

MOVIES

# Gripping tale awakens 'Ghosts of Mississippi'

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ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEW YORK (AP) — On a June night 33 years ago, Medgar Evers, a prominent black civil rights leader, pulled into the driveway of his Mississippi home and was gunned down from behind by an assassin with a high-powered rifle.

Gushing blood, he dragged himself to his door, only to die as his wife, Myrlie, and their young children stood helplessly by.

Facts discovered later about the murder weapon and other evidence strongly implicated a local white supremacist named Byron De la Beckwith. But two all-white juries deadlocked and Beckwith was freed.

"Ghosts of Mississippi" advances the story to the late 1980s. It follows the real-life story of a youthful district attorney who became interested in exhuming the case, to bring justice to Evers' widow Myrlie (Whoopi Goldberg) and to exorcise the ghosts of unbridled racism that still hang over the new, "integrated" South.

History has left us with a gripping tale. And producer-director Rob Reiner ("When Harry Met Sally...," "A Few Good Men," "This

Is Spinal Tap") deserves a top grade for unimpeachable intentions. His "Ghosts of Mississippi" is a generally competent drama that succeeds as a detective story and moral fable, one that convincingly answers the question, "Is it ever too late to do the right thing?"

But the film's disappointing courtroom scenes lack any kind of real bite and when it turns to domestic matters, "Ghosts of Mississippi" gets as saccharine and artificial as a made-for-TV movie.

When Assistant District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter (Alec Baldwin) first gets the idea that the ancient case can be resurrected, everyone scoffs. Witnesses are dead. Files are long missing. Physical evidence has disappeared. Besides, as his boss (Craig T. Nelson) reminds him, the understaffed D.A.'s office has a full-case load featuring recently buried corpses and other victims who are still very much alive.

The sequences in which DeLaughter barrels along dusty Southern back roads — accompanied by his investigators played by William H. Macy and Lloyd "Benny" Bennett as himself — are brisk and sharp. One

impressive scene has DeLaughter's team meeting reluctant witnesses at night, in a moonlit swamp hung with vines and moss.

As DeLaughter begins spending his evenings combing old files and traversing the state to interview old witnesses, his wife Dixie (Virginia Madsen) starts to feel neglected and embarrassed — her father was the judge who presided over Beckwith's second trial.

"You're going to pursue this thing," she gasps. "You're going to humiliate me in front of my friends, my family and the entire state of Mississippi." Before long, Dixie is back at her mother's house leaving her husband to play Mr. Mom to their three children.

With his boyish mane and eye-crinkling smile, Baldwin is appealing as the idealistic attorney. Despite doing double duty at the office, Bobby never looks disheveled and even has time to meet and marry a new love interest (Diane Ladd). Even with mom gone, the DeLaughter youngsters are always sitcom well-behaved. And the house is always neat.

Goldberg, swathed in staid

clothing, her wild locks tamed under a heavily lacquered matronly hairstyle, is fine every time she appears as the vry and determined Myrlie Evers, but too often she isn't given enough to do, except look as solemn as a figure on Mount Rushmore.

The film owes much of its energy to the supercharged performance of James Woods as the unrepentant, arch-racist De la Beckwith.

Even with layers of latex to give him the crevices, jowls and wrinkles of a 72-year-old, Woods seems to be having the time of his life playing the swaggering, smirking hate-monger. Woods has always specialized in villains, but this time he outdoes himself.

The murdered man's sons, Darrell Evers and James Van Evers bring authenticity to the project by portraying themselves, while their sister, Reena Evers, appears as a juror. Yolanda King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. is cast as Reena in the film.

The Castle Rock Release runs a little long at 123 minutes. It opens at metro Detroit movie theaters Jan. 3.

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