

Film & Media

Eight Men Out. Produced by John Sayles. A Sanford/Pillsbury Production, 1988. 120 minutes. (Orion Pictures Corporation, 540 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10022).

Producer John Sayles scored a hit with his portrayal of the 1919 World Series “Black Sox” scandal in the movie “Eight Men Out.” The picture explores the betting scam that led to the lifetime banishment from baseball of eight White Sox players. Adopted from Eliot Asinof’s 1963 account of the affair, “Eight Men Out” is among the best baseball pictures to date. Having followed Asinof’s book closely, the movie focuses a great deal on player profiles and motivation.

Furthermore, the eight conspirators, including legendary “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, are not portrayed as opportunistic athletes driven merely for financial gains. Rather, their actions are fueled, in part, by principles. Only Chick Gandil is depicted as a villainous opportunist whose gambling habit spearheads the player’s path to doom. Viewers, instead, see the players as decent human beings led astray by Gandil and others. By design, producer Sayles seeks a more objective judgment of their actions. In an interview with *The Sporting News* (September 26, 1988) Sayles remarked, “I want the audience to get to know these men and try to understand the reasons and the pressures that can lead someone to be corrupted.” From the very beginning, the cleavage that existed between the players and management is captured. Indeed, tight-fisted owner Charles Comiskey’s character is cast in a dim light. His stingy behavior (depicted nicely in a scene where the players received a gift of flat champagne from the owner), that included meager salaries and broken promises on bonus incentives, motivates them to act in a bipartisan fashion.

The conspiracy, to be sure, was a good old-fashioned labor-management struggle that characterized 1919 on a larger scale. Furthermore, the “Black Sox” scandal was one of many traumatic events that year. During the post-World War I period, Americans experienced nationwide labor strikes, bloody race riots in Chicago and St. Louis, the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, the Red Scare, and tense congressional battles over the League of Nations. Indeed, as the 1919 World Series commenced, President Woodrow Wilson was bedridden with a stroke rendering the nation leaderless. Still knowledge of the fix, it should be remembered, did not emerge until late 1920.

The movie is loaded with personality and professional conflicts. Buck Weaver, for instance, is portrayed as an innocent bystander caught between his loyalties to the game and to his scandalous teammates. Manager Kid Gleason also is a torn individual. Suspecting treachery, Gleason’s frustrations, following yet another loss to the Reds, emerge in a locker room fight scene where he battles the callous Chick Gandil. Yet, during Grand Jury testimony, the manager clearly emphasizes his support for his players. “Eight Men Out” also reveals that there existed both two sets of gamblers and scams. While gamblers Sleepy Bill Burns and Billy Maharg, along with the players, were undermining the World Series, Arnold Rothstein—the “king of the gamblers”—was undermining them. The movie, as well, shows an unorganized group of players who, eventually, never receive full payment for their actions. In fact, the entire conspiracy was not at all well-planned. The complicated scenario was excellently depicted in a scene with gamblers, players, and administrators walking in and out of hallway doors. Further credit is warranted for the accurate scene depicting the Grand Jury testimony of gambler Burns, whose exact words from his real testimony were used in the movie. Sayles—who plays a believable Ring Lardner—also does well in emphasizing jury bias. Indeed, jurors, as shown, actually did celebrate with the defendants after their acquittal.

There were, of course, “creative liberties” that Sayles took. For instance, pitcher-conspirator Eddie Cicotte’s problems with Comiskey started in 1917,

not 1919 as shown in the movie, when the owner prevented the pitcher from winning thirty games-and a large bonus. As well, Hugh Fullerton, the persistent journalist who uncovered the scam, never confronted any of the gamblers (as opposed to the movie version). Also, there exists a courtroom scene where Buck Weaver protests his desire for a separate trial. This never happened. Finally, Joe Jackson's inability to sign his name also was untrue.

There were factors omitted as well. Not seen is Christy Mathewson who played an important role in sequestering "evidence." Mathewson, along with journalist Hugh Fullerton, carefully scrutinized the Series keeping a record of those plays deemed to be of suspicious nature. The movie also omitted the Grand Jury testimony of Arnold Rothstein (who, instead, is shown gleefully sailing away in the film). In fact, American League president Ban Johnson later accused Rothstein of playing a role in the scandal. Crying slander, the gambler contemplated suing Johnson. Afraid of self-incrimination, however, Rothstein backed down (Rothstein, in reality, had, at one time, befriended both Charles Comiskey and New York Giants manager John McGraw.)

Other flaws were somewhat minor but worth mentioning. Both Eddie Cicotte and Dick Kerr were not strikeout pitchers as opposed to the movie version. Also, the errors committed by the "Black Sox" shown in the movie as obvious, were, according to Cicotte himself, almost impossible for untrained eyes to pick out. Indeed, the victorious Cincinnati Reds committed just as many errors as the "Black Sox." To make things more difficult, most of the "Black Sox" performed statistically well in the series. Joe Jackson, for instance, batted .375.

Sayles, nonetheless, did a remarkable job considering the rigid cinema guidelines a movie maker faces. The depiction of a historical event on film, of course, faces the albatross of time. Whereas authors may expand their chapters to explain even minute details, movie makers must often encompass complicated issues within a matter of minutes. Sayles, of course, could have expanded Kenesaw Mountain Landis' role further. Indeed, without the lifetime suspensions handed down by the commissioner, there exists no story. Yet, Landis appears only to be little more than a cameo figure in "Eight Men Out." Furthermore, what of the Cincinnati Reds? Their "victory" was equally as tarnished. Lost is the fact that the Cincinnati Reds in 1919 won ninety-six games-eight more than their "powerful" opponents. Also lost is the fact that, in 1920, the White Sox were only one of seven clubs suspected of throwing games. Finally, given the nature of the scam, their guilt apparently did not weigh heavily on them, for they won ninety-six games in 1920—a season some claimed they "threw" to the Cleveland Indians. Indeed, Eddie Cicotte was a twenty-one game winner that year. These points, not to discredit Sayles, reveal the limitations to cinema history. One cannot fully understand the impact of the conspiracy without seeing the full cycle of cause and effect. But the movies' strong points-motivation, characterizations, and condensation of complexity-far overshadow the criticisms. Hence, applause is warranted to John Sayles for presenting a sound story of a very sad tale.