
Docudrama: Genre Definition and History

Until the 1970s, there was no such word as "docudrama." Prior to that time, there had been no need for the word because most movies fit fairly neatly into categories of either fiction or non-fiction. There was fact-based drama, of course, such as *Gung Ho* (1943), but such films never pretended to be exact re-enactments of the events they covered, or the people involved. In the 20 years since its invention however, the term "stuck" and now refers to one of the most popular and controversial film genres. The change from dramatization to "docudrama" took place during the 1970s, beginning with the production of television features ("movies of the week") that purported to give re-enactments of events and personages. There were earlier films, such as *The Battle of the Bulge*, which had personalities telling a true story using dramatized facts. More frequently, the films were billed not as re-enactments but as purely dramaticized tales, using fictionalized names and loosely based on an actual event -- a difference which left producers room to maneuver in dramatizing events and audiences with the realization that to get the facts, they should check the history books.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Hollywood began flirting with a subgenre similar to docudrama, the "historical biography" -- beginning with Warner Bros.' *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936), which scored an unexpected hit with Paul Muni in the title role and William Dieterle (who came to specialize in such films). In these films, the lives of great scientists (Marie and Pierre Curie), inventors (Edison twice, in *Young Tom Edison* and *Edison The Man*), musicians (Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner), sports heroes (Knut Rockne and George Gipp in *Knut Rockne, All American*; Lou Gehrig in *Pride of the Yankees*), and even businessmen (Julius Reuter in *A Dispatch From Reuters*) were dramatized by an array of Hollywood stars. But none of these movies ever pretended to give more than some basic facts of the lives they covered. And, in any case, the main body of these movies were in vogue only a short period of time, from about 1935 until the outbreak of World War II -- most were not successful after 1940, the notable exception being *Pride of the Yankees* (1941), the dramatization of the life of doomed Yankee star Lou Gehrig, whose story had moved millions of baseball fans just two years earlier. The first made-for-television biographies, most notably Buzz Kulik's *Brian's Song* (1970), followed Hollywood precedent with perhaps a little more faithfulness, since the story of Brian Piccolo was well known to millions of football fans at the time.

The docudrama is fundamentally different, claiming to re-create events, time sequences, and even personal interaction between its supposed subjects in detail. The genre evolved out of the same mindset as the "illness-of-the-week" concept in telefilm scheduling -- both derived from a desire to offer an immediacy that was unavailable to theatrical films, with their longer production and distribution schedules. If television movies couldn't compete with their theatrical cousins in the area of production values, big-name stars, or ambitious scripts, they could offer a brand of topical depth that feature films seldom aimed for. The docudrama first appeared during the mid-1970s, when television film producers found that they could get an extra bounce in the ratings and the press by adding layers of verisimilitude to their work -- names, historical dates, and characters that were purported to be based closely on real-life figures. The results were sometimes unfair to history, as well as to earlier films.

For example, while John Sturges' hit *The Great Escape* (1963) faithfully dramatized a

celebrated escape attempt by Allied air prisoners from a German prison camp during World War II using fictionalized characters, the television docudrama *Great Escape II: The Untold Story* (1988) -- co-directed by Jud Taylor, who acted in the original -- played faster and looser with the facts. Strangely -- and tellingly -- enough, among the earlier entries in the genre was Quinn Martin's superb production of *Attack On Terror: The F.B.I. Vs. The Ku Klux Klan* (1975), which re-enacted the murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi during 1964 and the subsequent investigation and prosecution of the men responsible; and *Ruby And Oswald* (1978, later renamed *Four Days In Dallas*), depicting the events leading up to and following the murder of President Kennedy, and the personalities of Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby. The docudrama genre flourished in the sphere of television because of the comparative substance behind the material. Television was a "fast" medium, both in terms of production and getting something on the air, and as a vehicle for presentation -- it worked better flooding the viewer with information than dwelling on detail. Alan J. Pakula's *All The President's Men* (1976) was a rare theatrical entry into the field, dramatizing characters and elements of the story of the fall of the Nixon White House.

Although some television critics and a few historians were uncomfortable with the format, their concerns were more technical than anything else. Where the docudrama began to encounter problems, both with critics and the public, however, was when feature filmmakers began turning their attentions to historical subjects, and the demands of drama began to eclipse the documentary content. During the 1980s, for example, one of the most popular and successful docudramas was Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, which covered the same events dealt with in *Attack On Terror* -- a more overtly "dramatic" telling of the tale, complete with a full-blooded (and superb) performance by Gene Hackman as a law-enforcement officer on the case. The concern of some historians was that the theatrical film, with its more dramatic orientation, would become the "reality" for audiences -- would Gene Hackman and company, and a script that necessarily took some liberties with the truth for brevity's sake, eclipse the reality behind the story? The genuine controversy surrounding the genre didn't come to the fore, however, until the 1990s, and the release of two theatrical docudramas, Oliver Stone's *J.F.K.* and Robert Redford's *Quiz Show*.

Stone's movies had always taken a very personal view of its subjects, whether dealing with Vietnam (*Born On the Fourth of July*, *Platoon*) or the business world (*Wall Street*). But those earlier films were either personal stories of individuals, or fictional dramas. *J.F.K.*, however, dealt with a real event, the murder of a President, and was extremely controversial for the personal slant that Stone put on events, trying to present his belief in a conspiracy theory as fact. Most significantly, the director seemingly presented half-truths and shadings of truth to sustain his sincere belief in a conspiracy theory behind the murder of President Kennedy. His unwillingness to address the criticisms of his film in public, by taking on his critics, only exacerbated the controversy behind the film. Similar problems have bedeviled Robert Redford's feature film *Quiz Show* (1994), which dealt with the quiz-show scandals of the 1950s.

Redford's film, based on the book *Remembering America*, presented the breaking of the scandal as the work of the author of the book, a former Congressional investigator who had been involved in the case, but only very late in its history and on a relatively limited basis. No sooner had the film appeared, than a New York judge named Joseph Stone -- who as a prosecutor in the 1950s had broken the case and done much of the work attributed to others in the movie -- cried "foul" and cited his own book, which told a more accurate version of the story than the film did. Redford later admitted that, in the interests of pacing and structure, and the

need for a unified drama, some liberties were taken with the facts of the case, but that this was acceptable for a "drama." The problem, as critics, journalists, and historians continue to point out, is that movies like Quiz Show and J.F.K. give the appearance of truth to their content by using actors portraying real people and supposed re-enactments of the events involved. A compromise has yet to be devised that is acceptable to both sides, but it is clear that the filmmakers are as jealous of their creative purview as the journalists and historians are of their territory.

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