show-stealing and consummate performance.

Technically, there appear to be a couple of minor errors. When Whitaker is polishing the silver, his afro appears to be thinning on top, but is thicker in the next scene. There also appears to be a framed picture of a silver-haired Oprah on the bedside table at a time when she is only beginning to grey. Otherwise, the film is well done, but noticeably politically slanted. I recommend the film for viewing. More than entertainment, it is an invitation to begin and/or continue the conversation in this country on how we treat the least of these. Dr. King reminded us of the tragedy of "appalling silence."