

Leaving the others behind

Antwone Fisher, directed by Denzel Washington

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Antwone Fisher, directed by Denzel Washington, written by Antwone Fisher

Actor Denzel Washington has turned director and chosen for his first effort the story of an angry young man who, with the help of a US naval psychiatrist, uncovers the source of his rage in early abuse at the hands of a foster family.

On the point of being tossed out of the navy for fighting with his shipmates, petty officer Antwone Fisher (Derek Luke) is sent to see Dr. Jerome Davenport (Washington) for lessons in “anger management.” In conversations with Davenport, Fisher reveals the truth about his origins: that he was born in prison, that his father was shot by an ex-girlfriend before his birth, that his foster mother—the miserly and brutal wife of a clergyman—mistreated and humiliated him for 14 years.

Through therapy Fisher begins to come to terms with his emotional state. The finishing touch is provided by a visit to Cleveland, his hometown, where he reunites with the surviving members of his father’s family and pays a visit to his unfortunate, downtrodden mother. He meanwhile overcomes his aversion to physical intimacy through a relationship with a fellow naval officer (Joy Bryant)

The real Antwone Fisher worked as a security guard at Sony Pictures when his story caught the attention of producer Todd Black. A decade later his autobiography has been made into a film, and he has been working on at least two other film projects.

No one would begrudge Fisher his personal success, but the script, direction, acting and final product reduce life and human relationships to quite manageable bite-size pieces, arranged to illustrate a series of platitudes about “coming to terms with your past,” “having the courage to reach out for help,” “overcoming all obstacles” and “demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit.”

Antwone Fisher, whatever the conscious motives of the screenwriter and director, bears the mark of a narrow and retrograde socio-cultural moment. Instead of anger over the conditions ultimately responsible for Fisher’s misfortunes, it offers racial pride, self-help advice and facile psychology.

There are many unlikely and formulaic aspects to the film. When he first makes an appearance, Fisher, for all the misery he has endured, seems rather poised and well-adjusted. His only difficulty is a tendency to fly off the handle. A few sessions with Dr. Davenport and the latter’s fatherly advice and concern suffice to turn the situation around. The film wants to have it both ways: to underline the depth of the abuse and then to suggest that ridding oneself of such psychological trauma is child’s play. No one who thinks about the matter seriously is likely to be convinced. The romance between the two naval officers also goes more smoothly, particularly when one considers the history of sexual abuse on the one side, than humanly possible. Likewise, the working out of the psychiatrist’s own personal problems on the basis of his experience with Fisher seems too good to be true.

This is the pragmatic “road to recovery” as set out by daytime television talk-show hosts and their “therapist” guests of dubious origin and outlook. It’s all about “taking responsibility” and “refusing to be a victim” and whatever other banalities are circulating in the lucrative world of offering cheap advice to a confused and vulnerable general public.

The work as a whole has a simplistic, do-it-yourself approach to profound and painful problems. Fisher has no more than to acknowledge a difficulty, Davenport offer a few pointers and the young man quickly resolves the issue. The aesthetics of the film—modest, low-key, neat—follow this general pattern. Overall this is an effort to stuff something large, difficult and life-and-death into a small, tidy box. The strain shows.

To its rather superficial mix, *Antwone Fisher* adds a touch of black nationalism. At one point Davenport hands Antwone a copy of John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* (1972) and argues that his foster family’s sadistic behavior is the result of having internalized abuse suffered by their slave ancestors. Without question the centuries-long experience of slavery must leave enduring psychological scars, but patterns of child abuse and domestic

violence are hardly restricted to one or another ethnic group. They find their most general roots in a society based on the exploitation, continuously enforced by violence or the threat of violence, of one class by another, which inevitably distorts every human relationship. Which book would Davenport offer to a white sailor with a history of abuse?

The psychiatrist also provides Fisher with a work by Marcus Garvey, who espoused racial separation and the return of American blacks back to Africa. The film is not overtly racist in its outlook, or insofar as it is, this is merely the default setting of many contemporary black (and female and gay) artists, who accept uncritically the assumptions of so-called identity politics. This passes for “radicalism.”

Hand in hand with this goes the film’s emphasis on “individual responsibility.” Without perhaps intending to, Washington’s work tends to accept the prevailing argument that the most oppressed layers have only themselves to blame for their plight. The scene in which Antwone confronts his birth mother (Viola Davis) is particularly disturbing. He is taken to visit her by his late father’s relatives, who seem to be economically stable. She, on the other hand, lives in a dismal tenement in a rundown neighborhood.

Antwone challenges her, “Why didn’t you ever come to get me?... Didn’t you miss me at all?... I’ve educated myself, I’ve read hundreds of books. I’ve traveled around the world. I speak two languages. I’ve served in the US Navy and been awarded medals and ribbons of honor.” When his mother, deeply shaken by his unexpected appearance, cannot find the strength to reply, Antwone leaves her, the object of pity and a certain degree of scorn, and returns to his more successful relatives. He has apparently experienced “closure.” One is left with the distinct impression that creatures like his mother are weak, cowardly and perhaps immoral.

However, the circumstances that lead a woman to leave her child permanently with others, surely a heart-wrenching human decision, find their ultimate source in social oppression. Fisher’s anger may be comprehensible on the personal psychic level, but the filmmaker has a responsibility to provide a more general and compassionate understanding. Otherwise the film is aligning itself, inadvertently or not, with the privileged who sit on high and preach morality to those in the social abyss.

The insistence that individuals ought to escape and overcome all difficulties on their own, ignoring the fate of other, “less fortunate” human beings, first of all, accepts as a given that nothing can or perhaps needs to be done about the general state of the world. Indeed, such an insistence must take place *at the expense* of arguments in favor of the need

to change the structure of society to eliminate poverty, drugs and child abuse.

On the other hand, the case for radical social change does not negate the possibility of individual action and self-improvement in any fashion and never has. On the contrary, the cause of social liberation and the great demands it exerts have always inspired the most extraordinary acts of individual initiative, which are inevitably associated with raising the overall cultural and intellectual level. Washington’s film must encourage selfishness and illusions in the “American dream.”

The inspirational lessons which the filmmakers and critics seem to be drawing from Fisher’s experiences turn reality on its head. What they take to be a “universal” is rather the exception that proves the social rule.

Antwone Fisher contains both healthy and unhealthy impulses. No doubt Denzel Washington, an enormously talented and dignified performer, would like to create some kind of alternate ethos to the popular music-rap culture, with its glorification of backwardness and violence, perhaps even to the worship of celebrity and wealth. But what does the film offer as an alternative? The US Navy, militarism, patriotism, social conformism—and this on the eve of an unprovoked, colonial-style assault on a small, defenseless country.

The two “cultures” are merely opposite sides of the same coin. Neither questions the essential premises of the existing social order. One searches in vain at present for a black American filmmaker whose work would encourage serious political opposition, much less social rebellion. Nearly everything is about career and self-interest. And the results are appropriately and inevitably weak.

A number of American films in recent years have essentially argued not merely for an individual solution to a patently social problem, but that one must make one’s way and leave the others, the “losers,” behind and the existing order unchallenged. Each does this in its own way, films like *Erin Brockovich*, *Good Will Hunting*, *8 Mile*, *crazy/beautiful* and *The Yards*. This is not an attractive or admirable trend.



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