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Forest Whitaker (left) and Denzel Washington star in *The Great Debate*. Great debaters are about the underdog debate of the team that wins the national championship, and some critics have complained that it follows the formula of all sports films leading, through great adversity, to victory at the end. That's the way it is. How many sports movies or movies about outsiders competing anyway, have you seen that end of defeat? It is human nature to seek inspiration in winning, and it is a film that is a testament to both inspiring and re-creating the stories of a wonderful team and its coach. The team is from the small Wylie College in Marshall, Texas, a black institution in Jim Crow south of the 1930s. The school's English professor, Melvin Tolson (Denzel Washington), is a taskmaster who demands high standards from his debate team and they are rewarded with a national championship. It's something that sports the film is about, but the film is about a lot more and in a way that doesn't follow the formulas. There are, for example, the secret lives of Tolson. Wearing jumpsuits and work boots, he ventures incognito as an organizer for the national trade union sharecropper's. He is a dangerous radical, local whites believe probably a communist. But it organizes both poor whites and blacks whose slavery is equal. He keeps his politics out of class, however, where he hides a different kind of secret: He is one of America's leading poets. Although the film barely touches on him, Tolson published long poems in magazines such as *Atlantic Monthly* and in 1947 was actually named the poet laureate of Liberia. It is ironic that his role as a debate coach would have won him greater fame today. He conducts grueling auditions and selects four team members: Henry Lowe (Nate Parker), who drinks and foos around but is extremely smart; Hamilton Burgess (Jermaine Williams), superb debater; James Farmer Jr. (Forest Whitaker), a premature 14-year-old who is their explorer, and Samantha Bouquet (Jurnee Smollett), replaced, and the only female debater they've heard of. Tolson drills them, disciplines them, advises them, and leads them to a string of victories that completes the victory over Harvard, the national champion. We get a good sense of the upbringing of the black community that has produced these students, particularly James Farmer Sr. (Les Whitaker), a preacher. (The young Denzel Whitaker, like his son, has nothing to do with, and is not named after Washington.) James Jr. will continue to find Congress of Racial Equality. Tolson drives his team on long trips to out-of-town debates, and one night traveling late, they have a defining emotional film experience: They take place on a stage where a white mob just lynched a black man and set fire to his body. They barely run away with their lives. And their daily lives are fraught with racist danger; especially for Tolson, who was singled out by the local as a rabble-monger. This experience informs them of their as much as formal research. The film isn't really about how this team wins national champions. It's more about how its members, his coach, his school and community believe that education is their best way out of the swamp of racism and discrimination. They find it unthinkable that decades in the future, serious black students will be criticized by jealous contemporaries for acting white. They're black, proud, purposeful, focused, and they express it all most dramatically in their debates. The debate itself has one feature: the Wylie team somehow draws the good side of each question. Since the debaters must defend any position they draw, it may have been intriguing to see them defend what they don't believe, even despite. However, I suppose I understand why this is not done here; it would interrupt the flow. And the flow becomes a mighty flood in a powerful and passionate story. This is one of the best films of the year. NOTES: In fact, Wylie's real team did beat the national champions, but out of USC, not Harvard. Co-author Robert Eizele explains: In that era, there was a lot at stake when black college discussed any white school, especially one with the rise of Harvard. We used Harvard to demonstrate the heights they reached. Great Debaters Theatrical Release poster Directed Denzel Washington Produced Todd Black Keith Forte Joe Roth Oprah Winfrey Screenplay by Robert Eisel Jeffrey Porro Starring Denzel Washington Forest Whitaker Nate Parker Jurnee Smollett Denzel Whitaker John Hurd Kimberly Eliza Music Peter Blue James Newton Howard Productions Distributed December 11, 2007 (2007-12-11) (Cinerams Dome) December 25, 2007 (2007-12-25) (United States) Duration 126 Minutes Strange United States Language English Budget \$15 million Box office \$30.2 million. It's based on an article written about the Wylie College Discussion Team Tony Scherman for the spring issue of 1997 *American Legacy*. The film stars Forest Whitaker, Denzel Whitaker (unconnected), Kimberly Eliza, Nate Parker, Gina Raverna, Jermaine Williams and Jurnee Smollett. The screenplay is written by Robert Eizele, with the story of Robert Eizele and Jeffrey Porro. The film was released on December 25, 2007. A plot based on a true story, the plot revolves around the efforts of debate coach Melvin B. Tolson (Denzel Washington) at Wylie College, a historically black college affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (now the United Methodist Church) to beat his team on an equal footing with whites in the American South during the 1930s, when Jim Crow's laws were routine and lynched. Wylie's fictional team eventually succeeds point where they can discuss Harvard University. The film explores social constructs in Texas during the Great Depression, from day-to-day insults to African Americans to lynchings. Also depicted is James L. Farmer Jr., who at 14 was on Wylie's debate team after graduating from high school (and who later co-founded the Congress of Racial Equality). Another character on the team, Samantha Bouquet, is based on the real personality of Henrietta Bell Wells, a famous poet and the only female member of the 1930s wiley team who participated in the first collegiate interracial debate in the United States. A key line of dialogue used several times is the famous paraphrase of the theologian St. Augustine Hippo: An unfair law is not a law at all. The other main line, repeated in several different versions depending on the context, is about doing what you have to do so we can do what we want to do. In all cases, these vital lines are spoken by the characters James L. Farmer Sr. and James L. Farmer Jr. The historical film notes depicts The Wylie Debate team beating Harvard College in the 1930s. The real Wylie team instead defeated the University of Southern California, which at the time was the reigning debate champions. Despite the fact that they defeated the reigning champions, Wylie was not allowed to officially call themselves winners because they were not a full member of the debate society; blacks were admitted only after the Second World War. Starring Denzel Washington as Melvin B. Tolson Forest Whitaker as James L. Farmer, senior Denzel Whitaker as James L. Farmer, Junior Nate Parker as Henry Lowe's Jurnee Smollett as Samantha Beech as Jermaine Williams as Hamilton Burgess Gina Ravera as Ruth Tolson John Hurd as Dozier Sheriff Kimberly Elise as Pearl Farmer As Dunbar Reed Damien Lil as Wilson Frank L. Ridley as the guardian release of *The Great Debaters* was released in theaters December 25, 2007. The release of the film coincided with a nationally-intensified effort by the city's debate leagues to get hundreds of urban and financially challenged schools to create debate programs. The cities in the spotlight were Denver, Philadelphia and San Francisco. On December 19, 2007, Denzel Washington announced a \$1 million donation to Wylie College so they could re-establish their team discussion. In June 2007, after the completion of the shooting at Central High School, Grand Cane, Louisiana, Washington, donated \$10,000 to Central High School. (quote needed) Home Media *Great Debate* was released on DVD on May 13, 2008 on a one-disc and 2-disc edition. In the 2-disc edition, the first disc does not include additional material, but the second disc includes audio commentary, documentary creation, deleted scenes, featurettes, and up pore gallery. The film was the first 1979 allowed to shoot on the Harvard campus. The Reception Box Office *Great Debaters* debuted at No.11 in its first weekend for a total of \$6,005,180 from 1,171 locations. The film grossed \$30,236,407 in the United States. Critical response as of November 20, 2012, review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes reports that 79% of critics gave the film positive reviews based on 131 reviews. Consensus site reads: Wonderful cast and first-class script raise the *Great Debate* beyond the familiar formula for a touching, uplifting drama. Metacritic reported that the film had an average score of 65 out of 100 based on reviews from 32 critics. Carrie Rickey of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* named it the 5th best film of 2007, and Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* named it the 9th best film of 2007. Some critics criticized the film for playing it safe. John Monaghan of the *Detroit Free Press* said: Serious moviegoers, especially those attracted to the aggressive Oscars campaign, are likely to find the package superbly wrapped, but intellectually empty. The award won: Image Award for Outstanding Film Won: Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture: Denzel Washington Won: Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture: Jurnee Smollett Won: Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture: Forest Whitaker, Nate Parker, Denzel Whitaker Won: Stanley Kramer Nomination: Golden Globe for Best Film - Drama Nomination: Image Award for Outstanding Director in a Motion Picture: Denzel Washington Nomination: Golden Drum Award for Best Musical Sound Editing in a feature film Soundtrack Songs for the soundtrack to the film were picked up by Denzel Washington from more than 1,000 nominees. It contains remakes of traditional blues and evangelical songs from the 1920s and 1930s by artists such as Sharon Jones, Alvin Youngblood Hart, David Berger and Caroline Chocolate Drops. It features favorites such as Step It Up and Go, Nobody's Fault But Mine and Duke Ellington's classic Delta Serenade. Varez Sarabande released a separate album of the film's score, composed by James Newton Howard and Peter Golub. The full soundtrack includes the following songs: Track Listing My Soul Is a Witness - Alvin Youngblood Hart and Sharon Jones This Is What My Child Loves - Sharon Jones, Alvin Youngblood Hart and Tinie Hodges I Have Blood in My Eyes For You - Carolina Chocolate Drops and Alvin Youngblood Hart Step And Forward - Alvin Youngblood Hart and Teenie Hodges It's Tight, Like This - Sharon Jones, Alvin Youngblood Hart and Tinie Hodges Busy Bootin' - Alvin Youngblood Hart - Carolina Chocolate Drops City Asylum - Alvin Youngblood Hart and Carolina Chocolate Drops Two Wings - Alvin Youngblood Hart, Sharon Jones w/Billy Rivers and Angelic Voices Vera Serena Delta Berger and the Sultans swing wild about being That thing - Sharon Jones, Alvin Youngblood Hart, - Teenie Hodges Nobody's Fault, but Mine - Alvin Youngblood Hart and Caroline Chocolate Drops How Long Before I Change My Clothes - Alvin Youngblood Hart We Won't Move - Sharon Jones w/Billy Rivers and Angelic Voices of Faith Up Over My Head - Sharon Jones w/Billy Rivers Box office Mojo. Received 2016-05-12. *BlackNews.com* - The Story of the American Magazine's Legacy of the *Great Debate* is transformed from pages to big-screen director and starring Denzel Washington and produced by Oprah Winfrey. Archive from the original on June 30, 2008. Great debaters are the official site. *Thegreatdebatersmovie.com*. Received 2012-10-12. b Martin, Douglas (2008-03-12). Henrietta Bell Wells, pioneer of the debater, dies at 96. *The New York Times*. ISSN 0362-4331. Received 2019-08-06. Great debater. Roger Ebert. 2007-12-24. Received 2008-06-29. To fight Black College, hope for a revival. *The New York Times*, December 5, 2007. *thegreatdebaters.org* - resources and information. - *thegreatdebaters*. *Thegreatdebaters.org* archive from the original on December 11, 2007. Received on August 10, 2019. National Association of Urban Debate Leagues. Naudl.org archive from the original 2012-10-26. Received 2012-10-12. The Debate College gets \$1 million as a gift. *Los Angeles Times*. 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