

Arts & Entertainment

Amistad a powerful, stirring film



Screen Scene

Stuart Green

You get the distinct feeling watching Steven Spielberg's period drama *Amistad* that the piece was a labour of love for the accomplished filmmaker.

Not that Spielberg doesn't put his heart and soul into everything he does, it's just more obvious with certain projects—usually his more serious or sentimental films.

It was most likely the case with *ET*, *The Color Purple*, *Always* and *Empire of the Sun* and it was definitely true of *Schindler's List*. But with the exception of *Schindler's List*, his most heart wrenching films are often his weakest.

Working from an original screenplay by newcomer David Franzoni, Spielberg has crafted an occasionally stirring and powerful film that tells the story of a group of African slaves standing accused of murder and mutiny in the United States.

Set during the closing days of the Martin Van Buren presidency and the apex of the abolitionist movement, the film follows the Africans as they are processed through a justice system to which they can't relate by a government they don't recognize in a language they don't

understand.

The president (played marvellously by Nigel Hawthorn) and his secretary of state (John Paymer) want them tried as the wards of Spain, the country of origin of the boat they were on, in order to appease 11-year-old Queen Isabella (Anna Paquin).

Meanwhile, the slave traders who own the slave ship *La Amistad* claim the accused should be returned to them. Yet another group, of British soldiers, claims it has rights to the slaves.

Ultimately it's up to a group of determined abolitionists led by Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman) and Lewis Tappan (Stellan Skarsgård) to see the group freed. They enlist the aid of upstart lawyer Roger Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey) to argue that since the slaves are kidnapped Africans, no laws pertain to them and they should be returned to their homeland.

Baldwin, in turn, calls on former president and abolitionist John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) to argue the case when it ends up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

All of this drama augmented by outstanding performances from the leads—in particular Djimon Hounsou as the leader of the Africans—makes for a compelling and fascinating film, even more so when you consider that the events are

based on historical facts.

Problems arise, however, when Spielberg's sentimentality gets the better of him. Scenes that should be poignant and understated are overblown and deliberately manipulative.

On the other hand, Spielberg is not afraid to take a scene to its logical extreme when called for. The depiction of the slave uprising and the flashbacks to their initial capture are necessarily brutal, shocking and graphic, but not gratuitous.

ALLEN AND ALLEY SHINE IN FOR RICHER OR POORER

Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley star as wealthy New York socialites on

the verge of divorce and on the lamb from the IRS in *For Richer or Poorer*.

They seek refuge in an Amish community where they pretend to be visiting cousins of one of the local clans.

There they reignite the spark of their marriage and learn what it means to be humble...

Despite its seemingly cute premise, *For Richer or Poorer* is strangely grown up in its use of innuendo, language and situations and is much more amusing than it may appear to be.

SCREAM 2

A LAME SEQUEL

Capitalizing on the sleeper success of the first *Scream* film, shockmeister Wes Craven delivers a sequel that in true sequel fashion, fails to live up to the original.

The first film was a clever parody of the slasher genre that was also a terrific horror film to boot. This film tries to recapture the spirit of the first and almost succeeds but since the 'gimmick' has already been done, it's hardly as rewarding.

Written by Kevin Williams, who also scripted the first film and this year's *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and featuring most of the original cast, *Scream 2* is as lame a sequel as those to which the characters keep making off-the-cuff references in the film itself.



Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley hide out in Amish country while on the lam from the IRS.

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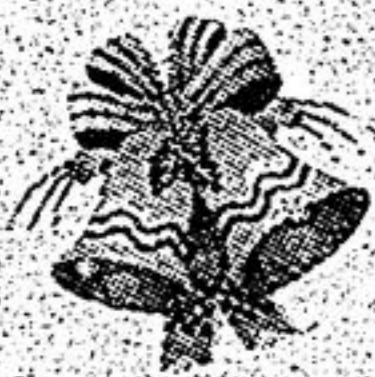
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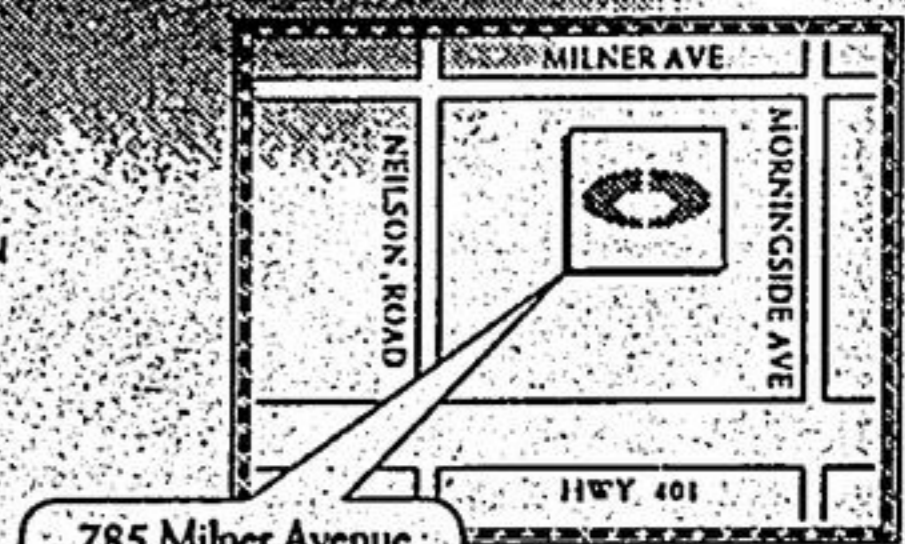
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