

# Washington fails to master debating in *The Great Debaters*

## theatre review

### The Great Debaters

Now Playing

Written by Suzan-Lori Parks and Robert Eisele

Directed by Denzel Washington

Starring Denzel Washington, Forest Whitaker, and Jurnee Smollett

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Online Coordinator

Imagine meeting an overdressed super-scholar who seems intent on telling you every "Back in my day" story in the most overly dramatic voice possible, and you'll have a good idea of what seeing Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters* feels like.

Produced, directed, and starring Denzel Washington, the movie deals with two plots: the first follows debate team coach Melvin B Tolson (Washington), who's attempting to push the Wiley College debate team to compete with white debate teams during the depression. But when night falls, Tolson discards his academic suit and becomes a unionist who's secretly trying to unite the sharecroppers in opposing some unjust company while

dealing with the problems of juggling his dual identity and the political discrimination he faces. It's like John Q stepped into a time machine and decided to become Batman during the depression.

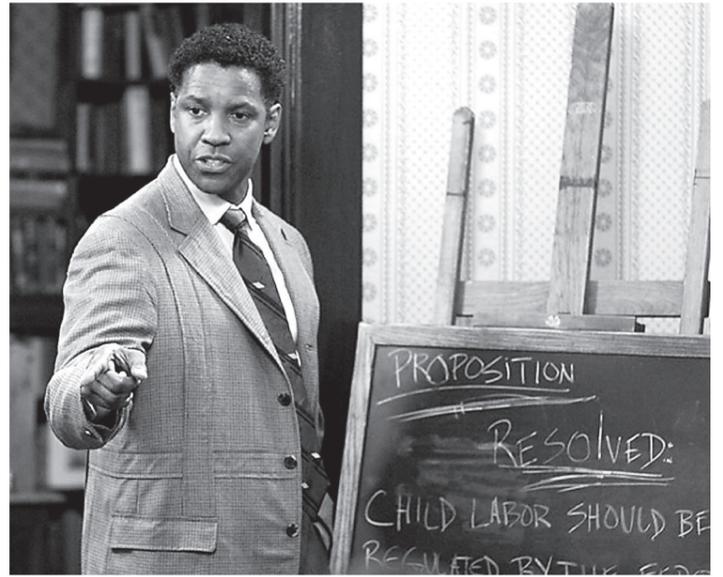
The other plotline examines the all-black Wiley college debate team, which includes young Samantha Booke (Jurnee Smollett), child prodigy and future civil rights activist James L Farmer Jr (Forest Whitaker), a radical activist (Nate Parker), and some guy that doesn't actually say much in the movie and promptly disappears halfway in. Whitaker also plays the overly strict religious father of Farmer Jr who later helps Washington's character in his struggle against the Man, for some reason.

To Washington's credit, he's attempting to do a movie about things that haven't been tried on film, and these risky parts become the sole redeeming qualities of the movie. The reminder that there were black scholars, scientists, and academics during the times of segregation is something that's lost on the public consciousness these days, and Washington makes their struggle utterly fascinating. Also, the debate parts of the movie are engaging and can be followed by anyone.

But unfortunately, Washington immediately buries these perks by attempting to make every scene in the movie more dramatic than the last one. A movie should be a bit of a rollercoaster, with some well-placed patches of comic relief and even a bit of romance, but Washington seem content to just bring his movie deeper and deeper into the world of angst.

Every time you think Washington might lighten things up a bit, something horrible happens; for example, when our motley protagonists are lost in a town and it looks like someone might crack a joke, they run into a lynch mob; a nice pleasant dinner at Tolson's home becomes another source of drama when a team member quits after discovering Tolson's political side. Even when the train's departing to one of their debates—an event that should be happy and filled with anticipation for what's to come—it's made to be foreboding and sad for some reason. I can only imagine that Washington was trying to build more and more tension towards the end, but by the time *The Great Debaters* is over, you're so emotionally exhausted that you're simply glad it's finally finished.

All of this angst and pain could



be explained away by the clause of "this is a true story," except that this story is riddled with historical inaccuracies. A debate brings up how evil Adolf Hitler is, even though the war hadn't started; Smollett's character—dubbed Wiley College's first woman debater—never actually existed; and even the main historical premise of the movie is harmed because it fails to mention that the team didn't actually become national

champions: because Wiley wasn't part of the debate society, they couldn't gain the title, even though they beat the reigning champions.

If you're a die-hard fan of Denzel Washington's work or you want to appear really smart, you might be able to enjoy *The Great Debaters*. However, if you don't have your room covered in Denzel posters, only go to this movie if you want to sit through the longest two hours of your life.



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