

Mississippi Burning ★★★

Year of Release: 1988

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Alan Parker's controversial civil rights drama, *Mississippi Burning*, is an exciting and gripping drama, but one—alas—marred by several flaws.

At the heart of the film is an outstanding performance by Gene Hackman as Anderson, a former sheriff turned FBI agent. In his home state of Mississippi, Anderson finds himself to be both an insider and an outsider. He hails from the South and knows its values, attitudes, and mentality, but personally he has rejected them. At the same time, however, he is too much a free spirit and an individual to completely fit within the FBI. Hackman's character in *Mississippi Burning* is fascinating and the most intriguing aspect of the film.

Under Parker's sensationalistic direction, *Mississippi Burning* is intense and disturbing. However, several aspects of the film are troubling. *Mississippi Burning* evokes immense hatred towards its villains. Parker manipulates your emotions such that you want nothing more than the FBI to kick some butt—in other words, to nail the bad guys. Although the FBI's vendetta is extremely rousing, I had to ask myself: isn't this the function of a Rambo or Charles Bronson movie?

Mississippi Burning is not really about the civil rights movement at all. Rather, the film depicts a struggle of wills between two stubborn FBI men:

Hackman and his superior, played by Willem Dafoe. Dafoe is a strict, by-the-book agent who follows FBI procedure to the letter. Hackman, who is more familiar with the South, likes to do things his own way, even if he must bend or break the rules. *Mississippi Burning* is more concerned with the conflict between Hackman and Dafoe than it is with the racial unrest between the blacks and the whites in Mississippi. Underneath Hackman and Dafoe's clash and underneath the film's Rambo mentality, the important issues get lost: those pertaining to the civil rights movement.

My main problem, then, with *Mississippi Burning* is its historical setting. Why did Parker have to set this story of two FBI men in the civil rights era? And more importantly, why did he have to base the film on a true incident? *Mississippi Burning's* fictionalized historical basis distracted me. I constantly wondered which parts were true and which were fictional.

Mississippi Burning is troubling and thought-provoking. To be honest, at the end, I wasn't sure exactly how I felt about it. Ultimately, I think it is a worthwhile but challenging and perturbing film. I applaud its dramatic intensity, but I have to question the film's light dismissal of important underlying racial issues.