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Sankofa. Haile Gerima, director.

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Last night I saw the best film I have ever seen on the subject of slavery. It is <cite>Sankofa</cite>, and is now playing in Atlanta, at the National Black Arts Festival. The film was met with great approval by the audience, which was as deeply moved as I was by this epic two-hour drama. I do not believe that I am exaggerating when I say that <cite>Sankofa</cite> is the <cite>Schindler's List</cite> of slavery. <p> This powerful film was done by Haile Gerima, an independent Ethiopian filmmaker who visited with the audience after the viewing, to answer questions. It takes place in Jamaica and Ghana, and documents the horrors of enslavement, and the struggle of millions of Africans for freedom. The epic begins at Ghana's Coast Castle, which is a tourist site today. It is here that Africans were herded into dungeons, before being shipped to the New World. An African-American model, who is visiting as a tourist, becomes fascinated by the cite's history. She finds herself transported into the past, as she struggles to find herself. When the main character gets lost in the dungeon, she experiences the horrors and struggles of slave life, along with countless others. "Sankofa" is an Akan word that means to return to the past, in order to move forward. <p> The movie contains a sophisticated plot, which gives attention to gender issues, inter-slave relations, and cultural conflicts, as well as attention to the slaves' relationship to overseers, Christianity, etc. It succeeds in documenting the oppression of slavery from the vantage point of the slaves, but also balances the realistic portrayal of oppression with a correspondingly realistic portrayal of slave resistance. The epic is history at its best, combined with an African folktale dimension that strengthens the powerfulness of the story. <p> This brief review does not do justice to this movie. It is a great one! However, it is only being shown in select cities and in select theatres that the filmmaker has rented. It is having greater success in Europe and expects to do well in Africa. But major theatre chains in the U.S. are not interested, because they consider a realistic film about African-Americans and slavery to be bad for their box office. Director Haile Gerima, director will need to find interested people and groups in the U.S., who can demand that the film be brought to regular theatres. It is currently being shown in New York, after having had its U.S. premiere in Baltimore. The film has won the Agip Grand Prize at the African Film Festival in Milan, Italy, and the Best Cinematography Award at the FESPACO Film Festival in Burkina Faso, Africa. It is a Mypheduh Films Release. It took Gerima nine years to get financing to make the independent film, and four months to shoot it. This is a very special film, comparable to <cite>Schindler's List</cite>, and one which Americans of every race, ethnicity, gender, should see. It's plot is both universal and specific. <p> The movie and subsequent discussion between the director and audience highlighted the need for fuller public history presentations about slavery, and a need for a good national Museum of Slavery, similar to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Gerima spoke movingly about the great need to feed the minds of African-American youth, as well as their bodies, in order to save a generation that is being decimated daily. Indeed, links between art, history, and social responsiblity come together in this monumental film. <p> <cite>Sankofa</cite> also indirectly raises important questions that will prompt incredible discussions in classes or groups. Some may be offended by the film's negative portrayal of christianity, but this portrayal opens the issue up for discussion brilliantly. Because of the universal but specific issues raised, <cite>Sankofa</cite> will be a great vehicle for bringing together individuals and groups who are concerned with human rights and social justice for everybody.

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