Team Colors
Film explores racial divide in 1930s America
As reviewed by David Steiner

The Great Debaters
Viewed May 2008

In the 1930s, an all-black debate team from a small East Texas college defeated the all-white debate team of the University of Southern California (USC) in front of at least a thousand people. The Wiley College team was trained by English professor Melvin Tolson and anchored by James Farmer Jr., later founder of the Congress of Racial Equality. Take a little poetic license to replace USC with Harvard, and you have a classic David-defeats-Goliath tale that is Denzel Washington's movie The Great Debaters.

Even this wordy summary, however, fails to give you the measure of the film: James Jr. was 14 years old at the time of the great debate and something of a child prodigy; his father, a minister and son of a slave, was the first African American to earn a doctorate in the state of Texas. Tolson became an important poet (best known for his work “Harlem Gallery,” a meditation on black America and the nature of art) and a courageous organizer of farm laborers across the color line. And that's just the start: throw in the movie's powerful reminders of brutal racism (a showdown over a run-over hog has one riveted, a lynching becomes all the more powerful for its indirection), a love story, a meditation on the universality of D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, a paean to the dreams education makes possible, a debate about Jesus as radical social reformer, and you begin to get the whole picture.

Denzel Washington as Tolson and Forest Whitaker as Dr. James Farmer Sr. give strong performances, no more so than in a brief theological fencing match on the lessons of Jesus that is the memorable debate of the movie. The shimmering fury that underpins the direction and acting of the racially charged scenes scrapes the psyche of the viewer and alone is enough to recommend the film.

Given the penumbral riches, both historical and invented, that dance around the core narrative of the film, the college debates themselves barely register: the positions are repeatedly stacked in favor of Wiley, the interactions of the team are merely sketched, and deeper pedagogical questions of lasting importance remain buried. As Wiley College's own account made clear (it seems to have been dropped from their website), Tolson wrote out all the speeches for his students, who then memorized them, and even provided rebuttals so his team would be fully prepared. Some would call that instruction in the art of plagiarism. But the movie only touches on the ethics of professorial authorship. The debate topic is changed the night before to eliminate any advantage Wiley would otherwise have enjoyed from Tolson's work. Then and now, there is a fine line between debate coaching and scripting. At the same time, Tolson challenged his team through his considerable erudition, buttressed by contributions from other faculty members.

California State University professor David Gold, on whose fine research I am relying here, makes it clear that Tolson's pedagogical techniques combined extensive memorization, acute sensitivity to issues of logic, appeals to the classics, exhortation to social activism, and demands for the highest level of academic performance. Tolson, whose father was self-taught in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, combined "racial pride, radical Christianity, philological rigor, and liberatory rhetoric that changed students' lives." In a phrase that E. D. Hirsch might embrace, Tolson evidently remarked that "the only difference between debate coaching and scripting. At the same time, Tolson challenged his team through his considerable erudition, buttressed by contributions from other faculty members.

There was, then, another movie hiding here—about a great, complex, bullying, courageous, immensely talented teacher, whose fierce discipline, acute sense of social inequalities, firsthand encounters with Jim Crow, and highly refined ear for language, literature, and culture would merit careful documentary treatment. But it is enough that his singular life and work enticed Denzel Washington and Oprah Winfrey (the movie's producer) to place his story on the ever-haunting canvas of our fraught racial history, and to remind us of the constant struggle to summon education as the midwife of what we can only hope is a more equitable future.

As for debating itself, the movie highlights the skills of academic research, of memorization, of elocution, of logical thought, and of teamwork that together make a compelling case for the educational value of formal debate (for more on the value of debate for education, see "Intellectual Combat, school life, page 88). Schooled as I was in the English form of debating—focused on persuasion, on speedy and sharp repartee, on humor and the ability to move an audience—I would add that combining American and British debating would make for an even richer educational experience.

David Steiner is dean of the School of Education at Hunter College, CUNY, and former director of arts education at the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C.