

'Mudbound' tackles the black experience around WWII, 'because it's still going on,' says director Dee Rees



"Mudbound" cast, from left, Garrett Hedlund, Mary J. Blige, Rob Morgan, director Dee Rees, Jason Clarke, Carey Mulligan and Jason Mitchell. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By **Randee Dawn**

NOVEMBER 30, 2017, 6:00 AM | REPORTING FROM NEW YORK CITY

Dee Rees may be a relatively new director, but she's unafraid to tackle the big stories — like an adaptation (written by Virgil Williams) of the award-winning book by Hillary Jordan, "Mudbound." Telling the story of two families in Mississippi — one white, one black — during the tumultuous Jim Crow years before and after WWII, it finds love and warmth amid the daily oppressive horrors of systemic racism. The cast and Rees sat down with The Envelope to explore how the film's story of the past is also the prologue for modern America.

This is a big sprawling tale with a lot of characters' stories. What drew you to it initially?

Dee Rees (director): I wanted to tell the story because of the multiplicity of voices, because I could give it depth and nuance and make it nuanced and interesting. The risk with this kind of material is it could be

nobody's story — it could be schmaltzy and presentational. I knew I could make it layered.

WATCH: Video Q&A's from this season's hottest contenders »

Jason Mitchell (Ronsel): This is my story; this is a lot of people's in the South story. I'm from New Orleans and I've watched so many guys have to put their head down and keep their opinions to themselves and Ronsel was so much more than that.

Mary J. Blige (Florence): Florence is a woman that I know and I'm sure everyone knows. That woman is my grandmother, she's my aunt, and I related to that — I believed I would be able to give something to that character and make her live.

Garrett Hedlund (Jamie): I'd seen [Dee's film] "Pariah" and there's this scene where the gal's on the bus coming back after the party and she held this shot of the girl forever, working through her internal dilemma. I thought, if I can work with a director that lets you explore the mentality and crisis that characters are going through for an extended period of time, that's something I want to be a part of.

Jason Clarke (Henry): It just felt like a great big huge American film and as a foreigner [Clarke is Australian] I was really excited about that. It lacked sentimentality, it didn't let anybody off the hook. Playing a nice, kind, gentle white racist — [laughter in the room] — was also different.

Rees: A sneering racist.

Films about the black experience in U.S history seem to bounce between slavery/Civil War, and the Civil Rights era. Why do we skip over this pre- and post-WWII era?

Rees: Because it's still going on. They want to go straight to the win — and even then we didn't "win." When a certain person says "make America great again," I think this period is the "again" he's referring to. And I'm trying to get behind this mythology of the "greatest generation," who we were, what we really did and what did it cost. The American educational system has a reductive, simplified view of history. But things didn't end with [the abolishment of] slavery. This period is our link between our then and our now.

Rob Morgan (Hap): When I was in Germany — at this convention with 50,000 Germans — I was like the only black person there, and I didn't come nowhere near the racial tension I feel just walking in front of this hotel [in New York City]. Three or four of them told me that in their school system they're taught to atone for the atrocities of their forefathers. America doesn't do that.

Carey Mulligan (Laura): I had never seen a picture of a black man in the Second World War. I knew intellectually [that] black men were found in the war, but I don't think it was part of my understanding. That's crazy, because the amount of famous iconic imagery there is from the war — and I couldn't think of one. That was so strange to me.

Mitchell: As a country, we have blood on our hands and we have to stop overlooking the fact that it's just "white privilege." It's something that's taught. A lot of people teach their kids this racially bigoted mind frame.

Rees: I was born in 1977 and I was still getting bused to school because Nashville was still segregated in some ways. When you don't acknowledge that legacy, you don't have to take responsibility for what to do next.

When you decided to make this film, did you speak with your relatives about how much of this rang true for them? Or was it not talked about?

Rees: I have my grandmother's journals to draw on. She talks about her parents picking cotton; she said she was never going to pick cotton, she was going to be a stenographer. World War II opened up opportunities for her she wouldn't ordinarily have gotten. But my grandfather — he went to war and his big comeuppance was "you get to be a postal carrier now." He didn't get the GI Bill, the house. He got "you're allowed to stick around." Despite contributions, he was kept on the outside.

“

The person who owns the pen is the one who writes the history — so we're glad we're working with Dee Rees, because she's got a pen in her hand!

— Rob Morgan

Morgan: The person who owns the pen is the one who writes the history — so we're glad we're working with Dee Rees, because she's got a pen in her hand!

The title "Mudbound" is the title of Jordan's book; what other significance does it convey?

Rees: You can think of the mud as an allegory for race; the muck we're all stuck in. We bring it in, we take it out with us, we don't take it off. It's a fiction we created for ourselves.

Blige: For me, the mud is the constant negative energy we're living in. We're living in mud right now, we are mudbound, the hatred and who our leader is, and all this ... is the mud. There's nothing clean about it. But there are pieces of life in there — the water, that cleanses us. You see how Florence loves her son, and the relationship between Laura and Florence. This movie is relevant, right now — because all of this has really gone down, and the mud is really where we all go to die.

calendar@latimes.com

Copyright © 2017, Los Angeles Times

This article is related to: [Racism](#)