

Film review: The power of the human spirit shines in “Bear Me Into Freedom”

Dorian Mitchell Special to The Star Democrat
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ST. MICHAELS — The strength and resiliency of the human spirit were prevalent in the recent “Bear Me Into Freedom” special film on Frederick Douglass at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. A passion project by the Bear Me Into Freedom Collaborative, this exploration into the life of the local and famous activist and abolitionist was showcased on a sleek 22-foot screen. It ties into the corresponding exhibit on Douglass on display at the museum. The seamless screen display, the impressive sound system (complete with natural sounds from Talbot County) and the film’s beautiful voice-overs collectively immersed the audience.

“We’re telling the story of Frederick Douglass in a different way,” said Jeff McGuiness, local photographer and historian. “What we’re trying to say is he used his experiences here on the (Eastern) Shore to change the social policy in the country. The theme ‘All men are created equal’ starts right at the beginning.”

McGuiness’ book, “Bear Me Into Freedom: The Talbot County of Frederick Douglass,” was a cornerstone of the film. He is a member of the Bear Me Into Freedom Collaborative. While the film’s voice-over work — each voice a participant from Talbot County — was a huge attraction, Lance Morris’ role as the voice of Frederick Douglass was the pièce de résistance. His rich, vibrant tones rolled across the audience in waves, doing a fantastic job in emphasizing the messages in the film.

This was especially true whenever Morris delivered a quote from Douglass.

“The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced,” Morris said as Douglass, his voice thrumming with emotion.

The impressive voice-overs worked in tandem with photographs from McGuinness' book. Quotes appeared in stark white font for further emphasis, while artfully done transitions on the screen employed graphics of historical imagery to heighten the film's dramatic, powerful atmosphere. The film's fluidity was essential for the story's progression and did not distract the audience from what was being shown.

The film wasn't solely a biography of Douglass' life. It recounted Douglass' journeys from childhood in 1800s Talbot County to adulthood and his career as a dynamic orator, while also highlighting the struggles he experienced as a slave and how those shaped his determination to fight against slavery. The audience experienced said struggles through Morris' narration, on-screen photography, sharp sound clips and carefully-deployed background imagery.

Another common thread was honesty. There was no sugarcoating of historical flaws nor sweeping them under the proverbial rug. The film displayed these flaws and the cruel nature of slavery openly to show how far the human race has come and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

"Truth, justice, liberty, and humanity will ultimately prevail," Morris said, as Douglass.

Harriette Lowery, a member of the Bear Me Into Freedom Collaborative, said she's pleased with how the film turned out.

"I do hope it makes us work toward meeting people for real and that it makes us and our nation better," said Lowery, also a co-founder of the Frederick Douglass Honor Society. "There's so much divide and it's getting so frightening. It raises so many questions of how far we've actually come."

As the film moved throughout Douglass' escape from slavery and into his later life as an equal rights advocate, the audience could feel his vow to fight against injustice transform into a tangible presence. This effect was heightened by swelling scores from the soundtrack and imagery from his autobiography, "My Bondage And My Freedom," along with depictions from the Civil War, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Viewers also shared Douglass's triumphs on the passing of the Constitution's 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, which he strongly advocated for.

"It means that color is no longer a calamity; that race is to be no longer a crime; and that liberty is to be the right of all," Morris said, as Douglass, on the 15th Amendment.

The "Bear Me Into Freedom" film was an amazing homage to Douglass. Its foundation masterfully blended history with cinematic touches. The viewers could tell this was an act of love from Talbot County residents. It balanced telling his story with imparting how Douglass' work on equality continues today. The technology involved brought the vision of the Bear Me Into Freedom Collaborative to life in an awe-inspiring way.

"It was so exciting seeing this come to life. I think it's made a difference for many people already, and we hope to continue adding to that," Lowery said. "We've just scratched the surface of Frederick Douglass."

For more information about the Bear Me Into Freedom Collaborative and its works, visit <https://www.bear-meintofreedom.com/>. Details about the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's "Bear Me Into Freedom: The Talbot County of Frederick Douglass" exhibit are available at <https://cbmm.org/bear-me-into-freedom/>.