Nate Parker: racism, rape allegations, and an embattled director who refuses to say sorry

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By John Hiscock

Nate Parker talks quickly, in grandly eloquent phrases, about slavery, injustice, about his Art (with a capital A), about how he became imbued with the revolutionary spirit and the obstacles he has faced.

He talks in lengthy and complex diatribes, not only about his controversial movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, which he co-wrote, directed and stars in, but digresses on to other subjects: religion, family, racism. But what he doesnâ??t talk about and refuses to address is the 17-year-old rape case in which he was acquitted and why he has not apologised to the woman concerned and her family.

In interviews, at press conferences and on the red carpet at the Toronto Film Festival in September, he consistently dodged questions about the sexual abuse allegations at Penn State University in which he and a fellow student athlete were accused of rape. They claimed the sex was consensual.

Parker was acquitted in a 2001 trial and his roommate, Jean McGianni Celestin, who co-wrote *The Birth of a Nation*, was convicted but he appealed the verdict and was granted a new trial; the alleged victim would not testify again. She committed suicide in 2012 after two previous attempts.

Speaking to CBS televisionâ??s 60 Minutes show for a forthcoming interview, Parker addresses the court case but stops short of an apology: â??I was falsely accused,â?• he tells host Anderson Cooper. â??I went to court, I was vindicated. I feel terrible that this woman isnâ??t here. Her family had to deal with that, but as I sit here, an apology is â?? no.â?•

Parker admits to Cooper that what happened that night was â??morally wrongâ?• when viewed through his faith: â??As a Christian man . . . just being in that situation, yeah, sure. I am 36 years old right now. My faith is very important to me, so looking back through that lens . . . itâ??s not the lens I had when I was 19 years old.â?• But when asked if he felt any guilt at all, his answer is unequivocal: â??I donâ??t

feel guilty.â?•

Parkerâ??s film tells the story of Nat Turner (Parker), a slave who led a bloody rebellion in Virginia in 1831; among the many violent scenes is a brutal depiction of Turnerâ??s wife being raped. Although it received a standing ovation at the Sundance Film Festival and rave reviews in January and won two awards there, the American Film Institute later refused to screen it amid concerns from the students about the resurfaced sexual allegations.

Nate Parker in *Birth of a Nation*

The initial Oscar buzz died down after The Hollywood Reporter quoted members of the Academy who admitted that the controversy had made them less likely to vote for the film â?? or even watch it. Almost overnight, one of Hollywoodâ??s most promising new film-makers had become damaged goods, and his eagerly anticipated film was suddenly a PR nightmare.

Parkerâ??s case hasnâ??t been helped by an essay written by his accuserâ??s sister, Sharon Loeffler. â??In the years that followed, Nate Parker became a well-known actor,â?• she wrote in Variety. â??It tormented my sister to see him thrive while she was still strugglingâ?¦ As her sister, the thing that pains me most of all is that in retelling the story of the Nat Turner slave revolt, they invented a rape scene. The rape of Turnerâ??s wife is used as a reason to justify Turnerâ??s rebellion.â?• Loeffler goes on to call the scene â??creepy and perverseâ?•.

When *The Birth of a Nation* premiered at Toronto it was reasonably well received with plenty of applause. Tellingly, though, it received no end-of-festival awards and critics have suggested that Parkerâ??s history and present adamant refusal to address the issue will have an adverse affect on the movieâ??s performance. It is due to be released in the UK on January 20 next year.

There was some doubt as to whether Parker would even attend the Toronto festival and if he did, whether he would give press conferences and interviews. But for four days during the festival Parker was in the spotlight, always evading questions about the rape scandal with convoluted diversions into the subject matter of the movie, saying: â??This is a forum for the film. I donâ??t want to hijack this with my personal life.â?•

Nate Parker with his wife Sarah DiSanto (Photo credit: Getty Images)

When we talked at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel, I asked whether he thought the rape case would damage the movieâ??s performance at the box office and how he felt when details of the allegations resurfaced he replied: â??I am 36 years old, there are so many obstacles in my life so many obstacles getting this film off the ground. I go to God with my thoughts and my prayers for support and getting through any of the obstacles that have presented themselves in my life.â?•

Will it have any affect on the movieâ??s chances for awards?

â??I try not to think of awards. I donâ??t make movies for awards, I make movies for people. I am an artist and not a politician.â?•

But how have the recent events affected him and how will it affect the movie?

â??I am going to speak first to the rape scene in the movieâ?¦ I made this film without any reflection of anything that did or didnâ??t happen in my life. As a black man, as a father, as a husband my last 36 years have been many obstacles that have led me to this moment and the way I have continued to get through them all is in prayer and petitioning to the God that I believe in.â?•

Nate Parker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, 40 miles east of where Turnerâ??s rebellion occurred. His parents never married although his mother later married an Air Force officer.

â??I grew up with nine of us in a three-bedroom apartment and it was very hard in the sense that we had very little,â?• he recalls. â??But as a kid you donâ??t understand what you donâ??t have until you turn on the television and then you are able to contextualise your position in society.

â??So in seeing the different ways people that look like me were represented in the media it affected me greatly and I grew up with a very heavy and dense chip on my shoulder, like I am sure many others do, and I had very few ways of dealing with it because there were so many closed doors for people who look like me.â?•

However, he went to Pennsylvania State University where he became a nationally ranked wrestler and met his future wife, Sarah, who is white. The couple have four daughters in addition to another daughter Parker had from a previous relationship. Parker has also adopted his sisterâ??s son.

Nate Parker at the Toronto Film Festival in September (Photo credit: Reuters/Jack Thornhill)

His Hollywood career began when he was spotted by a talent manager while attending a modelling convention in Texas. He moved to Los Angeles and made his screen debut in the TV series â??Cold Case,â?• before being cast by Denzel Washington in the historical drama *The Great Debaters*, which Washington directed. He went on to appear in *The Secret Life of Bees, Red Tails* and *Arbitrage*.

He was in his 20s when he learned of Nat Turner, an educated slave and preacher whose rebellion is now seen as a turning point in the fight for liberation. â??It made me feel a bit more whole, like I knew more about the contributions of people that looked like me to the country that everyone said was so great,â?• he says. â??I thought more people needed to know about it.

â??So when I became an artist I said I wanted to present this to the world and to be honest, I didnâ??t know if I was going to direct. I just knew it needed to be told. I donâ??t think this story is important just for black people; I think itâ??s important for all of us. Itâ??s something necessary and worthy of our attention.â?•

In 2014 he began work on the script and on raising the Â£7 million budget for the movie he called *The Birth of a Nation*. He ironically used the same title as D.W. Griffithâ??s 1915 movie which was notorious

for its virulently racist views of blacks and which historians see as a major impetus for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and a rise in lynching and other racist violence.

â??I reclaimed the title and re-purposed it as a tool to challenge racism and white supremacy in America,â?• says Parker.

In his version of Turnerâ??s story, a brutal sexual assault by white men on Turnerâ??s wife feeds a rage that sets the rebellion in motion. History, however, shows that Turner never acknowledged having a wife and his rebellion was, according to his own writings, based on spiritual visions.

The film was shot in 27 days and first screened at the Sundance Film Festival where Fox Searchlight Â£14 million for the worldwide distribution rights, the biggest deal in the festivalâ??s history.

â??When I made this film I had no ideaâ?¦ I would never have guessed in a million years that I would be sitting here today,â?• says Parker. â??I just made a movie and kept going forward and tried to finish it.â?•

As for the violent and bloody rebellion in which Turner and his followers hack and murder white men, he says: â??We have to give our audiences credit to think that they wonâ??t reduce the entire film to being about black people killing white people. If you watch the film and are honest with yourself you can see past the skin colour and recognise it was literally the oppressed against the oppressor.

This film is about so many things that are bigger than me.â?•

The Birth of a Nation will screen at the London Film Festival in October followed by a January UK release.

(Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk)

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1. Feature Film

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5. Director
6. Film
7. Filmmaking
8. injustice
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12. religion
13. slavery
14. Telegraph
15. Writer

Date Created
October 3, 2016
Author
hollywoodglee