

# America's Dream (1996)

## Segment 2: "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black"

TV Movie. Running time: 1 hour 22 min. Story segment: c. 30 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 0; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*

*Psalm 9:9*

*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*

*Luke 9:25*

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*Romans 12:2*

Originally produced for HBO, this DVD features a dramatization of three short stories, related only in that they were written about blacks by blacks: "Long Black Song" by Richard Wright; "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black" by John Hendrik Clarke; and "The Reunion" by Maya Angelou. Due to lack of time I am going to review just the second story because it is the reason why I bought this used DVD. (Will write on the other two worthy stories later.) When I was working on my D. Min I used the story in my thesis after gaining permission from Dr. Clarke to

use a quotation from it.

The adapters changed the story quite a bit to round out more the character of Wesley Snipes' George Du Vault. After all, you don't go after a star of Mr. Snipes' stature just for a supporting role and bring him on at the end, as in the original story! In the film version, set in 1948, he is principal of a Georgia "colored school" and married to Lara (RaéVen Larrymore Kelly), a detail added to include some conflict later when he has doubts about his vocation—at the beginning we see him playing his trombone, and quickly putting it down when Lara comes home. It is apparent that she does not approve of his musical interest.

George Du Vault plays Uncle Tom to state supervisor Prof. Daniel (Timothy Carhart), hiding his feelings about the white man's degrading paternalism. This has served him well, as the white man offers him a promotion to be his assistant, a position that will pay more and lift him professionally to the state level.

But neither had counted on young Aaron Crawford (Norman D. Golden II), the brightest and most talented student at the school. Although possessing intellectual gifts, it was his artistic endeavors that earned the boy the most admiration. His drawings always highlighted a holiday such as Thanksgiving or George Washington's birthday. On the birthday of his teacher, Miss Williams (Vanessa Bell Calloway), Aaron brings a special gift wrapped in newspapers. She is surprised when she unwraps and stares at it. It is not at all what she had expected. Holding it for all to see, she reveals that it is a portrait of Christ, a *black* Christ.

Like the good teacher she is, she asks Aaron to explain why he painted it. The boy explains:

"It was like this. You see, my uncle who lives in New York teaches classes in Negro History at the Y.M.C.A. When he

visited us last year he was telling me about the many great black folks who have made history. He said black folks were once the most powerful people on earth. When I asked him about Christ, he said no one ever proved whether he was black or white. Somehow a feeling came over me that he was a black man, 'cause he was so kind and forgiving, kinder than I have ever seen white people be. So, when I painted his picture I couldn't help but paint it as I thought it was."

When she brings the large painting to Mr. Du Vault's office, he is anything but pleased, recognizing immediately its controversial nature. The teacher wants to enter it into the State Pride contest that Prof. Daniel had announced at the school assembly, but Du Vault is adamant that he will not allow it. After he talks with the boy, Du Vault is troubled at home, getting into a row with his wife. She is also upset over his hesitation at accepting Prof. Daniel's lucrative offer. At this point the film well depicts the twin pressures seeking to force the principal to remain an Uncle Tom—hope for material gain and his desire to please, no, probably, *keep* his ambitious wife.

Thus the film delves into Du Vault's soul far more than the original story did. At first I was a bit upset that Aaron was pushed a bit off center stage, but then I realized that this was not really the case, that he *shares* it with his principal. They each had reached a major point in their development, the boy as an artist daring to express himself in what could be an unpopular way in an oppressive white world; and Du Vault, struggling with a decision that might gain him a small piece of the world, but lose his soul.

The story is particular in that it shows the terrible pressures blacks endured under the American apartheid system, and it is also universal because virtually everyone at some time has to make a choice between what he knows is right versus what is expedient. Added to that are some good artistic/theological insights about artists and Christ. You

might have to hunt this DVD down, starting with your local public library, or if you want to own it, Amazon has some great deals for you, new or used.

Note: I would like to write more about this story, my D. Min. and the way in which people of color have been depicting Christ since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I will save this for a more appropriate place, my blog on this site.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the July issue of VP.*