

THE BIRTH OF A NATION (2016) - RT: 120 MINS

- Released October 7, 2016
- Nate Parker wrote, directed and starred
- Fox Searchlight Pictures distributed
- \$10 million dollar budget
- Rated R for disturbing violent content, and some brief nudity

QUICK OVERALL THOUGHTS

- Phil Svitek
- Joelle Monique

DEVELOPMENT

- Parker said his film had the same title "ironically, but very much by design" He told the magazine *Filmmaker*:
 - Griffith's film relied heavily on racist propaganda to evoke fear and desperation as a tool to solidify **white supremacy** as the lifeblood of American sustenance. Not only did this film motivate the massive resurgence of the terror group the Ku Klux Klan and the carnage exacted against people of African descent, it served as the foundation of the film industry we know today. I've reclaimed this title and re-purposed it as a tool to challenge racism and white supremacy in America, to inspire a riotous disposition toward any and all injustice in this country (and abroad) and to promote the kind of honest confrontation that will galvanize our society toward healing and sustained systemic change.
- After Parker finished his acting role in *Beyond the Lights* in late 2013, he told his agents he would not continue acting until he had played Nat Turner in a film
- He met with multiple financiers, and the first to invest in the film were retired basketball player **Michael Finley** (who invested in the film *The Butler*) and active basketball player **Tony Parker** (no relation)
- Parker eventually brought together 11 groups of investors to finance 60 percent of the \$10 million production budget, and producer Aaron L. Gilbert of Bron Studios joined to cover the remaining financing
- In November 2014, development was underway, and **Armie Hammer** joined the cast

WRITING

- Parker wrote the screenplay, which was based on a story he co-wrote with Jean McGianni Celestin
- Parker learned about Turner from an **African-American studies** course at the **University of Oklahoma**. He began writing the screenplay for a Nat Turner film in 2009 and had a fellowship at a lab under the **Sundance Institute**
- While he got writing feedback from filmmakers like **James Mangold**, he was told that a Nat Turner film could not be produced
- *The Hollywood Reporter* said, "But what he heard instead were all the reasons a movie about Nat Turner wouldn't work: Movies with black leads don't play internationally; a period film with big fight scenes would be too expensive; it was too violent; it wouldn't work without a big box-office star leading it; Turner was too controversial—after all, he was responsible for the deaths of dozens of well-off white landowners."

STORY/CAST

- No such thing as a good slave owner? Initially fooled by Owner
- Forced love story?
- Rape as incentive to action? Does it negate the real Nat Turner?
- Violence at end, too little, too soft?
- Realizing the real extent of slavery
- By April 2015, [Aja Naomi King](#) and [Gabrielle Union](#) joined the cast
- In subsequent months, [Penelope Ann Miller](#), [Jackie Earle Haley](#), and [Mark Boone Junior](#) also joined the cast
- Filming took place in [Georgia](#) in May 2015 and lasted 27 days
 - [Nate Parker](#) as [Nat Turner](#)
 - Nate Parker was born on November 18, 1979 in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. He is an actor and producer, known for [The Birth of a Nation](#) (2016), [Non-Stop](#) (2014) and [The Great Debaters](#) (2007). He has been married to Sarah DiSanto since 2007. They have four children
 - I want to pick material that involves me. I always tell my team that I never want to make the same movie twice. That's what terrifies me the most.
 - I'd love to play Nat Turner. What I would never play? Anyone wearing a dress. We just need more images of me. We've been emasculated physically, metaphorically too many times for me to support it. For me, that's where the line stops.
 - [Armie Hammer](#) as Samuel Turner
 - Armand Douglas Hammer was born in Los Angeles, California, to Dru Ann (Moble) and Michael Armand Hammer, a businessman. His great-grandfather, [Armand Hammer](#), was a prominent tycoon and philanthropist who ran the company Occidental Petroleum for many decades. Armie's recent ancestry includes Russian, Jewish, English, Scots-Irish, and German. He has one younger brother, [Viktor Hammer](#). His father is chairman and CEO of the [Armand Hammer](#) Foundation, where his mother is a board member. His parents also serve together on the boards of the Los Angeles Dream Center and Knoedler & Hammer Galleries in New York. In addition, his father is a member of the board of trustees for [Oral Roberts](#) University, and his mother, a former bank loan officer, teaches Bible study in Los Angeles.
 - His family moved to Dallas, Texas, when he was approaching school age. They moved to the Cayman Islands in 1993, where they stayed for 5 years. While here, Armie attended the Grace Christian Academy, a school that his father set up. They returned to Los Angeles when Armie was age 13. He attended L.A. Baptist High School and Calvary Junior High School. He made his stage debut playing "Rooster Hannigan" in a 6th-grade production of "Annie". He left school in the 11th grade so that he could pursue acting. His parents were keen for him to continue his studies, so he took courses at Pasadena City College and UCLA.
 - He had various small parts, before being cast as [Billy Graham](#) in [Billy: The Early Years](#)(2008). His breakthrough role came when he played the "Winklevoss Twins" in [The Social Network](#) (2010). He has since played "Clyde Tolson" in [J. Edgar](#) (2011), "Prince Alcott" in [Mirror Mirror](#) (2012), and starred in the title role, John Reid, in the 2013 version of [The Lone Ranger](#) (2013), opposite [Johnny Depp](#) as Tonto.

comedy, [Funny Money](#) (2006), opposite [Chevy Chase](#), in which her performance was compared to [Lucille Ball](#) and [Carole Lombard](#) in their heydays.

- [Jackie Earle Haley](#) as Raymond Cobb
- Tony Espinosa as young Nat
- Jayson Warner Smith as Hank Fowler
- [Jason Stuart](#) as Joseph Randall
- [Steve Coulter](#) as General Childs

EASTER EGGS/COMPARISONS

- Historical inaccuracies
- The rebellion occurred in Southampton Co. VA. August 21- 23, 1831
- The song in the teaser trailer is "Strange Fruit," recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. The song, which was written in 1937 by poet, teacher, and activist Abel Meeropol (under his pseudonym, Lewis Allan), was a protest against lynchings in general and specifically against the 1930 Marion, Indiana, lynching of Abram Smith and Thomas Shipp. "Strange Fruit," which became one of Holiday's signature songs, has also been recorded or sampled by many other well-known singers, including Nina Simone, Diana Ross, Tori Amos, Cassandra Wilson, and Kanye West
- The film looks at the slave revolt Nat Turner led in Virginia in 1831, but a storytelling device - the brutal sexual assault by white men on Turner's wife - feeds a rage that sets the rebellion in motion. History shows that Turner never acknowledged having a wife. There are records that indicate Turner's owner, Samuel Turner, married him to a slave named Cherry, but that he likely didn't consider the marriage valid and Nat never mentioned the marriage in his writings. Turner's rebellion was, according to his own writings, based on spiritual visions. "In a seventh vision, Nat Turner saw a holy war and believed he was commanded to take up arms against his oppressors," according to historians
- Academy Award-nominated filmmaker [Norman Jewison](#) tried to establish a film project about the life of Nat Turner in 1969

DIRECTING

- "I don't want this to be a film. I want it to be a movement. I don't want it to be a moment in time. I want a launch pad for conversation around how we can deal with our trauma collectively. Then we can create a cultural shift."
- "He became my hero in college. I never heard about him until I went to college"

PRODUCTION

- He invested \$100,000 of his money to hire a production designer and to pay for [location scouting](#) in [Savannah, Georgia](#)
- The film was shot in 27 days
- Some scenes were shot on a former plantation between Springfield and Clio, Georgia, about thirty miles north of Savannah
- Elliot Davis was born on May 23, 1948 in the USA. He is known for his work on [Twilight](#)(2008), [I Am Sam](#) (2001) and [Out of Sight](#) (1998)
 - Frequently lights subjects from below eye level
 - Look could be called naturally expressionistic

- Uses color range from desaturation to color
- Employs multiple techniques from hand held to classic looks
- Pushes the envelope of imagery in storytelling

EDITING

- [Nate Parker](#) cut about 20 seconds out of the movie after the premiere at Sundance: "I probably cut 20 seconds. I'm a perfectionist to a fault. I could hardly watch the movie at Sundance. Even until the credits rolled, I knew the imperfections that were thorns in my side."
- Some insert shots were added after it was bought by Fox Searchlight Pictures
- Steven Rosenblum was born as Steven J. Rosenblum. He is known for his work on [Braveheart](#) (1995), [X-Men](#) (2000) and [Blood Diamond](#) (2006)

SOUND/MUSIC

- Parker used the [a cappella](#) choir from [Wiley College](#) on the soundtrack. Parker had previously been part of a cast that portrayed historical figures from Wiley in [The Great Debaters](#)

MARKETING

- *The Birth of a Nation* premiered in competition at the [2016 Sundance Film Festival](#) on January 25, 2016
- Before it screened, the audience gave a [standing ovation](#) to the introduction of Nate Parker
- Following *The Birth of a Nation's* Sundance premiere, [Fox Searchlight Pictures](#) bought worldwide rights to the film in a \$17.5 million deal.
 - Competing deals also came from [The Weinstein Company](#), [Sony Pictures Entertainment](#), and [Netflix](#).
 - *Variety* said Fox Searchlight's deal was "the richest in Sundance history"
- A teaser trailer for the film was released in April 2016, followed by an official trailer on June 21, 2016
- A film poster with Parker in a noose made from an American flag was released on July 15
- After the public became aware of Parker's earlier involvement in an alleged rape, one LA street artist distributed a version photoshopped to read "Rapist"
- **CONTROVERSY:**
 - In August 2016, media attention around the film resurfaced 1999 rape charges against Parker and co-writer Celestin. (Parker was acquitted in 2001; Celestin was initially convicted but the conviction was later overturned and the prosecution declined to pursue retrial. The accuser committed suicide in 2012.) The studio reportedly is taking a wait and see approach before marketing to church groups, college campuses, and Hollywood figures
 - Because *The Birth of a Nation* attracted increased scrutiny due to possible [Oscar](#) nominations, and the film itself depicts a fictional, brutal rape that does not show up in historical records, there was significant press coverage about damage control by [Fox Searchlight Pictures](#), the studio releasing the film
 - [Gabrielle Union](#), a rape victim and one of the main stars of *The Birth of a Nation*, wrote in the Los Angeles Times, "As important and ground-breaking as this film

is, I cannot take these allegations lightly. On that night, 17-odd years ago, did Nate have his date's consent? It's very possible he thought he did. Yet by his own admission he did not have verbal affirmation; and even if she never said "no," silence certainly does not equal "yes." Although it's often difficult to read and understand body language, the fact that some individuals interpret the absence of a "no" as a "yes" is problematic at least, criminal at worst."

- Sources suggest that Parker and Celestin's accuser was either unconscious or extremely drunk when Parker invited Celestin to have sex with her as he was already actively engaged in a sex act with her

BOX OFFICE

- In the United States and Canada, *The Birth of a Nation* was projected to gross around \$10 million in its opening weekend. It went on to open to \$7.1 million, finishing 6th at the box office. African-Americans made up 60% of the first weekend audience
- In assessing the mediocre opening weekend of *The Birth of a Nation* the [Washington Post](#), reported, "While some moviegoers may have been put off by the controversy, middling reviews for the movie itself probably didn't help. Meanwhile, historic dramas can be a hard sell: It's possible a lot of multiplex visitors just plain weren't interested."

RECEPTION

- *The Birth of a Nation* received mostly positive reviews from critics. On review website [Rotten Tomatoes](#) the film has an approval rating of 78%, based on 149 reviews, with an average rating of 7.2/10
- The site's critical consensus reads, "*The Birth of a Nation* overpowers its narrative flaws and uneven execution through sheer conviction, rising on Nate Parker's assured direction and the strength of its vital message."
- [Metacritic](#) gave the film a normalized score of 68 out of 100, based on 47 critics, indicating "generally favorable reviews"
- Audiences polled by [CinemaScore](#) gave the film an average "A" grade, on an A+ to F scale
- Justin Chang at [Variety](#) compared *The Birth of a Nation* to *12 Years a Slave*, saying: "Parker's more conventionally told but still searingly impressive debut feature pushes the conversation further still: A biographical drama steeped equally in grace and horror, it builds to a brutal finale that will stir deep emotion and inevitable unease." He concluded, "*The Birth of a Nation* exists to provoke a serious debate about the necessity and limitations of empathy, the morality of retaliatory violence, and the ongoing black struggle for justice and equality in this country. It earns that debate and then some."
- [The Hollywood Reporter's](#) [Todd McCarthy](#) said, "The film vividly captures an assortment of slavery's brutalities while also underlining the religious underpinnings of Turner's justifications for his assaults on slaveholders." He added, "The film offers up more than enough in terms of intelligence, insight, historical research and religious nuance as to not at all be considered a missed opportunity; far more of the essentials made it into the film than not, its makers' dedication and minute attention are constantly felt and the subject matter is still rare enough onscreen as to be welcome and needed, as it will be the next time and the time after that."

FINAL THOUGHTS