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Interview

THEATER OF WAR: CAPTURING BATTLE IN FILM AND FICTION AN INTERVIEW WITH RON MAXWELL AND JEFF SHAARA

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Facts reveal battle strategies, political maneuvering, and casualty lists that give us the details of war. But it is the fictional accounts produced over the past 130 years that convey the intimate, human moments that pierce our hearts and illuminate our imaginations.

The novel--and in modern times, the film--speak to our souls in ways that no other medium can. *Gone with the Wind*, *The Horse Soldiers*, *Glory*: these timeless stories continue to resonate with us because they breathe life into the ghosts whom we know, through faded ink on yellowed pages, once existed. Ironically, fiction made flesh makes us eager for the facts, which are now more meaningful.

There is a delicate art to the recreation of reality in novel and cinematic form. Writers and directors dance along the thin line between truth and interpretation, recycling history to create a product for broad public consumption. Filmmaker Ron Maxwell and novelist Jeff Shaara share their experiences of interpreting war and creating memorable characters through the new film *Gods and Generals* (Warner Brothers, Fall 2002) based on Shaara's 1996 novel of the same title.

- Leah Wood Jewett, United States Civil War Center

Ron Maxwell: The view from behind the camera

Ronald F. Maxwell is writer/director of *Gods and Generals*, which recently completed filming in Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia. It stars Robert Duvall as Robert E. Lee, Jeff Daniels as J.L. Chamberlain, Mira Sorvino as Fanny Chamberlain, and Steven Lang as T.J. Jackson. It will be released by

Warner Bros. in theaters in December 2002.

Civil War Book Review (cwbr): What are your thoughts on a film's role in telling accurate history, perpetuating (or tearing apart) a contested public memory, or providing entertainment?

Ron Maxwell (rm): This screenplay for *Gods and Generals*, although faithful to the structure of Jeff Shaara's novel (Ballantine, ISBN 0345422473, \$7.99, softcover) and its main characters, has taken on a life of its own. These distinctions are in characterization, dialogue, and cinematic storytelling. I felt compelled to include the stories of Afro-Virginians and Virginia women who figured in the historical events covered in the film, and who could illuminate the story in unique ways, revealing other facets of the "generals" as well as offering a richer tapestry of the times. Jim Lewis joined Jackson's staff in the fall of 1861 as his personal cook and valet. Although inconclusive, the scant evidence about him suggests he was a free man of color, and that is how I have chosen to portray him. He stayed close to Jackson to the end. I hope to illuminate his relationship with the general, shedding light on southern blacks who found themselves caught up with those who fought for the cause of secession.

In doing my research for the screenplay, I came across the journal of Jane Howison Beale, who lived in Fredericksburg through the war years and was present, with her children, during the siege and battle of Fredericksburg. Neither Anna Jackson nor Fanny Chamberlain endured a rival experience, and I deemed it important to see the war from the aspect of a civilian, a woman, who found herself momentarily at its epicenter.

As is always the case when delving into the facts, wonderful coincidences emerged. The Reverend Beverly Tucker Lacy was both her pastor and Jackson's wartime chaplain. The Beale family also provided me with the opportunity to introduce Roberta Corbin of Moss Neck Manor, where the Confederate army would winter in the early months of 1863, Jackson would meet Mrs. Corbin's enchanting five-year-old daughter Jane, and where Sandy Pendleton, Jackson's youthful aide, would encounter his future wife Catherine Corbin.

One story opened up into another, characters miraculously crossed paths, some would escape harrowing circumstances, some would die suddenly from a fever. Altogether, the women began to provide the story with a dimension that put the battles and combat in relief, and which made the soldiers themselves

more human, more vulnerable. The American Civil War is as much a saga of the home front as the front lines and with this film I wanted to make that connection better known.

Jeff Shaara's book is great reading. To be sure there is lots of warfare, but in some measure the book is successful because he takes you through long passages of the characters' thoughts or describes their inner lives. In film much of this needs to be externalized. Silent passages or musical interludes can be effective, as are the voice overs of thoughts. But at the end of the day, character is largely revealed through dialogue and action, especially if the characters are inherently loquacious and sometimes eloquent.

Everyone knows that dialects vary within linguistic groups--by region, by ethnicity, by education, and by distinct localized influences. This was no different at the time of the American Civil War. In Gettysburg the characters spoke in eight studied dialects.

In *Gods and Generals*, the same attention to linguistic fidelity remains and introduces the audience to both whites and blacks with little or no formal schooling. It is challenging to write dialect on to the page. But it is important, as a guide to both the reader and the actor who will eventually interpret the role. It must be stressed that these rural dialects do not imply ignorance or stupidity—they are not meant as stereotypes. The writing of dialect in a script is crude at best. It is intended only as an indication of regional and social distinction.

It is the job of skilled actors to bring these characters and their speech to vital and convincing reality. The folksy rural patois and vocabulary of both blacks and whites is contrasted to the more educated of both races, as exemplified by Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain or Frederick Douglass. As was the case on the set of Gettysburg, a linguistic dialect coach worked with the cast to discover the actual speaking "solutions," which became organic and invisible touches of character, in contrast to the seeming heavy-handedness of the written word on the page.

cwbr: What responsibility does a director have when tackling a historic subject, either via production of a documentary or a feature film?

rm: Ernest Gellner wrote, "Anything must be true before it can significantly claim other merits. Without truth, all else is worthless." Poetic license is the art of what might have been. Not a snapshot, it is more like a retrieved memory, an illumination. It is a window opened to reality. When we read Victor Hugo or Leo Tolstoy, we know it is fiction we are reading, not history, but we are convinced of its authenticity, its honesty, its rigorous conception of what "might have been, what could have been." Poetic license is not an excuse for sloppiness and slipshod research, it does not provide authorization to make it all up. Poetic license is not a hunting license to kill truth.

Filmmakers, playwrights and novelists, like historians, are fiercely preoccupied with the truth--poetic, dramatic and historical. When it rings true it is believed. When truth is rendered with artistry, it yields *War and Peace*, *Les Misérables*, *The Gods Will Have Blood*. Through these novels we know the French Revolution as well or better than we know it from historical works.

The Civil War was a brutal episode in our history. A half million were killed or wounded. Tens of thousands were made refugees. The suffering was beyond our reckoning. Individual heroism and courage, duty and honor, only make sense in the context of these trials and tribulations. I have not shied away from either in the screenplay for *Gods and Generals*. The last thing the world needs is a mindless, glossy entertainment on the Civil War. So it is important to accept the seriousness of this challenge: to keep our eyes wide open, to be relentlessly honest, to refrain from perpetuating myth and folklore--to get to the truth of the matter. Nothing will be more dramatic and nothing will be more worthwhile.

cwbr: *What is one of the best Civil War films that you have ever seen? The most influential? The most unfairly neglected or dismissed?*

rm: By the time of the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, a gruesome prologue was already underway in Missouri and Kansas. May 24, 1856, was the night that John Brown's self-named Army of the Lord hacked, shot, and stabbed a grisly human swath along Pottawatomie Creek. What followed and continued nearly unabated until even after the collapse of the Confederacy were events and atrocities most uninformed Americans would more readily associate with Kosovo than with the good ol' USA. It is in this uncertain and dangerous world that *Ride With the Devil* is set. The film takes an unflinching look at the brutality from both sides and refreshingly refrains from sweeping moral judgments. Free of pandering to clichéd expectations and the constraints of a politically correct

point of view (such as, the Confederates defended the institution of slavery, therefore any atrocity committed by Yankees is justifiable and even heroism on the part of Rebels is despicable) the film can explore deeper, more complex themes.

Ride With the Devil examines a tragic subject without being a tragedy. We follow a small group of Sesech partisans across battles, witnessing through their eyes the unpredictable violence, the vulnerability of civilians, and the total war of guerrilla armies. But at its heart, amid all this mayhem and death, friendship, loyalty and generosity survive—even a sense of humor. And, without giving away the ending, there is metamorphosis and resurrection.

Ride With the Devil captures the authenticity of the character in time and place, and therefore tells a story we are willing to believe. This is classic filmmaking with a sure and steady hand. It's that rare Hollywood event, a story of substance told with genuine artistry. The first thing the filmmakers got right was the jargon. These characters talk like they couldn't be from anywhere else but mid-19th-century America. Nearly all Hollywood historical films get the sets and costumes right, and this film is no exception, but rarely do they capture the moral universe, the defining idiosyncrasies of peoples who lived in their own particular times. Human life is universal, but it is always expressed in individual ways. Sometimes the movies really do reflect the mystery and contradictions of human existence. Sometimes friendship and personal loyalty trumps ideology and politics. Sometimes it doesn't. *Ride With the Devil* is not only first-class entertainment. It's a liberating experience.

Jeff Shaara: The writer's perspective

Son of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Michl Shaara, Jeff Shaara is the author of *Gone for Soldiers* (2000), *The Last Full Measure* (1998), and *Gods and Generals* (1996). His latest novel, *Rise to Rebellion* (2002), deals with the American Revolution.

Civil War Book Review (cwbr): When you write an historical novel such as Gods and Generals, the process entails taking facts, weaving them into your view of events, and publishing the interpretation for public consumption. The filmmaking process transforms that vision yet again. What do you find compelling about this process? Which aspects of the story are best explored through the novel, the film, and through non-fictional accounts? Does the

story lose or gain anything in the translation from one form to the other?

Jeff Shaara (js): For me, the most compelling aspect of writing historical fiction is telling the story from the points of view of various significant historical figures. The challenge is to find the means to get inside their minds, and tell the story as they might have told it. It is a risky thing to put words in the mouths of characters such as Robert E. Lee or George Washington. But when I have completed the research and I feel as though I know these people on a deeply personal level, then the storytelling is fun for me. I feel I'm seeing the events through the eyes of the people who created the history. It's far different from writing what most people would call a history book.

I'm not an historian, and I'm not bound by the restraints that most historians feel they must operate under. As a storyteller, my goal is to entertain. However, when dealing with real events and real characters, I have a responsibility to get it right. I believe that when history is accurately portrayed, it is the characters who bring it to life. From what I hear from readers, this approach makes for a much more interesting look at an historical event.

By definition, dialogue, both spoken and internal, is what makes my books fictional. But through the dialogue, and through the points of view of the characters, the reader can come to understand much more about why and how the history occurred, far beyond what that reader can get from the facts and figures of nonfiction history. I hear from an enormous number of people who express their appreciation for the fictional approach. That, of course, further increases my responsibility to tell a story as accurately as possible.

I believe a film can go a step further, by bringing to the audience a visual image that they might not get from a novel. This isn't always the case, and if I've done my job as a writer, I should be painting a good visual picture as well. The disadvantage for the filmmaker is staying inside the mind of the character that's pretty tough to do when you're working in a visual medium. (The technique that filmmakers use to deal with that is a voice-over which a good filmmaker will tell you is a pretty clumsy tool.)

To give due credit to nonfictional accounts, the responsibility of the historian is to present the facts. If the historian does his or her job, the reader should come away with a fairly complete idea of what happened. But it's the why that gets historians into trouble. I'm told often that historians don't engage in

opinion or interpretation. I believe that's a ridiculous claim. One good example is Robert E Lee. There are so many nonfiction interpretations of the man and his accomplishments, each one championed by a particular historian as the correct view, that it throws doubt on the entire notion of the historian as strictly the fact keeper. Any controversial historical figure is subject to interpretation, and I find it rather interesting that historians will debate the merits of Thomas Paine or Nathan Bedford Forrest, while claiming to tell only the truth. Each generation has its own truth, and this applies to historians as well as anyone else.

What is lost by moving from one medium to another is in the eye of the beholder. Many people would rather see a film than read a book. Others consider the book to be far superior to anything that can be put on film. The historian will tell you that objectivity is lost when an historical account is related by a novelist. (I disagree.) Naturally, the novelist, filmmaker, and historian can each bring a particular contribution to the same account. What works for the audience is, ultimately, all that matters.