

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA

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Abstract

Contemporary American drama is no longer a mere reflection of society; it has become a powerful instrument for social change, utilizing the stage as a platform to challenge injustice and champion equality. This essay explores how contemporary American plays engage with social justice issues, illuminating marginalized voices, tackling systemic inequalities, and provoking audiences to confront uncomfortable truths.

Keywords: American drama, Black leaders, filmmakers, Hollywood trends

Introduction

Social causes are at the forefront of the American consciousness; just look at the TimesUp, and March For Our Lives movements that have sprung up over the past year and a half. There have always been social issues that need our urgent attention, but only recently have many societal ills have become seemingly omnipresent. While it may seem bleak to constantly hear about problems within society, it's also a chance to become more aware of your world and how you can help make it better.

As social causes have become more prominent, the entertainment industry has taken notice and has taken actions to become more progressive. It's amazing to see companies like Warner Bros. give away free rentals of Just Mercy, the 2019 feature film starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx, based on the true story of Walter McMillian, who sat wrongfully-convicted on death row, for the month of June in the effort to help those in need of "learning more about the systemic racism that plagues our society." One way to do that, especially at the top of 2021 with the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and work, is to take in films like 2014's Selma. In that film, Ava DuVernay recreated an America that was broken enough that MLK and a number of Black leaders and activists took to the streets to speak out about voting rights in Alabama. It's wild to think how relevant a film like that is today, where we're coming out of horrific riots at the Capitol due to those who believe the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

As long as there have been smart, empathetic filmmakers, there have been great social justice movies. They aren't all completely serious; many have found lighter,

sometimes even comical ways to address serious issues. Some have won Oscars, some were unfairly ignored, most are fascinating and necessary looks at the myriad problems within our society. Knowledge is power and these movies have plenty of it. Here are the best social justice movies.

Rotten Tomatoes: 96% (Critics) 95% (Audience)

Judas and the Black Messiah sees the fantastic Daniel Kaluuya portraying young revolutionary Fred Hampton in an Oscar winning role. The biographical drama centers on Hampton (Kaluuya), as he becomes chairman of the Chicago Black Panther party, but is eventually betrayed by William O'Neal (Lakeith Stanfield), an FBI informant. All too often Hollywood tends to soften portrayals of radical political figures, but thankfully this is not the case with Judas and the Black Messiah. Not only is the depiction of the Black Panther party pretty accurate (especially for a major Hollywood film), but it also has a remarkably accurate representation of Communism as a whole, and how the tenets of the ideology inform the political aims of the party. Kaluuya's performance is a revelation as a stirring, compassionate leader but Lakeith Stanfield almost steals the spotlight in his equally compelling role as a man tortured by his decision to give up his comrades. The film also deserves much praise for refusing to sanitize Hampton's death, which in real life was very clearly the Chicago police working in tandem with the FBI to murder a man in cold blood. Infuriating and inspiring in equal measure, Judas and the Black Messiah is the most radically political film that a major studio has released in quite some time.

Conclusion

Contemporary American drama has evolved from a mere reflection of society to a powerful instrument for social change. By centering marginalized voices, exposing systemic injustices, and sparking critical conversations, these plays contribute to a more just and equitable world. The stage has become a platform for social justice, prompting audiences to confront uncomfortable truths, foster empathy, and ultimately, inspire action.

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