

Glory ★★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Review by Randy Parker

The one great war movie of 1989, as far as I'm concerned, wasn't *Born On the Fourth of July*, Oliver Stone's manipulative post-Vietnam melodrama. It also certainly wasn't Brian De Palma's flawed *Casualties of War*. No, the finest war movie of 1989 was *Glory*, the Civil War drama starring Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, and Morgan Freeman.

Glory is the true story of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts, the first black fighting unit recruited by the North during the Civil War. Broderick plays Robert Gould Shaw, the young white officer who led the black soldiers into battle. Shaw, the son of well-to-do abolitionists, hailed from Boston high society. The letters he wrote home to his parents during the war are on display at Harvard, and were, evidently, the inspiration for *Glory*.

As the film begins in 1862, Shaw is a Captain in the Northern forces. Like Private Eriksson (Michael J. Fox) in *Casualties of War*, Shaw initially is naive and idealistic about the war—that is, until his company is attacked by enemy forces. Shaw experiences first hand the horror and chaos of battle, witnessing mass slaughter and receiving a minor wound himself when a bullet grazes his neck. Soon after his recovery, Shaw is promoted to Colonel and assigned to enlist and train blacks in the war effort.

Glory is the story not only of Colonel Shaw, but also of the black soldiers who laid down their lives to free their brothers from slavery. The film periodically jumps between Shaw's point of view and the perspective of the black soldiers. The movie introduces us to a handful of black recruits, and we follow them from their enlistment through basic training and finally into action.

The large black cast is uniformly outstanding, especially Washington who is electrifying as a runaway slave with a big mouth. He is brash and pushy, always getting into trouble and always looking for a fight. His bitter, tough guy facade is really just a mask for his loneliness and vulnerability. Washington provides much of the film's intensity and emotional power. In one heartbreaking scene, he is whipped for allegedly deserting the army. When he removes his shirt to receive the punishment, you cringe at the sight of his back, which is riddled with ugly scars from his days as a slave. It makes your blood boil. The humiliation of the beating is far more traumatic than the actual

physical pain it brings; a tear rolls down Washington's cheek—and down most of the cheeks in the audience as well. The episode becomes even more tragic when we learn that Washington wasn't deserting the army at all; he left camp to look for shoes because his feet were covered with oozing sores.

Morgan Freeman is, as usual, a strong presence, even in a small supporting role. He plays a grave digger who has buried more white soldiers than he cares to remember. He quickly becomes a leader among the black soldiers, holding the group together and serving as a liaison to the white officers. Colonel Shaw recognizes Freeman's leadership ability and promotes him to sergeant major, making him the first black officer in the army.

Andre Braugher makes an impressive film debut in the role of Thomas Searles, a free black who is one of Shaw's close childhood friends. Searles is educated and refined, like a white man, prompting Washington to nickname him "Snow Flake." The burning question is whether Searles is tough enough to survive basic training and to kill in combat.

The road from marching drills to battle action is a bumpy one for the black regiment. The soldiers suffer innumerable hardships, but somehow they never lose their morale. The army treats the black soldiers like second class citizens, subjecting them to racism and discrimination. They are paid only \$10 a month, whereas their white counterparts earn \$13, and, for a long time, they have to go without shoes, guns, or uniforms. To make matters worse, the white military hierarchy is extremely reluctant to allow the blacks into action, preferring instead to use them for manual labor. Eventually, however, the regiment receives its boots, uniforms, rifles, and right to fight, thanks to the stubborn resolve of Colonel Shaw. Shaw has absolute faith in his soldiers, and he fights tooth and nail to get them what they deserve, even if it means threatening a General with blackmail.

Broderick, in fact, is most convincing in the scenes where Shaw stands up for the regiment. Unfortunately, however, Broderick's uneven performance is, in many respects, the weak link in the movie. In an effort to look more mature, Broderick sports a mustache and a goatee, and throughout the film he slips in and out of a phony Boston accent. He is never altogether convincing as Shaw

since much of the time his emotions seem forced. The film places too much weight on Broderick's character and not enough on the black soldiers, who are more intriguing.

Glory regains lost ground with its harrowing depiction of war. The movie shows the devastation of war without resorting to the unnecessarily graphic gore which marred *Born on the Fourth of July*. *Glory* does not try to rattle you with nauseating blood and guts. Except for a few bullet wounds and one exploding head, the film, for the most part, leaves the gore to your imagination, which is not to say that the battle scenes in *Glory* are timid. To the contrary, they are chaotic and horrifying; it's just that director Edward Zwick (the co-creator of "thirtysomething") films them with far more subtlety and restraint than Oliver Stone could ever muster.

The key to *Glory* is the group dynamic among the black soldiers. The movie depicts some of (but

not enough of) their customs and rituals. In one scene, for example, the soldiers motivate themselves by singing prayers around the campfire. Each man has a chance to relay a few words of inspiration. A couple of the movie's most touching moments involve young black children looking up to the black soldiers with awe, disbelief and pride. The regiment's greatest triumph comes when the soldiers distinguish themselves in battle, thereby earning the respect of their white peers and earning the honor of leading the climactic assault on Fort Wagner.

Like any war film, *Glory* has its share of gloom and despair, but ultimately it proves to be a truly uplifting experience and an important history lesson, a valuable reminder that despite what the history books say (or, more precisely, what they do not say), blacks played a critically important role in the North's victory over the South—forever changing the evolution of this country.