

**DVD REVIEW: Mississippi Burning**

RODGERS, Diane <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-4308>>

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Mississippi Burning (1988) Alan Parker

Blu-ray, released 14 September 2015, RRP £19.99, cert 18, running time 129 mins

“What’s got four eyes and can’t see?... Mississippi!” quips Gene Hackman as FBI Agent Anderson in Alan Parker’s *Mississippi Burning*, a cynical joke about racist attitudes of the backward-looking American south. This heavyweight dramatic crime thriller, based on one of the most notorious race-related murder investigations in U.S. history, gets its first ever UK Blu-ray release courtesy of Second Sight.

Set in 1964, endemic racism and race-related violence throughout the southern states is scrutinised to an uncomfortably realistic degree, as Roger Ebert wrote: “More than any other film... this one gets inside the passion of race relations in America”; the film understands and explains events, whilst Parker’s direction criticises and highlights prejudice without undue sensationalism. The plot revolves around the historical events related to the murders of three civil rights activists (two white and one black) who go missing deep in the heart of Ku Klux Klan territory. The FBI are called in to investigate, headed by Agent Ward (Willem Dafoe), very much representing Kennedy’s America; a progressive, forward looking country of freedom and equality, with zero tolerance for racist violence and beliefs but believing in his by-the-book methodology and Bureau protocol. Agent Anderson is partnered with him, much more cynical with age and willing to take unconventional steps, by any means necessary, to bring injustice to light. Facing uncooperative local police and a community too afraid of the consequences to talk to the FBI, the murder investigation sparks repercussions of national significance in an era when segregation was still commonplace.

It is obvious to see how *Mississippi Burning* won a number of accolades including an Oscar, a number of BAFTAs and a best actor award for Hackman (at Berlin International Film Festival).

And it is indeed Hackman’s portrayal of Anderson that is the heart and soul of this film - his warmth and depth of character, his past as a small southern town Sheriff to his current, cosmopolitan, FBI post illustrates a shift in American values and the possibilities of a more inclusive future. He understands the (shockingly prejudiced) beliefs and attitudes of many white southern locals towards the black population, but does not for one second, as his partner perhaps mistakes him for early in the film, sympathise with the locals’ attitude in the slightest. In fact, his past allows him to speak to the locals in a language they understand - violence - to let them know racist actions are intolerable. He clearly expresses his outrage in a very open and human manner with which the audience can identify; violent beatings of innocent and peaceful members of the community from old men to women and children simply for the colour of their skin or cooperating with the law is extremely upsetting to witness, as shocking today if not moreso than when the film was released.

Ward is played subtly by Dafoe, leaving centre stage to Hackman, but his performance is vital to the success of the film. The audience’s absolute belief in his resolute determination to solve the case, refusing to give in to the stonewalling by the local community, and using all means at his disposal is what drives the film along. For example, a colleague informs Ward that the local motel owner wants the FBI out as they are ‘bad for business’, to which Ward coolly but firmly tells him to “Buy it”. Anderson advises Ward that FBI methods won’t work, knowing that conflict and violence will arise from outside intervention and will bring a warlike atmosphere to this smalltown America which, indeed, escalates to the KKK carrying out violent beatings and relentless petrol-bomb attacks on houses and churches. Ward, however, sees the value in setting a precedent here, to make a stand to show there is no place for racial intolerance in the America of the future, he recognises an era that needs to be brought to an end: “...it was a war long before we got here.”

Other than these central performances, what really strengthens the film is the impressive supporting cast; not one single character is made two-dimensional here, however small a role.

Brad Dourif plays vicious Deputy Sheriff Pell as cruel but with a twinkle in his eye, Frances McDormand is his resigned but proud wife. R. Lee Ermey plays Mayor Tilman, parochial and

angry, with earnest concern. Even Stephen Toblowsky, perhaps most recognisable for small but perfectly-pitched apathetic comedy roles (such as Ned Ryerson in *Groundhog Day*) is, in a few short minutes, able to deliver an impassioned and genuinely chilling speech here as a KKK leader. Every character feels like a real person; however distasteful their opinions or actions are within the film, they are still presented as believably nuanced and rounded human beings rather than caricatures in broad brush strokes, which could be all too easy to fall back on with such politically charged subject matter; much credit is due to both performers and director here.

The Blu-ray itself is excellent quality, transferred well without losing the textured grain of the original film, pleasantly noticeable in places. Bonus features are few but fascinating; separate interviews with Dafoe, writer Chris Gerolmo and a 20-minute interview with Alan Parker. There is also a feature audio commentary with Alan Parker. It would have been fascinating to have some of the lesser-featured supporting cast mentioned above involved, perhaps, but the simple and straightforward style of the menus and the extras presented suit to tone of the film well.