



THE HELP is an August, 2013 LVCA donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library.

United States 2011 146 minutes color Dreamworks Pictures / Reliance Entertainment / Participant Media / Imagination Abu Dhabi / 1492 Pictures / Harbinger Pictures Producers: Brunson Green, Chris Columbus, Michael Barnathan, Sonya Lunsford

*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

12 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

Points

2 Film Director: Tate Taylor*

0 Film Editor: Hughes Winborne

1 Cinematographer: Stephen Goldblatt

2 Lighting: Colin Campbell

0 Screenplay: Tate Taylor, based on the novel by Kathryn Stockett

1 Music: Thomas Newman, Ray Charles, Ellis McDaniel (Bo Diddley)

2 Production Designer / Art Director / Set Designer / Set Decorator:

Mark Ricker* / Curt Beech* / Rena De Angelo*

2 Sound: Dennis Drummond*

2 Acting

0 Creativity

12 points

Principal Cast: Jessica Chastain* (Celia Foote), Viola Davis*(Aibileen Clark), Bryce Dallas Howard (Hilly Holbrook), Allison Janney (Charlotte Phelan, mother of Eugenia a.k.a. Skeeter), Octavia Spencer* (Minnie Jackson), Emma Stone* (Eugenia Phelan a.k.a Skeeter, daughter of Charlotte), Chris Lowell (Stuart Whitworth), Ahna O'Reilly* (Elizabeth Leefolt), Sissy Spacek* (Miss Walters, mother of Hilly Holbrook), Mary Steenburgen (Elaine Stein, New York City book editor), Cicely Tyson* (Constantine Jefferson, housemaid for the Phelans), Mike Vogel (Johnny Foote), Anna Camp* (Jolene French, Junior League member), La Chanze* (Rachel, Constantine's daughter), Wes Chatham (Carlson Phelan, Charlotte's brother), Aunjanue Ellis (Yule Mae, replacement maid for Minnie at the Holbrook residence), Nelson Ellis* (Henry, a waiter), Dana Ivey* (Grace Higginbotham, D.A.R. executive), Ashley Johnson (Marybeth Caldwell), Leslie Jordan (Mr. Blackley, editor of JACKSON JOURNAL), Brian Kerwin (Robert Phelan, Charlotte's husband and father of Eugenia and Carlson), Shane McRae (Riley), David Oyelowo* (Preacher Green), Roslyn Ruff (Passagoula)

THE HELP plunks us down near Jackson, Mississippi in the halcyon days of the John F. Kennedy administration. Civil Rights advocates are applying unprecedented pressure to desegregate both the South and the racially restrictive property zonings of realtors in the North. Life for the working classes is about to change significantly. Newly matriculated Skeeter Phelan plans to join the reformist vanguard.

Education at the University of Mississippi has not prepared her to accept the brutal realities of poverty and flagrant, despotic racism which underpin the social structure of the state capital. For those at the bottom of the heap, economic survival is a constant uphill battle. On the other hand, fortunate patricians who own luxurious properties can maintain them at low expense and minimal managerial effort, allowing both dependency and autocracy at the same time.

While most of her contemporaries in Jackson's Junior League are completely satisfied with preserving the status quo, Eugenia Phelan's ambitions incline her to shake the tree. She does not plan an early espousal. And a carload of demanding

children is perceived as less rewarding than fame as a writer. What is not desired is some kind of hands-off maternal role, leaving fostering of youngsters to hired caretakers. Particularly to be avoided is the fate of becoming another Hilly Holbrook, queen bee of a socially ascendant sorority of bridge players.

Not content with supplying an anonymous regular housekeeping feature for the Jackson Journal's devoted readers, the film's protagonist dreams of moving north and becoming a published novelist. Since personal experience of domestic chores is very limited, the maid employed by one of Hilly's Junior League comrades, Elizabeth Leefolt, is imposed upon to contribute accurate information for the newspaper column. It does not appear to bother Skeeter that the designated informant is not paid for her time and expertise. Nor is there much concern shown about adding another assignment to Aibileen Clark's already overloaded work schedule. It's obvious that Eugenia has no more insight into the feelings and responsibilities of servants than her oblivious peers.

A publisher in New York has provided a measure of encouragement to pursue a literary career. Advising more experience is essential, Elaine Stein reluctantly agrees to give consideration to a proposed book project about black surrogate mothers and their relationships over time with white youths they raised. What will make this publication unique, Skeeter tells her, is the point of view. It will be that of the marginalized women themselves. Aibileen and Constantine, a former maid in the Phelan house, shall provide the details. Or so she hopes.

Meanwhile, Hilly's ongoing campaign to compel creation of separate bathroom facilities for each race is generating resentment in the black community, though winning favor with government officials. Her good friend Skeeter is entrusted with publicizing the Home Help Sanitation Initiative in Jackson's popular newspaper, a task consistently sidestepped as demeaning and odious.

Far more intriguing are revelations Aibileen writes about indignities and burdens suffered by the black female working underclass of Mississippi. If they ever appear in book form, it must be on condition of anonymity. No house servant wishes to lose her employment, despite its modest income. Slim is better than none.

Miss Stein ups the ante by demanding stories from more domestics. While Aibileen is willing to share recollections because of employer negligence leading

to the death of her only son, the rest of Jackson's black housemaids remain unwilling to risk firing and potential blacklisting. Stalemate seems imminent.

Minnie Jackson, maid of Miss Walters, is fired by Hilly for not conforming to revised hygienic procedures established for the protection of whites from alien contaminants. When her mother protests this abrogation of her privilege, she is packed off to a nursing home, leaving Miss Purity free to manage the Holbrook household as she wishes.

A new maid is hired to replace Minny. But she has the unacceptable gall to apologetically request a loan or advance to finance college education for one of her twin sons. Mr. Holbrook ducks the issue by racing off to work, a highly suspect behavior, leaving his firmer half to deny the helper's request. Hilly relishes rubbing salt in the wound by lecturing on the virtue of self-reliance, one she avoids practicing whenever possible, palming off responsibilities on everyone else and then criticizing perceived performance shortcomings.

When Yule Mae, her unappreciated employee, discovers a lost piece of jewelry in the course of running a vacuum behind a sofa, she takes revenge by palming it, vainly attempting later to trade the item for cash at a local pawn shop. For her pains, she is quickly suspected by the white proprietor of theft. Once it is determined who she works for, a call to Hilly confirms the unauthorized departure of the accessory. Police rapidly apprehend the offender. However, their brutal manhandling of the detainee, coupled with Medgar Evers' murder by the Ku Klux Klan, determine previously stoic local housekeepers to break silence and share both injustices and occasional white benevolences with receptive backbiting Skeeter, who continues to operate disarmingly in both white and black circles. Eugenia has no intention of compromising her own privileges, though she's not averse to trimming those of associates.

Another pariah in the area, Celia Foote, from a poor family of no social status, makes the faux pas of hiring ostracized Minny. Lacking social graces, culinary skills and home decorating insightfulness, Celia nonetheless has finessed a marriage with Johnny Foote, heir to wealth, property and privilege. Her gain was Hilly's loss, Johnny being a former fiancé who Mrs. Holbrook believes only married Celia due to the latter's pregnancy. Apparently, the current Mr. Holbrook has been obtained on the rebound as a financially attractive alternative mate.

According to the Jackson rumor mill, Hilly's preferred male companion would still be Johnny.

Further complications result from embarrassing toilet humor situations. One of these severs the last frayed bond between Skeeter and former best friend Hilly. Another augments hostility between vengeful Minny and her former boss, ratcheting it up to implacable animosity.

When Celia appears at the Holbrook residence uninvited with a home-baked pie from Minny, the juvenile cattiness of the hostess is spotlighted as the latter urges card party guests not to welcome their visitor, but instead to conceal themselves as if playing hide-and-seek. Of course, another mouth-watering treat from Minny Jackson is the last thing Hilly desires at this point. Later in the film, at a benefit for impoverished waifs in Africa, an embarrassing drunken confidence Celia makes to her nemesis about Johnny is capped by accidental ripping of Mrs. Holbrook's dress when Mrs. Foote mistakes her confidante's shoulder for a stabilizing pillar. There is no opportunity for either to exit gracefully, with Hilly's mother adding a belated betrayal when she takes home a pie baked by Minny in the name of her daughter, who will surely not begrudge African urchins charity money raised by sale of home-cooked pastry.

Yet Eugenia's betrayal of adolescent friends is just as ethically intolerable as Hilly's snobbery and vindictiveness. Hiding behind a gossipy book with no specified authorship is hardly an act of great moral courage. Even the sympathetic performance of Emma Stone as backstabbing Skeeter guided, or blinded, by assumed ethical superiority, cannot mask the repulsively parasitic nature of her onscreen persona. At no point does she even begin to question the correctness of peddling kitchen tittle-tattle as genuine biography. Nor is there ever any sign of moral qualms about what she is doing. In fact, at least the cowardly Elizabeth Leefolt has doubts about her behavior and evident internal conflict which sporadically surfaces in unconcealed anxiety about interactions with hirelings, an overbearing Hilly and an emotionally estranged daughter. Skeeter's only ongoing battle is with her mother, who is inclined to regard the former's wayward inclinations as evidence of either suppressed lesbianism or total surrender to feminist propaganda. A screenplay which interjects a sputtering romance with an oil rig worker only accentuates the notion of a missile imploding in its silo rather

than wreaking havoc on an external aggressor. Stuart Whitworth's condemnation of his girlfriend's lack of trust and unnerving class betrayal is fully justified.

The most telling incident in the film is Skeeter's lack of communication with Rachel, daughter of the Phelan family's veteran domestic. According to the screenplay, the two girls grew up together. Why doesn't the white investigator at least write to her former playmate to learn what motivated her mother Constantine's dismissal from the Phelan household? To harass Mother about the obviously lamentable incident is not only stupid, but also counterproductive. Scenes of Charlotte's capitulation to the chauvinism of Grace Higginbotham, symbol of entrenched white supremacy and unquestionable patriotic authority as a D.A.R. officer, are dramatically powerful. However, they contradict a climax depicting an indignant matriarch reasserting moral authority and exiling an understandably agitated prospective litigator from the Phelan property. If Hilly's claims of libel are unfounded, so is the equally unmotivated spleen of Charlotte. Her daughter has committed by betrayal just as reprehensible a moral crime as those of her Junior League neighbors. Only she reaped a benefit which they did not: acceptance into New York City's literary establishment. But at what personal cost?

THE HELP skirts the real controversy of integration. How do you change the present without condemning traditionalists for defending rituals and customs of the past? Simply denying them any moral authority whatsoever is going to make future cooperation impossible and continued mutual respect or understanding an unattainable fantasy. There will be no foundation for both parties to use in years to come. Just bitterness, rejection and alienation.

Fortunately for Tate Taylor, his film is a successful showcase for acting excellence. If some characters seem stereotyped and manipulated, it is because of deficiencies in the script. Fully creditable performances are turned in by virtually every actress observed, with special commendations for Octavia Spencer's scurrilously earthy Minny, Cicely Tyson's heartbreakingly victimized Constantine, Emma Stone's likably naïve Skeeter / Eugenia, the feisty frankness of Sissy Spacek's Miss Walters, weaving in and out of encroaching senility, a drolly clueless Celia Foote perfectly realized by Jessica Chastain, and the soberly restrained, endlessly grieving Aibileen, whose displacement of maternal love onto

the children of her persecutors is masterfully depicted by the phenomenally gifted Viola Davis, adding yet another unforgettable achievement to a distinguished career resume.

Cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt's work is efficient and even intermittently memorable. It invariably reinforces the actors, giving them key closeups and space to operate in without generating a sense of impinging background clutter.

Few American films have captured the incandescence of Southern sunlight so brilliantly as this one. Credit must go to Colin Campbell for keeping synthetic lighting at optimal levels throughout daytime scenes. At no point does murkiness or lack of definition sabotage the production.

Hughes Winborne's editing lacks dynamic flow, causing the full weight of responsibility for forward thrust to fall upon cast and camera crew. No montages appear. This separates the larger sociopolitical scene from the local community, thus making news photos of the Kennedys and Medgar Evers look like transmissions from another planet. Too often character entrances and exits just happen as if by magic, such as the scene in which a group of stunned maids congregate at Aibileen's house to finally unburden themselves of suppressed private stories. Characters seldom travel from one location to another, except by comically incongruous transports; generally they simply appear as the director commands, as if arriving by some anachronistic form of faxing.

A screenplay long on local dialect and short on motives damages the film repeatedly. Is Skeeter's publicizing of Hilly's embarrassments payback for years of existence as a dateless, unattractive adolescent geek? What, if anything, do the Kennedys and Medgar Evers have to do with the everyday humiliations of domestics in Jackson? Does Stuart really admire Skeeter. Or does he simply find her amusingly exotic? Is he patronizing by habit, or is that merely a preferred form of social camouflage? Would he actually enjoy having a subversive muckraker as a wife? Is telling the truth going to improve or corrode the lives of Jackson's publicly unnamed blabbermouths? Why is Johnny so impervious to social snubbing, while his wife gets no respect whatsoever? How can he be so accepting of repeated miscarriages? Or are they illegal abortions? For sure, the screenwriters won't risk commentary on any of these issues. Call it self-censorship

in the name of preserving popular appeal. Don't write anything that might offend anyone at any time.

There is nothing remarkable about the music score, which does a good imitation of sonic self-effacement. Every now and then some notes get sprinkled into the soundtrack to remind us that music existed in the 1960s, but only as incidental background ambience. This is so far from reality it is simply risible. Music was nearly everywhere on radios then and it was far from an easy-listening wash of forgettable fluff. A social revolution was already brewing in the recording industry, but no indication of that can be found in THE HELP.

Home furnishings and period costuming are accurate reflections of the period setting, reminders of the way people really dressed and lived in the post-Sputnik era when synthetics were still more novelties than givens. Fashionable dress alternated between absurdly trendy and classically elegant. So it should amaze no one that personal hair style reflected either willingness to conform to regulations or blatant rebellion. People with larger incomes enjoyed advertising them by lavish displays of new furniture and painstakingly manicured lawns. Those with tighter budgets bought second-hand or did without altogether in neighborhoods as staunchly segregated as Dixie's swimming pools. Production designer Mark Ricker headed an art department which convincingly recreated the Sixties, being ably reinforced by Art Director Curt Beech, Set Designer Paul Senski and Set Decorator Rena De Angelo.

Acute sound recording further enhances the production.

Creativity is shown by actors, but nothing innovative in cinematography, music, soundtrack, or settings is apparent. That should not be interpreted as a defect, for the film overall is engaging and merits viewing just to witness the passel of wonderfully molded and modulated performances from cast members.

Dvd bonuses are unremarkable, consisting of appropriately deleted scenes, a forgettable music video titled "The Living Proof," subtitles and scene selections.

Recommended solely for adults due to mature themes of racism, spousal abuse, political murder and social ostracism.

