

Screening History

A Test Case

In September 1980, a movie crew took possession of several blocks in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, to film a story set in the year 1822. When shooting a busy market scene that was designed to look like a typical shopping situation in early-nineteenth-century Charleston, the set designers gave close attention to historical details. They filled the city's open-air market with vegetables, placed a number of goats and chickens near the stalls, and situated scores of people in and around the facility. These extras were exquisitely dressed in fashions of the 1820s. The set designers also covered Charleston's asphalt streets with dirt, and they arranged for drivers in horse-drawn carriages to ride around the periphery of the market area. All these efforts helped establish a proper background for the movie's depiction of a typical 1820s morning in the port city. At the precise moment when all the props and people were in place, two elderly ladies who were visiting Charleston for the first time came around a corner and set their eyes on the marvelous scene. One turned to the other and exclaimed, "My goodness, they really do historic restoration right in Charleston!" Her comment offered amusing testimony to the filmmakers' careful efforts to give a few blocks of the city an authentic-looking appearance.¹

The made-for-television movie that resulted from these efforts, *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* (1982), offered more than just elaborate visual details. Professional historians were involved in planning the project from the earliest stages of its development. Far more than in most cases of cinematic history, skilled academicians played important roles in designing the film's story. They contributed to conceptualizing the screenplay, scrutinized early drafts of the script, and identified information in the historical archives that provided factual foundations for the drama. These scholars discussed their recommendations personally with the writer and the producers, who incorporated many of their suggestions in the film. The production of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* involved a partnership between scholars and filmmakers who cooperated in an effort to create a sophisticated cinematic interpretation of the past.

Despite these commendable attempts to deal responsibly with history, the makers of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* exercised a good deal of creative license in making their movie. They employed a number of generic conventions in the design of their story; they simplified complex information, collapsed several historical figures into a few, and compressed the presentation of events. They also mimicked the familiar three-act docudrama format, shaping their story in terms of exposition, complication, and resolution. The writer, director, and producers created dialogues between historic figures, even though there was no specific evidence that such conversations ever took place. On a number of occasions, the filmmakers speculated boldly about the motivations of important historic figures, and they showed these individuals taking actions that may or may not have actually occurred. In a variety of ways, the film's creators massaged facts, manipulated details, and manufactured evidence in an effort to present understandable and entertaining television drama.

An inside look at the making of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* can illuminate the complexity of bringing history to the screen. It reveals that filmmakers must exercise artistic license when producing historical drama. Even when these artists intend to honor the historical record, as the makers of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* hoped to do, they are often compelled to fictionalize. This example of significant compromising in a serious attempt to produce cinematic history provides a useful lesson for the cynical critics of docudrama who insist that filmmakers should present only accurate and authentic depictions of history. This case shows that dramatizing the past *requires* invention, that the practice of cinematic history is *inherently* creative. The case reveals, too, that even when filmmakers sincerely try to create a production that is educational and instructive, they must pay close attention to the traditions of the cinematic genre.

The following discussion of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* is much more personal than other analyses that appear in this book, because I was closely connected to this production. From 1976 until the film's national broadcast on PBS Television in 1982, I worked as a principal creator of the film project, participating in everything from the original conception and planning, fund-raising, and development to shooting on the set, postproduction work, and public promotion. Thus, my commentaries on this project spring from personal experience rather than formal study.

The opportunity to work on a film came unexpectedly in 1976, when I received a call from an individual working with the PBS station in Miami, Florida. WPBT, the local PBS affiliate, had received a planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and producers at the station

were seeking ideas for television shows. The grant allowed the station to communicate with humanists around the United States, and as an academic who had published some books and articles about slavery, my name turned up on the list of invitees. A representative of the station, himself a historian, asked that I write a few pages identifying concepts for programming. The invitation intrigued me, not only because it came with an honorarium (in those days, humanities scholars were not in the habit of receiving paychecks for consultation activities), but also because the opportunity to imagine a TV series that dealt with history sounded very exciting. I quickly tapped out ten pages of description calling for dramas about slavery in the United States. My proposal stressed that in recent years, much of the most important and controversial research in American history had dealt with the "peculiar institution." This subject interested the public, I said, principally because of the recent successes of the civil rights movement. Americans wanted to learn more about the origins of racial injustice and the historic struggle against it. The time was ripe, I argued, for a series of dramatic films that traced the experiences of real people whose lives had been affected by slavery. Each drama could serve as a window, providing audiences a view of a different issue from the history of slavery in America.

My connections with the world of television and film expanded quickly in that period. Shortly after I sent the ten-page proposal, producers at WPBT invited me down to Miami to discuss the idea in person. They soon gave me the title of project director, a term used by the NEH to identify the individual who guides one of its funded film projects through the various stages of development. A project director also serves as the principal liaison in dealing with the NEH. Beyond that, nothing was certain about my responsibilities; the job description was vague, and it had different meanings in the various production organizations that received grants. As I discovered over several years of association with NEH-supported projects, the scope of a project director's responsibilities depended on the individual's determination to stick his or her nose into the filmmaking activities and on the production people's tolerance for working with an academic. I was fortunate in teaming up with two talented and cooperative executives who gave me considerable latitude, especially in the early stages of the project: R. Shepherd Morgan, the executive producer, and Yanna Kroyt Brandt, the producer. Working with Morgan and Brandt, I named the subjects for study, developed treatments for the programs (story outlines with descriptions of scenes and characters), wrote the bulk of the grant applications (particularly the historical and dramatic narratives), and worked closely with professional screenwriters in creating the scripts. I also assembled a team of scholar-advisers that included historians at the height of scholarship on slavery and race relations at the time: Ira Berlin,

David Brion Davis, Eric Foner, Eugene D. Genovese, Herbert Gutman, Nathan Huggins, Benjamin Quarles, Armstead Robinson, Willie Lee Rose, William Shack, Kenneth M. Stampp, and Peter Wood.

Raising money for these productions constituted an enormous challenge. In view of the limited funds received annually by the NEH, my production associates and I had to seek financial support for each production as if it were an individual project. In each case, the application process essentially started anew, as we defended a film concept all over again to a new team of NEH judges. Furthermore, each film required two major grants—one for scripting, and a second for production. A production grant from the NEH was never sufficient to allow shooting to begin; it merely provided seed money, which then had to be supplemented by financial support from corporate underwriters. The producers and I remained busy for several years seeking approximately \$1 million in funding for each film. Throughout this process, we had to justify the programming not only in terms of its scholarly appeal but also with a view toward its attractiveness as entertainment. The NEH program officers, corporate underwriters, and PBS officials kept an eye on production values, not just the educational potential and cultural worth of the programs.

Over a period of several years, our production team received funding to complete three films. Two years after *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* appeared, PBS broadcast *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*. The Northup story dealt with a free black man who had been kidnapped into slavery. Northup spent twelve years in bondage in Louisiana before a sympathetic white man communicated information about his condition to friends in the North and succeeded in getting him released. *Charlotte Forten's Mission* (1985) related the story of an African-American woman who went to the South to help freedmen during the Civil War. The Northup and Forten films later appeared on the Disney Channel as well. WPBT also received NEH funding for the planning and scripting of additional films about John Punch, a runaway slave in early colonial America, and Moncure Conway, a white antislavery Virginian.² Unfortunately, we could not obtain sufficient corporate funding to support production of these scripts.

An important distinction between interpreting history for the reading audience and interpreting it for film and TV viewers struck me forcefully when I arranged the first meetings of our production team. These sessions brought together the executive producer, the producer, a couple of prospective writers, and the group of academic advisers. After much discussion, the scholars recommended production of a program that swept across broad social, economic, and racial issues but lacked a central focus on the experiences of one or two specific individuals from history. The scholars selected a topic I had identified in the NEH application as one of the most intriguing and well-documented

stories about slavery to emerge in recent scholarship. The subject was the Port Royal Experiment, which consisted of efforts by federal officials to bring freedom, economic progress, landownership, and education to slaves of the South Carolina and Georgia sea islands that came under Union control during the Civil War.

I tried to press the scholars for ideas about how we could create a compelling and manageable drama out of such a huge, amorphous history. This subject was tremendously important, I confessed, and it had been splendidly interpreted in a respected book by one of our advisers, Willie Lee Rose.³ But how could we find the foundations for a drama within Rose's vast and complex analysis? Several advisers suggested that our dramatists could surely come up with a way to shape a workable story. They argued that we should not miss the opportunity to bring Rose's groundbreaking interpretation to the screen. Her book threw important light on the emancipation experience, they argued, and television audiences could learn a great deal from a presentation of the issues.

After that meeting, one of the writers and I devoted an enormous amount of time to researching subjects related to Rose's book. We tried to create a workable structure for a script, but our efforts proved frustrating. The numerous people and events covered by our study constituted an ordinary amount of material for a book but were an extraordinary scope for a ninety-minute television drama. We soon began to flounder. A basic outline for the script did not emerge comfortably from the evidence, and when we tried to impose a form on the information, we engaged in heavy fictionalization, imagining "typical" behavior for a number of invented characters or historical figures about whom we knew very little. Seeking to jump-start this stalling project, I conferred with the producers, and we decided that travel might prove helpful. We arranged for our writer to meet for two days with Willie Lee Rose and then to travel to the sea islands of South Carolina so that he could gain some personal exposure to the region and work with local documents. This strategy failed to produce an impressive screenplay. Our story about the Port Royal Experiment continued to be unwieldy and unfocused.

By this time, I had become convinced that we were on the wrong track. The story of the Port Royal Experiment—a great topic for a book—was too broad for a filmed docudrama. I sensed that we could achieve greater progress looking at the activities of one individual who had participated in the "rehearsal for Reconstruction." That effort, however, would take more research and much more time. I eventually identified Charlotte Forten as the subject for such a film. Forten, the daughter of a distinguished African American in Philadelphia, had gone to the sea islands during the Civil War to teach the freedmen and left a diary tracing her experiences. By the time we settled on the interesting

Forten story, our first two docudramas on African-American figures from the nineteenth century were already well in development.

While we were still struggling with the Port Royal story, a more manageable topic was already on the table: the film project dealing with Denmark Vesey's slave conspiracy. I became increasingly excited about that subject's potential, because the essential elements of compelling drama appeared to be present. Vesey had been a slave but eventually won his freedom, yet Vesey's children continued to live in bondage. Rather late in life, around the age of sixty, Vesey became the leader of a plan to conduct a massive slave revolt centered in Charleston, South Carolina, with the goal of freeing the region's slaves. At the eleventh hour, however, some blacks revealed the plot, and Charleston authorities arrested Vesey and many of his associates. They convicted a number of the conspirators, sending some of them, including Vesey, to the gallows and banishing others from the United States.

By focusing particularly on the exploits of Denmark Vesey, we had the components of fascinating drama. Vesey's bold plot had a tremendous impact on white Southerners. It struck fear in their hearts, provoking efforts to tighten controls over slavery in the South. These efforts, in turn, antagonized Northerners and led to growing criticism of the oppressive institution. Our dramatization could show audiences how problems with slavery led to significant sectional confrontations in the antebellum period. Also, an examination of Vesey's experiences could teach audiences about the day-to-day lives of slaves and explore the complexity of the master-slave relationship. In the course of portraying Vesey's life, our film could reveal how blacks struggled for individual dignity in the difficult, race-conscious society of the slave South. Our program could also suggest the difficulties slaves faced when they resorted to violence to protest their condition.

Devising a conspiracy of my own, I scheduled the next meeting of producers, writers, and scholars in Charleston, South Carolina. My goal was to excite their interest in the Vesey drama by placing them at the site of the insurrectionist leader's activities. I hoped that they would sense the story's potential as they walked the streets of the historic city. The tactic was only partially effective, however. It worked with the producers and writers, but not as well with the scholars. A majority of the historians agreed to support further research and development of a treatment about Vesey, but they still chose the Port Royal Experiment as the first project to receive full script preparation. Several months later, the failings of the Port Royal screenplay had not been resolved, and I begged again for support of the Vesey script. After several more communications with the advisers, I finally won approval to make the Vesey story the first order of business.

Recalling the agony of that early experience in script creation, I do not see the advisers' commitment to the Port Royal story as a narrow-minded failure to understand the nature of filmed drama. I was perhaps more responsible than anyone for putting the production team in a morass, since the program about Port Royal had been my idea in the first place. When applying for scripting grants, I found that it was easy to extol the value of a TV program that examined the efforts to help African Americans move from slavery to freedom in the sea islands. The Port Royal Experiment represented a microcosm of the South's struggles with Reconstruction after the Civil War, I argued. It gave us a fascinating window into an important chapter in American history. My description sounded wonderful in a grant application, but it certainly did not provide a useful blueprint for designing cinematic history. When my colleagues and I tried to turn that description into a working script, we discovered that our plan was much too vague.

The struggle over the Port Royal story provided a valuable lesson for all the academics associated with the project, myself included. In order to turn academic history into cinematic history, we needed to learn how to communicate through film. At first, we did not truly appreciate the distinction between non-fiction and drama. We turned to our familiar narrative devices: citing vast amounts of data, relating stories about numerous historical characters, interpreting many important events that occurred over a long span of time. Working in that mode, we thought that Willie Lee Rose's book about the "rehearsal for Reconstruction" looked like a suitable subject for television. But, as we discovered, it was not easily translatable into television drama. We were facing a different kind of interpretive challenge in this case, one that was not as pressing when we wrote articles and books about history. Our film project required not only that we raise important questions about history but also that we try to imagine the answers in the form of an understandable and entertaining story for the screen.

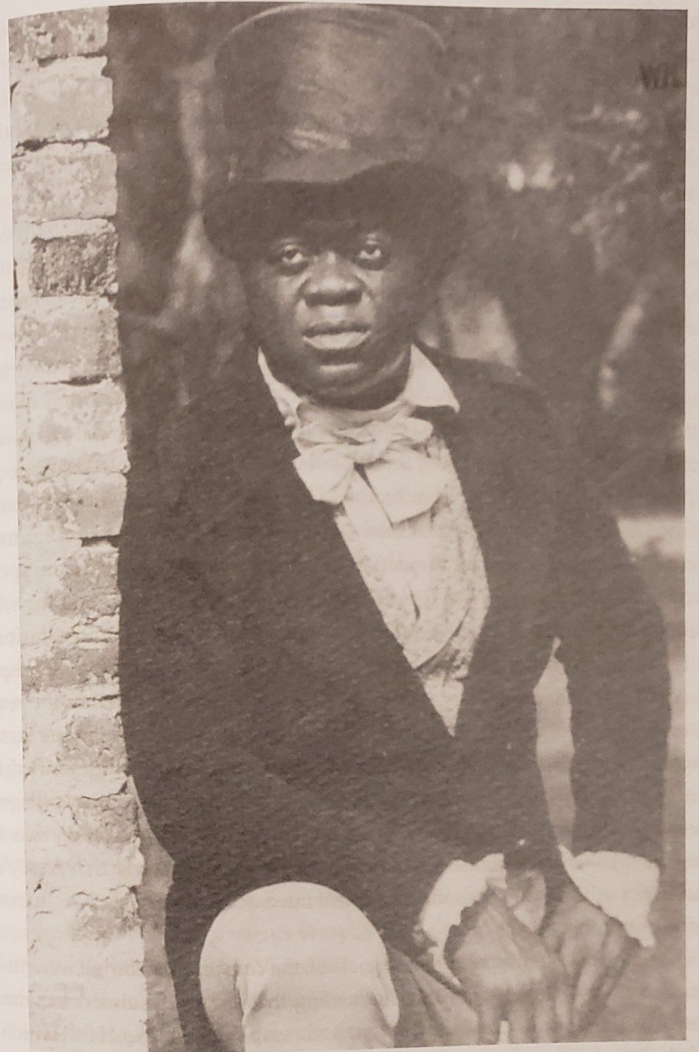
Could we educate and entertain at the same time? Were these two principal goals mutually supporting, or were they in conflict with each other? Did progress toward one goal necessarily undermine advancement toward the other? Our filmmaking experience suggested some answers.

At first glance, the Vesey story looks like an easy one for dramatization. There are abundant records in the historical archives related to the conspiracy, including testimony from a number of slaves implicated in the insurrection plot and an official report on the trial proceedings. We also found published interpretations of the events by the governor of South Carolina and the mayor of Charleston, newspaper articles, personal letters, and a variety of other primary sources. The documentary record of the Vesey conspiracy is certainly

one of the strongest among the cases of slave rebellion in American history. This wealth of available evidence helped us create dialogues that nicely reflected the historical record. When we needed to put words in the mouths of actors, we could often draw directly from extant papers of 1822. In the film, Denmark Vesey (Yaphet Kotto) sometimes speaks in the same language that appears in the records. His fellow insurrectionists take an oath of allegiance using words reported in the testimonies, and a judge announces Vesey's sentence in language drawn directly from the lengthier 1822 version. A publicist advertising our film for prospective television audiences could cite this documentation and claim that the movie gave an authentic picture of history. "Based on the facts!" a promotion blurb could exclaim. "Actors speak the very words of the historic figures!"

Yet even these heavily documented archival records provide just a few pieces of a complex puzzle. The record does not show what blacks or whites said to one another unofficially behind closed doors. Virtually all the private conversations in the drama had to be imagined. Also, we do not know much about Denmark Vesey's personal motivation in leading a slave rebellion. The papers contain only a few words suggesting that he was angry because, despite winning his own freedom in an 1800 lottery, his children remained in slavery. We know that Vesey found inspiration for revolt in Bible passages and that he was aroused by what he read in some published documents containing congressional debates on slavery. Still, these reports constitute only tiny bits of information that hint at motivation. A dramatist must surmise why a man who enjoyed the comforts of freedom would risk his life and those of many friends in such a dangerous plot.

Despite hundreds of pages of extant documents on the case, the most important details of Vesey's personal background are essentially limited to a lengthy footnote appended to the official report of the conspirators' trial. That brief commentary begins with these words: "As Denmark Vesey has occupied so large a place in the conspiracy, a brief notice of him will, perhaps, not be devoid of interest." Not be devoid of interest, indeed! Numerous books and articles have been published on the 1822 plot that interpret and inform at length about the possible meaning of the nineteen sentences in this one-paragraph footnote. Much like the authors of those publications, those of us who worked on the film speculated about the meaning of those words. In two flashbacks, our film traces Captain Joseph Vesey's (Donald Moffat) discovery of a fourteen-year-old slave (James Bond III) in the Caribbean, a lad whom the captain finds unique in his "beauty, alertness, and intelligence." We guessed about the conditions that could have led Captain Vesey to favor the youngster and make him a "pet" on his ship, then sell him into slavery and sometime later take him back on



Denmark Vesey (Yaphet Kotto) is a successful free black man in 1822 Charleston, South Carolina, in Denmark Vesey's Rebellion (1982). Much has been written about Vesey, but specific details about his personality, ideas, and plans are limited. As often happens in the making of a docudrama, the filmmakers had to engage in a good deal of speculation to present the character on the screen. (Robert Brent Toplin)

a return voyage. We had to imagine a situation in which Denmark Vesey approached the captain (his owner) many years later and sought to buy his freedom with money won in a Charleston lottery. How would a slave approach his master with such a request? And, like the authors of scholarly books about the subject, we had to interpret the single paragraph's characterization of Vesey as a man whose "temper was impetuous and domineering in the extreme."⁴

When I met with the scholars and production personnel to discuss these questions about the portrayal of Vesey, the exchanges turned quickly to controversy. Participants in the meeting disagreed about the goals of the conspirators. Documents from 1822, compiled by whites in South Carolina, portrayed the plot's leader in highly critical terms—as a vicious rebel motivated by blood lust. In contrast, late-twentieth-century historians had written many sympathetic words about the black freedman, pointing to Vesey's intelligence and courage. Even in failure, said these scholars, Vesey's plot showed southern whites that the blacks were not as happy in bondage as the slave owners were inclined to believe. Members of our advisory board clearly favored the second interpretation, but they were divided in the conclusions they drew from specific evidence in the archives. To some, the historic Vesey was a great hero, a freedom fighter much like the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution or the modern-day leaders of the civil rights movement. Others agreed that Vesey's struggle against slavery was noble, but they wondered whether the real historic figure could have resembled the hate-filled rebel described in the documents. These historians observed that some reports from 1822 described a vicious man who aimed to destroy Charleston in an orgy of rape, pillage, arson, and mass murder. Perhaps, said one scholar, the historic Vesey was a madman like Charles Manson. Or perhaps we could conclude that Vesey's reasons for rebelling were good, but his intended actions were likely to harm many innocent people.

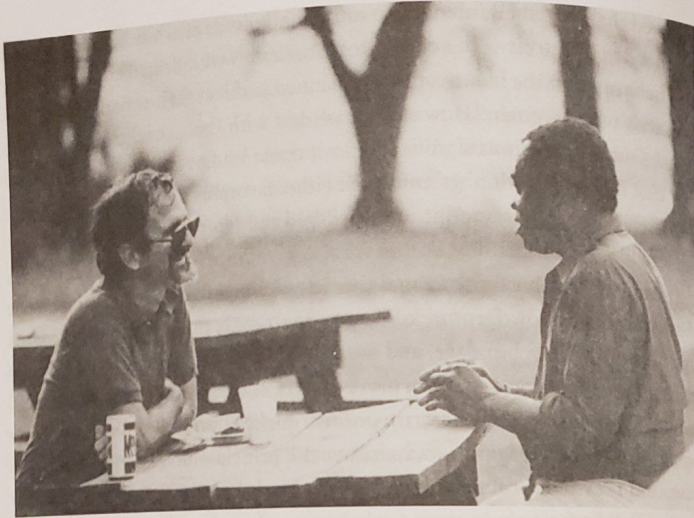
The scholars also disagreed on the goals of the conspirators. Some were inclined to believe reports from 1822 indicating that the rebels aimed to seize control of the ships in Charleston harbor and escape en masse to Haiti, which had abolished slavery in 1804. That interpretation cast a favorable light on the plot. But other historians wondered whether there was some validity to reports that suggested a more frightening outcome. They pointed to comments in the historic documents indicating that the conspirators wanted to create a terrible slaughter. This evidence raised the same questions as the interpretation of Vesey's intentions did, they noted. Although the modern-day observer cannot help but be sympathetic to the slaves' fight against oppression, a student of the subject has to acknowledge the disturbing information and decide how to deal with it. They pointed to papers from 1822 showing that a number of people

believed that the rebels intended to murder hundreds of white Charlestonians and set fire to the city. The citizens of Charleston who described these plans also believed that the insurrectionists planned to direct their sexual passions at the city's white women. How should we deal with these conflicting observations? Our decision was significant, for it could lead to a depiction of events that cast the insurrectionists' enterprise either favorably or unfavorably.

When designing the script, we privileged the sympathetic view of Vesey's personality, actions, and goals, but we also gave voice to some of the conflicting perspectives. Our fundamental characterization of the rebel leader is complimentary. We show Denmark Vesey to be strongly motivated by a desire to free his family from bondage, and we suggest that he had developed a principled notion about freedom from his reading of the Bible and antislavery documents. Justifying our emphasis on positive qualities was not difficult. We recognized that fearful whites had written the principal documents about the case, and they had probably described the blacks' motivation in very critical terms. Their references to rape, for instance, echo a fear that consistently appears in nineteenth-century claims about slaves' intentions toward southern white women. Perhaps white South Carolinians gave so much attention to assertions about lust, violence, and brutality because they did not want to give expression to a different motivation—the drive to achieve emancipation from oppression. Nevertheless, we felt an obligation to show that other visions of the revolt appeared in the documents. In the film, some of the slaves express an eagerness for murder and revenge, particularly Peter Poyas (Samm-Art Williams), one of the individuals who was especially associated with violent intentions in the slave testimonies.

Our portrayal of Denmark Vesey, however, conforms to the favored practices of cinematic history. It clears him of petty hatred or the desire for gratuitous violence. The film presents Vesey in heroic terms. He comes across essentially as a fighter for justice. Violence is not his goal; rather, violence represents a means to accomplish his dream of emancipation for South Carolina's slaves. *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* does not portray its central figure as a saint, but it certainly does not present him as a deeply flawed leader. The film attributes to other participants in the plot some of the thirst for violence and revenge that commentators mentioned in the documents.

William Freehling, a historian of the antebellum South, raised some objections to these portrayals in an article published shortly after our film's appearance on national television. Freehling observed that there was plenty of evidence in the archives suggesting that the Vesey revolt would have been a bloody affair if it had not been crushed by the authorities. The slave conspirators did not intend to be gentle with their oppressors, he pointed out. Freehling



The author discusses plans for the portrayal of Denmark Vesey with actor Yaphet Kotto on the set of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* (1982). (Robert Brent Toplin)

complained that *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* presents the slave leader and many of his followers flatteringly, minimizing a commitment to violence that was surely on their minds. In this fashion, television perpetuates myths. Unpleasant, antisocial behavior by blacks is eliminated from the story, said Freehling. Denmark Vesey the bigamist, terrorist, and militant revolutionary of history is not evident in the drama. *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* gives audiences black history in the manner they like it. It makes them comfortable by portraying an attractive hero, Freehling argued.⁵

Freehling is quite right in analyzing these issues from the perspective of academic history, but his observations are not particularly relevant to the fashioning of reel history. When writing books about this subject, Freehling can digress about the many possible motivations of the rebels and speculate on how the violent revolt might have played out. In the course of creating a drama, however, the opportunities for entertaining diverse interpretations are limited. Especially in the presentation of the central figure, an attempt to show him throughout the film as a representative of two poles in characterization—freedom fighter and mass murderer—would have been difficult. Drama forces the artist to choose a position and support it in the form of the actor's dress, facial appearance, voice inflection, and many other message-sending elements. Conforming to the favored practices of most cinematic history, we chose to characterize the protagonist in a favorable light.

By thinking only in terms of academic history rather than with a view toward the structure of reel history, Freehling had difficulty recognizing some of the notable achievements of the film. *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* gives much more expression to alternative views of the past than do most docudramas. In fashioning the script, the writer and I tried to make the dialogue reflect conflicting viewpoints about important people and events. The characters' words communicate many of the opposing ideas exchanged in the advisory board's discussions. Late in the drama, for instance, a slave asks Rolla (the governor's servant, played by Cleavon Little) whether Rolla could slay his own master, and he answers quickly in the affirmative. Later, Rolla tells Peter Poyas that he cannot believe what he said. Rolla observes that his master has been good to him, and he does not want to kill. He confesses that he is in the plot for his wife and children, "not for Denmark Vesey." Poyas then announces that he will be happy to murder the governor for Rolla. Poyas insists that Denmark Vesey is a great hero, and he challenges Rolla's commitment to the plot. "Maybe he's a madman; did you ever think of that?" Rolla responds. Through this dialogue and in other exchanges between leading characters, we communicate a variety of viewpoints discussed by the scholars and suggested by some of the diverse opinions expressed in the archival materials.

If Denmark Vesey serves as the film's hero, who is the villain? We avoided the stereotypical portrayals of whites that were fashionable in television docudrama at the time. The film's slave owners and spokesmen for slavery are not simply exploitative, insensitive, or sadistic types who demonstrate no consideration for the blacks. Instead, we drew on the research of Eugene D. Genovese (a board member) and other authors, attempting to give dimension to the characterization of South Carolina's whites. The approach we took in this interpretation is articulated in a letter I sent to the director, Stan Lathan, during the formative stages of the production. At the time, I was responding to the excitement about *Roots* (1977), the tremendously successful miniseries about slavery. Some members of the production team worried that our film would seem redundant if it appeared just a few years after the release of ABC's smash hit. I responded as follows:

Since the appearance of *Roots*, other shows have attempted to touch the same audience nerve (*A Woman Called Moses* and *Freedom Road*, for example) but they have all failed to come even close to *Roots*' success. The problem was not just one of production quality; it was a matter of subject. There can be only one *Roots* . . . at least for a few decades. If someone is going to educate TV audiences further on the subject, and interest them further, they are going to have to offer something new. And that brings us to a fundamental

question about our pilot program. What new information can we present to our audience? What new messages will stir their thinking about the history of slavery and its meaning for our lives today?

Perhaps it is time to go beyond the characters of *Roots*. We can stun audiences (and give them a more sophisticated understanding of slavery at the same time) by showing that the real problem was not simply one of good blacks exploited by bad whites. The real tragedy in this history concerns the way all people can become victims of a system. As we see in the script, a message about human relationships emerges which transcends the familiar black-white or North-South perspective. The story suggests that sometimes blacks and whites genuinely cared for each other as people, as in the cases of the Bennett-Rolla and Hammett-Bacchus relationships. Slavery was the institutional wedge driven between them. The system made them reluctant antagonists. This is a major message of our program—that by building inequality into a social structure we kill the potential of people to be decent, caring and good to each other. Some (though certainly not all) of the masters were basically decent people, but the system made them “bad.”

As audiences begin to see the complexity of personalities and their relationships, I hope the insights will jolt them out of their chairs. When they realize that each actor is not fulfilling the expected stereotypical role, hopefully their minds will begin to spin as they ask themselves: How did these people get into this fix? How will they get out? Who or what is to blame? In short, they will find themselves drawn into a historical detective story. A plot unfolds, clues are introduced to help them fit pieces of the puzzle together. But at the end of the story there is still enough complexity to make the effort to draw conclusions difficult. No doubt, they will see Denmark Vesey as an authentic hero, yet they will also find themselves relating with empathy to some of the white Charlestonians such as Governor Bennett.⁶

Our film does have one truly nasty villain, Captain Dove, drawn right out of the archival records. The Dove of history displayed much more doubt about the blacks' original claims of innocence than Governor Bennett did, and he urged the authorities to treat rumors of a conspiracy with greater seriousness. When another black came forward with reports of a slave plot, Dove felt vindicated, and he proved a particularly aggressive leader of the effort to apprehend Vesey and his supporters.

A more complex villain in the film is Benjamin Hammett (Ned Beatty), a Charleston businessman who owns one of the story's principal slave figures, Bacchus. Hammett represents a good example of the contradictions in slavery that I addressed in the letter to the director. He demonstrates concern for the

well-being of Bacchus (Bernie Casey), yet he works actively to control the activities of Charleston's slaves and, especially, the city's free blacks. Our drama portrays a deep sense of attachment between Hammett and Bacchus. One of the emotional high points in the film occurs when Hammett visits Bacchus while the slave awaits his execution. Hammett asks how he “went wrong” with Bacchus, expressing disbelief that his loyal slave plotted to kill him. Bacchus articulates the idea of an “institutional wedge” that I identified in the letter, asserting that his principal goal was to be free, not to kill. He acknowledges that Hammett was good to him but claims that the master never saw him as a person, only as a good horse or a very smart dog. Bacchus then chases his master away, proclaiming that death is not so horrible, for he had pretty much been asleep until Denmark Vesey awakened him with questions about his slave condition. The film shows Hammett leaving the prison in disbelief. Not recognizing Bacchus's fundamental humanity, the master remains confused and frustrated.

Our portrayals of two other whites in the story are also designed to suggest the complexity of relationships in slavery and the notion of an institutional wedge. We show Captain Joseph Vesey to be a kindly man who demonstrates a sincere liking for his intelligent and handsome young slave. But the captain also commands absolute power in the relationship and uses that authority with devastating effect when he summarily expels young Denmark from his ship. Governor Bennett (William Windom) is portrayed much like he appears in the records, a generous man who is slow to recognize that a genuine slave conspiracy is afoot and that it involves a few of his trusted servants. Toward the end of the film, Bennett finally recognizes the danger and proclaims that he will become a tougher master in his household. Bennett also applies these lessons to public affairs, saying that state and local authorities need to maintain much active vigilance over the slave population. In these comments, Bennett stands in for many southerners of the 1820s and 1830s who turned away from their “liberal” attitudes toward slavery and increasingly sanctioned strong controls over the blacks' activities, including the lives of freedmen.

Every new entry in a genre needs to offer something surprising—narrative developments that are different from the familiar fare—and it is in these characterizations of both blacks and whites that I believe *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* makes its most important contribution. Our film features heroes and villains—familiar characterizations in historical drama—but it also introduces a number of characters that represent flawed heroes and partially redeemed villains. In this manner, the film provokes audiences, challenging them to think about the terrible injustices that could turn blacks and whites into mortal enemies.

As discussed in the chapter on genre, dramatic film does not allow much room for hedging. In portraying characters, depicting events, and interpreting

behavior, the medium favors partisanship, commitment, strong opinions. Our preparation of the script called for a firm judgment concerning a fundamental question about the film's subject. We had to decide whether the slave conspiracy in Charleston truly existed.

In 1964, University of Chicago historian Richard Wade published an influential article in which he maintained that the Vesey plot was largely a figment of the imagination of nervous white Charlestonians. Writing in the *Journal of Southern History*, Wade claimed that evidence for a large-scale, well-planned slave insurrection was lacking. Charleston and South Carolina officials believed the wildest rumors, said Wade. Reacting in the hysterical manner of the Salem witch hunters, they pointed a finger at many people who may have been innocent.⁷ Many years later (in 2001), Michael P. Johnson continued and expanded this debate by arguing that Vesey and his associates had been victimized by a conspiracy involving coerced black witnesses, white supporters, and the courts.⁸

Our advisory board's first reaction to Wade's challenge was to circle the wagon trains. Citing the evidence of many other historical studies (including the writings of William Freehling) and reflecting on their own readings of the primary documents, the scholars maintained that there was substantial support for the conclusion that a major slave conspiracy existed in Charleston in 1822. Through the course of this discussion, however, we agreed to keep an open mind and investigate the issue further. The research I conducted as a result of the exchanges led to some intriguing conclusions. Evidence suggested that although the plot had been real, Wade raised some relevant questions. Above all, he seemed correct in suggesting that the number of slaves associated with the plot had been grossly inflated in some official reports. Figures as high as 9,000 conspirators had been mentioned by the authorities, and this large estimate of the number of participants found its way into many modern-day history books. My research suggested that the slaves used exaggerated figures as a means of dealing with potential recruits who doubted their chance of success. The conspirators hoped to inspire confidence by claiming that they had the backing of thousands of slaves. Nervous whites later repeated these extraordinary numbers to drum up support for restrictive measures against black slaves and freedmen. Although it is difficult to identify a specific figure, evidently about fifty or sixty slaves were reasonably well-informed of the plot. Once the recruiters communicated information to others, they assumed an enormous risk of betrayal.

As in the case of other controversies about historical interpretation, we tried to give viewers an appreciation of this debate through the dialogue in the screenplay. At various points in the story, individual actors express their hopes and frustrations regarding the attempt to recruit insurrectionists. Their

comments show varying degrees of confidence or pessimism about achieving a mass uprising (just as we found conflicting evidence in the documents). Ironically, then, we owe a debt to Richard Wade. Although we could not agree with his conclusions, his questions helped us probe more deeply into an important debate about the size of the conspiracy.

When I worked on the treatment and script for *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion*, I was unaware of the conventions of cinematic history, the traditional storytelling practices, yet I turned quite naturally to these familiar elements in fashioning a drama for the screen. There were, for example, far too many principal characters in the historic documents for a comprehensible story. Television audiences would easily become confused by the plethora of both black and white individuals involved in the events around Charleston. To deal with this problem, I recommended the collapsing of multiple figures into one. For instance, when I found that two of Governor Bennett's key servants, Ned and Rolla, had been deeply involved in the plot, I combined the individuals. Finding that Rolla's activities were somewhat more interesting and better reported, I let him serve as the composite figure. Documents also indicated that Denmark Vesey had many wives; one report spoke of seven. Scriptwriter William Hauptman and I settled on two, giving each character significant roles in the story. We also compressed events into a limited space of time, leaving the impression that the conspiracy and its discovery occurred in a much briefer period than was actually the case.

One of the most striking manipulations in the film appears at the end. Both the producers and the advisers were troubled by the difficulty of dealing with the sad conclusion. Denmark Vesey loses his struggle for the cause of freedom, and he dies with the hangman's noose around his neck. Some worried that the drama would prove depressing rather than inspiring and that audiences would reject the film because of its gloomy ending. Eventually, I discovered a way out of this narrative dead end. Reading some old documents, I learned that Vesey's son had been a special guest of honor at ceremonies held in Charleston near the end of the Civil War, marking the city's liberation from Confederate control. Vesey had had a number of sons, I acknowledged, but we could imagine that the one identified in the documents was the very Sandy Vesey who had been involved in the conspiracy and banished from the United States by South Carolina authorities. In other words, our story could show that one of the principal rebels lived to see the day of freedom from slavery.

My suggestion inspired a completely invented conclusion to the drama. Our film shows Sandy Vesey (David Harris) arranging an escape from Charleston. But before leaving the region, he visits the grave site of his father, and there he

encounters his mother, Beck (Mary Alice). Sandy takes a step forward, looking very sad. "He won't be forgotten," proclaims Sandy.

"Forgotten?" responds his mother. "Why they can't mourn him in Charleston. That's how much they're scared of him, even though he's dead. Your father will never be forgot. He let the truth out. They can't pretend we're happy in slavery any more." As Sandy sets off on his journey, hoping to reach Philadelphia, Beck calls out, "Tell them who he was. Just tell them who he was."

This portrayal is a product of our imagination rather than a reflection of the historical record and represents a bold exercise in artistic license. Nothing like the mother-son encounter ever happened, at least to our knowledge. Yet the scene helps give the movie an inspiring, uplifting finish, and it addresses some larger truths. Authorities in Charleston did, in fact, try to expunge evidence of Denmark Vesey's activities, and they refused to publish anything he said in his lengthy speech delivered in court. South Carolina's leaders were afraid of his legacy. Vesey's actions helped communicate the slaves' discontent, and on many occasions in the years leading up to the Civil War, abolitionists cited his example. Furthermore, by the late twentieth century, Charlestonians, including many of the city's white citizens, were giving greater recognition to Vesey's place in history. As Beck hoped in the film, people eventually learned "who he was." Indeed, our drama aimed to make a larger audience aware of him.

I took many lessons away from the experience of working on the Vesey production and other historical films, but two stand out in particular. The first relates to how I came to look at cinematic history, thinking increasingly about the production history and production personnel behind each film. The second concerns the fundamental tension over questions about truth and fiction. As a result of my experience in filmmaking, I am convinced that all cinematic history calls for considerable artistic creativity, even serious productions that receive academic stamps of approval.

All students of dramatic film should be exposed to the production experience, for familiarity with the various stages of film development can be invaluable for the study of cinematic history. Students can learn a great deal from script writing, production planning, working on the set, editing, and participating in various postproduction activities. Presence on the set is especially useful, because it changes forever one's perspective on dramatic motion pictures. After witnessing the busy activities of the production team, one is unlikely to sit back in a theater passively watching a movie. The suspension of disbelief becomes more difficult once one is aware of the many artistic decisions that go into cinematic history. Seeing the way cinematographers, gaffers

(electricians), grips (laborers who handle a multitude of jobs on the set), property managers (responsible for props), script supervisors (who keep track of scene-to-scene details), and others go about their business leads one to look for signs of these artists' handiwork in the finished product. The experience makes one look carefully at camera angles, observe how a director places actors in relation to one another in a scene, consider which point of view the camera is taking, notice the choice of lighting, pay close attention to costuming and makeup, listen carefully for sounds and music, and observe numerous other elements that communicate messages to the audience.

In one respect, the experience tends to spoil future movie entertainment. After seeing work on a set, the student of film cannot simply thrill to the exploits of a movie's heroes. When watching Mel Gibson in *The Patriot*, for example, the experienced individual will analyze the production, thinking about the ideas that director Roland Emmerich wished to convey when he set up a shot. The student will view Mel Gibson as an actor working hard at his job rather than as Ben Martin, the fictional character fighting the British in America's Revolutionary War. Suspension of disbelief becomes difficult once the viewer thinks of cinema as a production rather than as just an entertaining story. At another level, however, exposure to the production process provides a fascinating education. It reveals film in much greater complexity, sharpens one's sensitivity to the diverse methods by which the medium communicates, and makes one aware of the many subtle ways that images and sounds affect viewers' emotions.

Firsthand experience in the filmmaking process also encourages the observer to think about the medium as a production rather than as simply the finished product. Much of published film commentary relates to the completed work, to the words, sounds, and images that appear in a motion picture. Generally, less attention is directed to the activities of the many people who play important roles in crafting the production. After cooperating with writers, producers, directors, and numerous other artists associated with preproduction, filming on the set, and postproduction, the student of film is inclined to raise different questions when analyzing a movie: Who initiated the project? Which people guided the script's development? Which people or organizations funded the film, and why did they invest in it? To which audiences were they directing their movie? Were they influenced by the successes of related films? How did traditions of the genre impact their planning? Did key production personnel disagree on the film's interpretations of history? If so, how and why? In what ways did current events affect the choice of historical subject and the decisions about interpretation? What were the politics of the people who were most influential in shaping the story? Did their political ideas influence the film's perspectives? How did the movie's creators and publicists market the

production? To which interests and attitudes did they appeal? What did the promoters expect the audience's demographics to be? In what ways did the movie provoke controversy over its historical interpretations, and how did its creators respond to those criticisms?

My experience working on *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* and other films suggests that the study of cinematic history needs greater attention to these behind-the-scenes issues. Historians, especially, can profit in their investigations by applying to film the perspective that they apply in their general research on the past. They can view movies historically, tracing the process of film development. Their discussions of cinematic history need not be limited to the words, sounds, and images in the movie's finished version. Much can be learned about a film's relationship to history by studying the cinematic historians behind the production and their experiences in researching, developing, and marketing their story.

Another lesson I learned concerns the familiar debate about filmmakers' manipulation of history. When I faced the challenge of designing dramas for television that portrayed the past responsibly, I discovered that some distortion of the evidence is inevitable. No matter how deeply committed I was to rendering a story that told the truth about the past, I often found it necessary to fictionalize. There were too many gaping holes in the evidence for me to claim that the film was genuinely representational. I had to imagine how events and interactions took place, proffering educated guesses about a history that remained substantially concealed from the modern investigator. Indeed, most of what my production associates and I dramatized constituted informed speculation, for no historian knows exactly how Vesey and other historic figures dressed, walked, talked, or thought. Also, the documents available from 1822 offered conflicting evidence, for Vesey's contemporaries often disagreed when they described the rebellion and the people behind it. We, the filmmakers, had to make numerous judgments about the validity of these conflicting claims. We needed to privilege some of the evidence, shaping our vision of the truth out of an amorphous mass of details.

Denmark Vesey's Rebellion cannot be advertised as the only true story of the Charleston slave conspiracy. No filmmaker can honestly promote his or her production as such an achievement. Interpreting history through drama is a profoundly subjective enterprise. Other artists could examine the same historical materials and come up with very different dramas about the events of 1822. "Truth" is a matter of debate. It is constantly challenged and reconsidered. Different interpreters, communicating in different eras, may draw lessons that are quite distinct from the ones we advanced in our film.

My experience working on *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* also revealed that

contentiousness about history presented on the screen has its roots in the divisions that animate scholarship. I enlisted a blue-ribbon panel of scholarly experts to assist the production, yet those academic giants conflicted strongly when interpreting key elements of the story. On issues as vital as the personal motivation of the conspirators, their fundamental goals, and their chances of success, our advisers disagreed vehemently. The scholars were not even of one mind in assessing Denmark Vesey's character or his place in history. In all these matters, the professionals had to settle for a form of compromise that is not unlike the conclusions they draw in traditional scholarship. They had to accept a story that attempted to tell the truth as best as we could judge it. And in filmmaking, that truth is often a collective judgment.

Despite considerable manipulation, fictionalization, invention, and speculation in *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion*, I am proud of the drama's overall achievement. Its historical interpretations are supported by numerous works of scholarship. Accomplished historians vetted its design from the earliest conceptualization to the crafting of several script drafts. A talented production team worked hard to create intelligent and multidimensional views of slavery, while keeping in mind practices of genre that help make cinematic history artistically appealing. We did as much as we reasonably could to establish a delicate balance between responsible instruction and appealing entertainment.

If this educational production supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and designed for broadcast on PBS Television required a great deal of creativity, we should not be surprised that feature films involve enormous exercises of artistic license. Hollywood filmmakers are certainly under much greater pressure to take liberties. Their big-budget movies have to reach much larger audiences than do PBS productions. Feature films need to appeal to less educated audiences, communicating interpretations of history in ways that all viewers can understand. Their messages about history usually feature less complexity than did our story about the Charleston conspiracy of 1822. Hollywood's cinematic historians need to paint their history with broad strokes, greatly simplifying the portrayal of situations, characters, events, and ideas.

My experiences in filmmaking have led to considerable sympathy for the cinematic historians who confront these difficulties. After working in film's production trenches, I better appreciate the challenges that Hollywood artists face when they attempt to bring the past to life on the screen. I am more tolerant of their efforts to compress, invent, and speculate than I was before I produced a cinematic drama myself. The fascinating but complicated effort to render history on the screen made me much more aware that all attempts to interpret the past, including serious works of scholarship, call for a good deal of creative imagination.