

## **Once Upon a Time...When We Were Colored – A must see Black Classic**

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The true essence of the Black family in America is finally captured on screen in this beautiful mobile pictorial and landmark work. The African proverb “it takes a village..” is brought to life in this movie which IS the village...in action. From literally “can’t see in the morning til can’t see at night”, the Black family is shown at its natural best in spite of the inhumane treatment and conditioning on and off the plantations of that period. Be it in the school yard, church, jook joint (blues club), workplace, or throughout death, Black family life is continuously shown, fully equipped with strong culturally grounded parental figures.

Set in the Mississippi Delta in 1946 during harvest [season], this movie opens with striking shots of country roads framed with statuesque trees looming ever so quietly, like guardians of a secret temple. Beyond this seemingly pristine setting, lies the story of a Black family who [has] maintained their sense of dignity, despite the many social injustices that they have had to face. Though the legal whistle had been blown on the formal institution of slavery many years prior to 1946, *Once Upon a Time...When We were Colored* makes it clear that this institution has given birth to many offspring which display themselves in the form of economic, psychological, and socially oppressive forces. In this context, it is refreshing to see the lack of the stereotypical happy “house slaves”, who work unceasingly without the hope or will to leave the plantation. Instead, first time director, Tim Reid, shows us examples of the “field slave” personality that is best portrayed in the Uncle Sammy character, who states that he would “rather die than do field work”. However, this movie is an exception to what seems to be the unofficial Hollywood decision to only show buffoon and “yassa, boss” type Black characters.

The plot of this film focuses on the survival mechanisms that the Black community adopts in the face of the harsh and brutal realities of racism in the south. Based off Clifton Taulbert’s autobiography of the same name, we learn of the many critical lessons that were given to the orphaned Taulbert from the many other members of his community. Bits of advice come from dedicated businessman, Uncle Cleave, the caring Aunt P[o]nk [Phylicia Rashad], but especially from Al Freeman Jr.’s character, Papa. Papa is young Taulbert’s grandfather, and the center of his life. The interactions between Freeman and Taulbert are remarkably powerful because director Reid allows the audience to taste and savor what has previously been thought of as the forbidden cinematic fruit; the positive Black male image in his natural role as a Black man. This image acknowledges and mirrors the displays of love, nurturing, protection, trust, faith, and respect that we as Black people see everyday. It is truly a sight for sore Afrikan eyes at the video store.

In unreserved anticipation of seeing the usual cast of criminal characters that too often has accompanied movies with Black characters, my facial expressions continuously went from contorted wincing to smiling breathtaking sighs of relief. My facial transformations occurred when I realized that death was not knocking on the doors of well-developed characters that stood defiantly against a racist system. Both images of individual and unified community resistance were surrendered to us without stealing the gratification of seeing the fruits of this labor of love and devotion to Black people. I recommend this movie—not merely because it had a good beat and I could easily dance to it—but, more importantly, because it accurately portrays an often misrepresented and misunderstood people.

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