

The "Hurricane" Carter story on film: What's there, and what's not

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The Hurricane, directed by Norman Jewison, based on books by Rubin "Hurricane" Carter and Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton, screenplay by Arny Bernstein and Dan Gordon

The arrest and frame-up in 1966-67 of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the number one contender for the middleweight boxing crown, and John Artis, a young acquaintance, for the shotgun murders of three white people in a Paterson, New Jersey bar plunged the two young men into a struggle for their lives that lasted more than 20 years. The case mobilized masses of people into action against the injustice inflicted upon two young black men.

The newly released film by Norman Jewison *The Hurricane*, based on Carter's autobiography *The Sixteenth Round* and *Lazarus and the Hurricane* written by Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton, brings Carter's story of this 20-year struggle for justice to a popular audience at a time when most Hollywood fare barely acknowledges a world outside its own trivial illusions. It is a film well worth seeing because this case was such a transparent miscarriage of justice, and a film depicting the fight to free Carter has intrinsic value. It is a healthy sign that a filmmaker today would choose such a subject.

While virtually no one in the entertainment industry in the United States is dealing with issues of social turbulence, there have been a few films recently based on "true stories" of struggles against "the system." At the end of 1999 *The Insider*, and now *The Hurricane* present stories based on historical fact. While *The Insider* succeeds cinematically in "looking honestly" (see <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/nov1999/ins-n17.shtml>) at the state of things, the real power of *The Hurricane* lies in the subject matter.

Carter's story is extraordinary. The film deals with the enormous personal struggles as well as legal struggles Carter underwent to prove his innocence. Unfortunately, the film turns what was a state-organized frame-up into a private vendetta carried out by a fictionalized police detective, Vincent Della Pesca (played by Dan Hedaya), against the tough, street-smart Rubin Carter (Denzel Washington). More than one reviewer has referred to the detective character as "Javert-like," referring to the notorious police detective in *Les Misérables*. The true story of Carter and Artis's 20-year battle is more compelling and has much more political significance than is shown in the film. The film implies that the frame-up of Carter and Artis was unique—an aberration of justice. But as Carter was well aware in 1967, the state was out to crush the rising opposition simmering in the urban ghettos, and he was a prime target. He was outspoken, bold and had spent much of his youth in a correctional facility.

Norman Jewison is known for directing films dealing with controversial subjects, with injustice and racism in particular (*In the Heat of the Night*, *A Soldier's Story*, *And Justice for All* are several of the works he has directed). But as in his earlier films, there is a tendency in *The Hurricane* toward sentimentality: to wrap everything up in a neat package so it all comes out right in the end.

From early scenes in the film we learn that Carter at age 11 was arrested

while defending a friend against the predatory advances of a wealthy white man. Already a petty thief and child of the roughest streets of urban New Jersey, Carter stabs the man in self-defense. He is arrested and interrogated by Della Pesca, introduced here as the police detective who would hound Carter for more than 20 years.

When Carter escapes from the Juvenile Home before his scheduled release at the age of 21, he enlists in the army. Stationed in Germany, he begins boxing, realizing this is the way to harness his anger at the world. The boxing scenes, filmed in black and white, evoke a visceral sense of the anger pent up inside of Carter. These brutal sequences are reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*. They draw the viewer into Hurricane's hostility, while allowing one to empathize with these aggressive emotions.

While on leave from the army back in New Jersey he meets the woman he eventually marries. As he is beginning to straighten out his life and settle down, Della Pesca reappears to haul him in to finish the last 10 months of his juvenile detention. Upon his release, his boxing career skyrockets.

Carter was, by his own account, flamboyant, arrogant and hostile. Having fought his way up from an impoverished childhood, he relied on his skills and his sharp mind. As he grew more successful he flaunted that success. He shaved his head bald and wore expensive clothing. He owned luxury cars. He was also an outspoken critic of racial prejudice, and a supporter of the civil rights movement in the US from the early 1960s.

In a recent interview on National Public Radio, James Hirsch, Carter's official biographer, said, "He scared people and advocated any means necessary for black people to defend themselves." This side of Carter is not developed at all in the film. The film presents the conflict between his hostility and his determination as a conflict that Carter waged with himself to gain mastery over his own will. His experience in the army is credited with empowering him with dignity and self-restraint. The political issues that agitated him and about which he felt passionate are left out of the film.

The motive for arresting Carter and Artis for the murders on June 17, 1966 is imputed solely to Della Pesca, who appears outraged at Hurricane's success and popularity. While tailing Hurricane at a lavish reception, Della Pesca turns to his partner and says, "Can you believe that black punk? He thinks he's champion of the world." But why were they tailing him in the first place? The film doesn't tell us. In reality it was not merely because a certain police detective was a racist and enjoyed sleuthing a popular boxer. It was because of his outspoken position on civil rights and his willingness to advocate "any means necessary" for blacks to defend themselves against racism.

On the night of June 17 Carter is shown leaving an after-hours club with John Artis. They are pulled over and surrounded by the police looking "for two Negroes." Carter retorts: "Any two will do?" They are taken to the hospital where the critically injured survivor of a shooting at the Lafayette Bar and Grill is urged by Della Pesca to identify Carter and Artis as the killers. The witness cannot positively identify them.

Compressing the timeframe of the actual events, the film introduces Alfred Bello and Arthur Bradley, two petty criminals who were at the crime scene. Entering the bar after hearing shots and watching two black men flee in an old white car, Bello steals the money from the cash register and tells a woman at the back of the scene to call the police. A later scene shows Bello being coaxed by Della Pesca to lie and finger Carter and Artis. It is implied that he will receive leniency by assisting the prosecution.

Carter and Artis, convicted of the murders, are sentenced to prison “for the rest of your natural life.” Carter realizes that, as an innocent man, he cannot cooperate with the prison authorities as if he were guilty. He says to the warden on entering the prison, “I have committed no crime. A crime has been committed against me.” He refuses a prison uniform and is thrown into solitary confinement for 90 days wearing his suit, tie, good leather shoes and jewelry.

In the streets of Newark, New Jersey, Detroit and other cities, just weeks after Carter and Artis were convicted in May 1967, the “long hot summer” of rioting blew up against the intolerable conditions of ghetto life. These were the conditions that had formed young Rubin Carter: run-down apartments, unemployment over 20 percent, poor schools and little future for youth.

A year and a half before, Malcolm X had been assassinated in New York City. A year hence, Martin Luther King was to be assassinated in Memphis. The war in Vietnam was becoming a focus of tens of thousands of young people. A radicalization was under way. State forces were mobilized against this growing movement through open police provocations, frame-ups and murders. The National Guard was called out to quell the riots in the cities. It was one of the most volatile periods of US history since the 1930s. This is the social background to the Carter and Artis case that is barely touched on by the film. The audience is left to conclude that it was one bad cop and one angry black man locked in battle.

The film is successful in conveying a sense of personal struggle and change. There is a sequence in *The Hurricane* showing Carter in a mental boxing match with himself. The one—angry, raging and bitter, against the other—disciplined, proud, principled. We can all relate to these conflicting emotions, but when one is unjustly imprisoned, in solitary confinement for the first three months of the rest of one's visible future, most would succumb to the bestial side. The film does not attempt to dilute this angry and sometimes violent character. Carter, in his autobiography, readily acknowledged that he *could* have killed someone. His mental opponent in this sequence relies on the discipline and independence he has gained from life. He emerges proud and determined not to allow the system to defeat him emotionally.

However, as with the personification of evil in Della Pesca, we meet the “guardian angel” jailer who helps Carter retain his dignity by bending the rules for him. This character, also a fictional creation loosely based on one of the guards at Rahway prison, reinforces the artificial “balance” that the filmmakers bring to the story in their attempt to demonstrate that ultimately the American Justice System “can work.”

Carter turns the system inside out for himself. He sleeps when everyone else is awake. At night he puts himself through demanding physical exercise to maintain his athletic abilities both physically and mentally. He studies law, works on his appeals, and he writes *The Sixteenth Round*, his autobiography, which is published in 1974. Carter has described it as “throwing the message in the bottle into the ocean.”

From the beginning of their ordeal Carter and Artis insisted on their innocence. The state's case relied entirely on the testimony of Bello and Bradley. Coincident with the publication of Carter's book, Bello and Bradley recanted their testimony, acknowledging they were pressured by the Paterson police to implicate Carter and Artis in the triple murder. They admitted they were offered a cash reward and lenient treatment in prison.

This is not shown in the film.

Carter managed to bring international attention to his case by 1975. He gathered the support of singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, actress Ellen Burstyn, heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali and other celebrities known for their commitment to civil liberties. During the second trial Bello recanted his recantation and the prosecution introduced a motive of “racial revenge” for the first time, and Carter and Artis were convicted again. The celebrities disappeared. The film shows Carter sinking into despair, cutting off relations with his wife and refusing any outside communication.

Several years later in Toronto, Lesra Martin (Vicellous Reon Shannon), a black youth who was “adopted” by a group of Canadians, bought a copy of *The Sixteenth Round* at a used book sale. Moved and inspired by Carter's story, Martin convinced his mentors to become involved in the Carter case. Two members of the group, Sam Chaiton (Liev Schreiber) and Terry Swinton (John Hannah), later wrote *Lazarus and the Hurricane* upon which the film is partly based. While the film enhances the role played by this group for dramatic effect, one of the stronger aspects of *The Hurricane* is the unfolding of the relationship that developed between Carter and Martin.

Lesra struggles within himself to achieve his goal of becoming a lawyer, while barely being able to read Carter's autobiography. He immediately relates to the conditions from which Carter emerged. He, too, was raised in the slums of Brooklyn. Moving in with the Canadian group was the one chance that allowed him to transcend the fate that befell Carter. It is the determination of this young man to meet Hurricane Carter and to fight for his release that eventually created a very close bond both in the film, and from other accounts, in reality, between Carter and Martin. However, this is the aspect of the film that becomes overly sentimental. In one scene in which Lesra visits Hurricane in prison, to the background of violins, Hurricane looks at Lesra from behind the prison bars, reaches out and grips his hand, saying “Hate put me in prison, love's gonna bust me out.” This is unnecessary. The music, the tight close-ups and “intimate” dialog serve to *make* you weep, not allow you to be genuinely moved by the truth of the real story.

During the next nine years Carter's defense team, aided by the Canadians, worked to uncover previously unknown evidence. They discovered a consistent pattern of deception, suppression of evidence and mishandling of the case by the Paterson police. Three of the Canadians actually move to New Jersey to work on the case. We follow the growing trust that Carter develops for these Canadians and Lesra. Since the release of the film Carter has made a point of acknowledging his gratitude to the Canadian group, calling them “the best level of people on the planet earth.”

After further setbacks and enormous effort to assemble a brief, the case was brought before Federal Court in 1985, at which time Judge H. Lee Sarokin overturned the 1976 conviction. Sarokin ruled that the prosecution had committed “grave constitutional violations.” He further ruled that the convictions had been based on “racism rather than reason and concealment rather than disclosure.” What we do not learn from *The Hurricane* is that the prosecution subsequently attempted to appeal Sarokin's ruling for the next three years, all the way to the US Supreme Court. The Court denied the state's appeal, effectively squashing the prosecution's hopes of yet a third state trial.

Clearly the story of Hurricane Carter holds many lessons and has a deep impact on us today. In an interview Carter expressed that he was well aware of the broader significance of his arrest. He said he felt at the time, “If they get me and John Artis now, they'll get you tomorrow.” So what is the significance of the choices made by the filmmakers of what to depict or emphasize and what to omit? According to a pre-release interview with executive producer Rudy Langlais, “When you see these two white people and a young black kid and this wrongly accused boxer, standing on the

courthouse steps after the convictions were overturned, we want you to feel good, to feel like the system works for people sometimes.” To achieve this goal, the film excises the social conditions that gave rise to the frame-up of Carter and Artis and its broader implications.

As Hurricane exits the final courtroom scene a free man, a low-angle shot shows the federal courthouse against the blue sky, its roof pointing heavenward. Truth and Justice have prevailed. Under conditions in which Mumia Abu-Jamal is facing the death penalty and Nathaniel Abraham, a 13-year-old in Michigan, has been tried for murder as an adult, we wonder how the system “works for people sometimes.” One hopes that the film will inspire the audience members to find out about the real story and draw their own conclusions.



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