

## Relentless Artistry of ‘12 Years a Slave’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 17, 2013 - 10:53am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – A man is chained to the floor in a dark, barren room. He has been ripped from his family and his freedom, and we watch as he’s whipped with amazing brutality. It goes on well past the point that most films with similar human suffering would have cut to a less stressful image. It will not be the last time that “12 Years a Slave” forces the viewer to turn away before the editor does it for you.

With “12 Years a Slave,” Steve McQueen chronicles the horror of slavery in ways that haven’t been seen on film before. It is an important film, one that should turn its creator and star into household names during awards season. It is relentless in its intensity and yet the film walks a fine line between realism and the filmic vision of its creator. The sheer power of the performances capably transport viewers to a place that most of us can’t even comprehend but the fingerprints of the filmmaker can often be seen on the final product, blurring the line between reality and art.

Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) was living as a free man when he was drugged and sold into slavery. For more than a decade, he struggled against the sin of slavery, facing unimaginable horrors that tested his resilience and very humanity. Early protestations of his freedom were met with beatings. His name was stolen from him. He was forced into deadly working conditions, used against his fellow slaves, and pushed beyond the point where most of us would break. And, of course, he was not alone. “12 Years a Slave” is both one man’s story and an overall chronicle of one of the darkest chapters in American history. This is our past, one in which men saw other people as property, and it has arguably never been presented in such stark, unrelenting horror.



12 Years a Slave

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Much as in Michael Fassbender's incredibly physical performances in McQueen's "Hunger" and "Shame," Chiwetel Ejiofor was asked to be completely fearless here and he fulfills all the promise of those who have long-proclaimed him one of cinema's best-kept secrets. He could win an Oscar for his work as he so subtly portrays a man forced to bend but unwilling to break. Ejiofor's work is the best thing about the film, adding layers of subtlety through performance to John Ridley's script. Ejiofor's not given a lot of dialogue, as slaves were often whipped just for speaking, but he does so much with his eyes and body language to convey Solomon's inner and outer torture. And the few big moments of expression that the script allows him are presented without melodrama.

Fassbender gets the showier role of Edwin Epps, one of Solomon's more maniacal owners, a man obsessed with a slave named Patsey (the mesmerizing Lupita Nyong'o), who turns to Solomon for protection. Fassbender represents the dangerous lunacy of men who saw other human beings as property. As he so often does, Fassbender makes unique character decisions that other actors wouldn't even consider. The whole cast is strong, although I did wonder if small roles filled out by recognizable actors like Benedict Cumberbatch, Paul Giamatti, Garrett Dillahunt, and Brad Pitt wouldn't have been better-served by new faces, so as to blend into the fabric of the piece instead of standing out for even just their first moment. Everyone here is good but the film belongs to Ejiofor, Fassbender, and Nyong'o.



12 Years a Slave

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

It belongs to Steve McQueen as well. From the angles chosen by him and regular cinematographer Sean Bobbitt to the soaring score by Hans Zimmer, there's a definite sense of creative vision here that other filmmakers might not have brought to the piece. I wished I hadn't been so cognizant of Zimmer's score or McQueen's visual compositions at so many points in the film. It's not that McQueen brings the sentimentality or "Hollywood-ization" that stories like this have often been treated with in the past but I felt like the performances were often forced to overcome the artistic flairs of its director (the same could be said of "Hunger" and "Shame") instead of working with them.

It's a minor complaint for a major film. I take away many things from "12 Years a Slave" but one that this film captures that I don't believe has ever been so well-conveyed is how horror became normalized in slavery. A man hangs from a tree, barely alive, pushing up by his toes to keep from suffocating. And, behind him, slaves go to work. It's one of many images in "12 Years a Slave" that captures how the world didn't stop for human rights violations as we hope it would. Solomon Northup's story is both triumphantly unique and, tragically, our shared history.

*"12 Years a Slave" stars Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Fassbender, Lupita Nyong'o, Paul Dano, Sarah Paulson, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Brad Pitt. It was written by John Ridley and directed by Steve McQueen. It opens in Chicago on October 18, 2013, and is rated R.*



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [15]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

[brian@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:brian@hollywoodchicago.com) [14]

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