

The Rosa Parks Story (2002)

TV Movie. Running time: 1 hour 37 min.

Our content ratings (0-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you.

Deuteronomy 16:20

O Lord, thou wilt hear the desire of the meek; thou wilt strengthen their heart, thou wilt incline thy ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

Psalms 10:17-18

The old saying about there being a woman behind every great man is certainly true of Martin Luther King, Jr. Actually, there are two—his wife Coretta Scott, whom we see bravely bearing so much fear and heartache in *Selma*, and Rosa McCauley Parks, subject of the TV movie *The Rosa Parks Story*. After being thrilled by *Selma* I thought it was finally time that I get out and watch the DVD centering on the lady who helped propel Dr. King onto the world stage. Now I am wondering why I waited so long to watch this. There is so much to like about it.

Shown as part of CBS' celebration of Black History Month on February 24, 2002, the film stars Angela Bassett as Rosa Parks and the veteran Cicely Tyson as Rosa's strong-willed mother Leona, and the son of Dr. King, Dexter Scott King, as the great leader. There's even a cameo appearance by Mrs. Park's real life friend Rebecca Daniels Carr. The director is Julie

Dash, best known for her *Daughters of the Dust*. And the writer is Paris Qualles, who wrote the script about another important group for Black (and American) History, *The Tuskegee Airmen*.

The film opens in 1956 with the famous press coverage of Mrs. Parks getting on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama and flashes back to Rosa attending a small Quaker academy for Negro girls in 1924. A despondent girl says in class that it doesn't matter whether or not they learn anything, because all they will ever be able to do is to serve white folks. Young Rosa refutes this by saying that God created everyone equal and that if they learn, they can be anything they want to be. The white teacher tells the class that if they learn nothing else at the school, may they remember this.

Rosa grows up to be an attractive young woman whom barber Raymond Parks (Peter Francis James) falls in love with, but the shy woman plays hard to get whenever he comes calling. He likes to be called Parks, but from what we see of his won't give up attitude, he ought to be called Persistent. Eventually, thanks to his persistence and charm Rosa's reserve melts away and they begin dating.

It is 1931, and the "Scottsboro Boys" are the talk of the nation because a jury in Scottsboro, Alabama had imposed the death sentence on nine black teenagers accused of raping two white girls. Parks, a member of the NAACP (this is not mentioned in the film), is concerned and accompanies some other members to try to help the victims. At the department store where Rosa works as a seamstress altering and repairing clothing she sees a news story reporting that two black men have been found dead down there, reportedly working for the Legal Defense Fund for the defendants. She spends anxious hours worrying that one of them is Parks, but when she returns home, Parks, shaken by his ordeal but very much alive, is in the kitchen talking with her mother. This will have an effect later on when Rosa is the one at the center of hate and danger.

Six years after she marries Parks (1942) Rosa herself is humiliated when during a heavy rain she pays her bus fare and starts to go directly back to the "Colored" section rather than exit the bus and re-enter by the side door toward the back. Intimidated by the driver, James F. Blake, she gets up and exits at the front. He drives away with her umbrella caught in the door. He stops to push it out, and then drives on, leaving her in the downpour.

Much later on she is reunited with childhood friend Rebecca "Johnnie" Carr at the office of the local NAACP. Rosa becomes a member of the organization—and not just a member, but also the secretary. Parks is not thrilled by this. As he had feared, she participates in more than just the meetings, volunteering to teach black children to read, the Bible being their textbook and becoming involved with a mother and incarcerated son who is sentenced to death for allegedly raping a white girl. Soon she is trying to register to vote, this scene following directly after one in which she is reading to children a lesson from St. Luke about persistence. She will need the latter, the arrogant clerk at the registrar's office turning her down twice before her successful third visit. From several flashbacks we see that her Grandfather was an important factor in the development of her concern for justice and her persistence in pursuing it.

The film continues on with the story leading up to the famous moment when Rosa refuses to give up her seat to a white person. Incredibly it is the same bus driver that put her off over ten years earlier, James F. Blake. When E.D. Nixon (Von Coulter), President of the Montgomery NAACP tells Parks of her arrest, the latter is very upset, jail at that time being a shameful place no respectable woman would be found in. How quickly this will change!

The meeting of ministers and NAACP leaders is well staged, with Jo Ann Robinson (Gwen Waymon) as the spark plug for the boycott and new minister Dr. King speaking over the arguing

voices that they must present a united front if they are to succeed. The boycott begins successfully. Dr. King preaches an elegant sermon inspiring the huge crowd to resist injustice—and Rosa is dismissed from her job at the department store. Parks also loses his job because his boss would not let him talk about his wife or the boycott. The harassment over the phone begins. Because of threats Parks nails boards over their windows for protection. As pressure from white racists increases, the marriage is strained almost to the breaking point, until...

Skipping over many important sections of her life, the film ends with footage of President Clinton singling out Mrs. Parks in his State of the Union address, "She's sitting down with the first lady tonight, and she may get up or not as she chooses." Because it is but 90 minutes in length, the film leaves out a lot of events that shows she was far more than what most people perceive of her—"the little lady who refused to give up her seat"—Mrs. Parks attendance at the Highlander Folk School, a liberal, integrated center for training labor and civil rights activists; and, when they were unable to find work, their moves to Hampton, Virginia for a brief period, and the later move to Detroit where she had a brother and sister-in-law. In that city she met the young candidate for Congress John Conyer, whom she helped get elected by asking Dr. King to come and speak for him. She became the receptionist and secretary for the Congressman's Detroit office until 1988, retiring because of health problems. She also spoke all around the country on behalf of civil rights, against the Vietnam War, and campaigned for Gerge McGovern in his bid for the Presidency.

Although we might wish for more, this film will move us far beyond the popular image of "the tired old lady who refused to give up her seat on a bus." Working in Montgomery, Alabama where all of the events took place, director Julie Dash and her talented cast bring to life a story that is uniquely

American, an exciting chapter in the march toward freedom.

For more details on this great lady's life see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Parks.

For a film that shows an ordinary black family in Montgomery during the boycott see [The Long Walk Home](#). In this film we hear the voice of Dr. King, but do not see him, the focus being on an ordinary black family and the white wife who employs the black wife.

This review, with a set of discussion questions, will be in the Feb. 2014 issue of Visual Parables.