

Invictus, Clint Eastwood's uncritical tribute to Nelson Mandela

Hiram Lee
18 March 2010

Having opened slightly in advance of the 20th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from prison on Robben Island, where he spent three decades behind bars for his role in anti-apartheid struggles, *Invictus*, directed by Clint Eastwood, is a tribute to the South African leader and his efforts to overcome racial tensions in the aftermath of apartheid. The film's stars, Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon, both received Academy Award nominations for their performances.

As *Invictus* begins, the newly elected President Mandela faces a country divided by racial tensions. The transition to an integrated society has only just begun, and the process has been difficult.

Eager to show that his administration will not harbor prejudice against white South Africans in retribution for years of apartheid rule, Mandela asks the staff of former President De Klerk to remain in his administration. His all-black security team is also supplemented by white officers from De Klerk's security force. "Not long ago these guys tried to kill us," one of his black bodyguards complains. "Forgiveness liberates the soul," Mandela replies.

When Mandela's party, the African National Congress (ANC), moves to change the name of the South African rugby team "the Springboks" to "the Proteas," as they had done for every other South African sports team, Mandela steps in to prevent them from doing so. The team and their emblem were despised by black South Africans as a symbol of apartheid but had a large and faithful following among many white South Africans. Mandela believes stripping the team of their name and colors would only inflame tensions in the country.

Mandela is told "the people" don't want the Springboks, to which he replies "In this instance, the people are wrong." He decides to meet with Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon), the captain of the Springboks.

During their conversation, Mandela rather cryptically gives Pienaar a mission: South Africa is set to host the 1995 Rugby World Cup. If the Springboks can win the Cup, uniting both black and white South Africans behind them, it will be a major step toward healing the wounds of apartheid.

Later, when the team's ability to go forward is in doubt, Mandela gives Pienaar a copy of "Invictus," a poem by the 19th Century English poet William Ernest Henley for inspiration. The film follows the beleaguered team members as they struggle to fulfill Mandela's mission.

A film about South Africa's transition out of apartheid, and one which considers critically the role of Mandela and the ANC in that process, would be entirely welcome. Such a film would also be ripe with dramatic possibilities for a writer or film director. Unfortunately, this is not that film.

Invictus makes surprisingly little impact on the viewer, and one must say that central to this is the inability of Eastwood to grapple with the most significant questions bound up with post-apartheid South Africa, the failure to dig deeply and bring out something essential about life under those conditions and about the policies of Mandela and the ANC. There is far too little on the social conditions faced by poor South Africans, their anger, their hopes, their frustrations and far too much on the "destiny" of Mandela and Pienaar.

The glimpses we see of the townships, where the most devastating levels of poverty prevail, never rise above the level of a set piece for the film's major characters to briefly pass through. The weight of the world, in other words, cannot be found in *Invictus*.

As it stands, the film is another part of the effort to build a mythology around Mandela. However, it would perhaps be a mistake to characterize the work as especially determined even in that regard. It would be more accurate to say that Eastwood has simply accepted the official

story on Mandela and has proceeded from there. The Mandela of Eastwood's film is the great statesman who can do no wrong, the visionary savior of South Africa who single-handedly united his country after decades of division. He is a saint.

Mandela will no doubt be highly regarded by many people for a long time to come for his part in the struggle against racist oppression in South Africa. Active in the anti-apartheid movement since 1948, Mandela would take up arms against the racist National Party government in the early 1960s as a leader of the military wing of the ANC.

With the aid of the CIA, the National Party government arrested Mandela in 1962 and in 1964 sentenced him to life in prison. He spent 27 years behind bars before he was released in 1990. It is remarkable that he survived intact. The campaign for his release from prison was supported by millions of people across the globe in an outpouring of solidarity for oppressed South Africans and opposition to the brutal policies of the National Party regime.

While many consider Mandela a hero for his consistent and often courageous fight against apartheid, the fact remains that the program of Mandela and the ANC was never the program of the South African or international working class and could not defend the interests of the majority of the population. The ANC's program was of a bourgeois nationalist character and called for the elevation of "non-European" capitalists to power.

The conditions in South Africa today reveal the true nature of the ANC and their program; the poor and working class population continue to suffer even as the elite in the ruling circles of the ANC have prospered. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a recent article on the anniversary of Mandela's release from prison, "Some 70 percent of the population live below the official poverty line, according to the latest figures. Unemployment stands at about 40 percent of the workforce according to any realistic estimate. At the same time, the richest members of society have increased their annual earnings by as much as 50 percent.

"Social inequality has grown between ethnic groups, as well as within them. The majority of black South Africans are still living in poverty, but a tiny minority of those at the top of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) have become billionaires and joined the wealthy elite that ran South Africa under the apartheid regime." (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/feb2010/pers-f15.shtml>)

These facts alone would seem to beg for a more critical

approach to the period and events depicted in *Invictus*. Eastwood is undoubtedly sincere in his opposition to racism, but an artist has the responsibility of digging deeper, bringing out the truth lying under the surface of things. The film need not have torn Mandela down, nor built him up to be more than he was. What was required was an honest and critical portrait.

The plan proposed by Mandela in the film, to unite black and white South Africans around a symbol of patriotic pride, in a unity based on nationalist solidarity does not come in for criticism by the filmmakers. The fact that the ultimate victory of the Springboks did nothing to alleviate the suffering of poor South Africans of all races is overlooked or ignored. It made people *feel* better, if only for a brief time, and that's apparently all that matters.

The happy ending of *Invictus* rings rather hollow. The film ends with black and white South Africans celebrating together in the streets following the victory of the Springboks in the Cup. Mandela is departing the stadium in his limousine, looking out over the crowded streets and smiling at what he sees. In voiceover, Freeman's Mandela recites the final lines of the "Invictus" poem: "It matters not how strait the gate/How charged with punishments the scroll/I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul." In spite of the odds, Mandela has fulfilled his destiny.

If anything, a more serious filmmaker might have begun his or her story in the aftermath of the Springboks' triumphant win and asked what took place in the days, months and years after the country was supposedly united by a rugby match. Precisely how "healed" did Mandela and the ANC leave the nation? Regrettably, this is all absent. Eastwood has taken real life events and transformed them largely into fairytale.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact