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# The Oscar for Best Fabrication

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WASHINGTON

I SAW “Argo” with Jerry Rafshoon, who was a top aide to President Carter during the Iranian hostage crisis, when six Americans escaped and were given sanctuary for three months by courageous Canadian diplomats.

We were watching a scene where a C.I.A. guy can’t get through to Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s chief of staff, to sign off on plane tickets for the escaping hostages, so he pretends to be calling from the school where Jordan’s kids go.

“Hamilton wasn’t married then and didn’t have any kids,” Jerry whispered, inflaming my pet peeve about filmmakers who make up facts in stories about real people to add “drama,” rather than just writing the real facts better. It makes viewers think that realism is just another style in art, so that no movie, no matter how realistic it looks, is believable.

The affable and talented Ben Affleck has admitted that his film’s climax, with Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers jumping in a jeep, chasing the plane down the runway and shooting at it, was fabricated for excitement.

Hollywood always wants it both ways, of course, but this Oscar season is rife with contenders who bank on the authenticity of their films until it’s challenged, and then fall back on the “Hey, it’s just a movie” defense.

“Zero Dark Thirty,” “based on firsthand accounts of actual events,” has been faulted for leaving the impression that torture was instrumental in the capture of Osama. It celebrates Jessica Chastain’s loner character, “Maya,” when it could have more accurately and theatrically highlighted “The Sisterhood,” a team of female C.I.A. analysts who were part of the long effort.

And then there’s the kerfuffle over “Lincoln,” which had three historical advisers but still managed to make some historical bloopers. Joe Courtney, a Democratic congressman from Connecticut, recently wrote to Steven Spielberg to complain that “Lincoln” fals  
of Connecticut’s House members voting “Nay” against the 13th Amendment for  
slavery.



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“They were trying to be meticulously accurate even down to recording the ticking of Abraham Lincoln’s actual pocket watch,” Courtney told me. “So why get a climactic scene so off base?”

Courtney is pushing for Spielberg to acknowledge the falsity in the DVD, a quest that takes on more urgency now that Spielberg has agreed to provide a DVD to every middle and high school that requests it.

Tony Kushner, the acclaimed playwright who wrote the screenplay, told me he was outraged that Courtney was getting his 15 minutes by complaining about a 15-second bit of film on a project that Kushner worked on for seven years.

The writer completely rejects the idea that he has defamed Connecticut, or the real lawmakers who voted “Aye.” He said that in historical movies, as opposed to history books where you go for “a blow-by-blow account,” it is completely acceptable to “manipulate a small detail in the service of a greater historical truth. History doesn’t always organize itself according to the rules of drama. It’s ridiculous. It’s like saying that Lincoln didn’t have green socks, he had blue socks.”

He feels that if he had changed the margin of the vote, or made someone a villain who was not in real life, that would have been inappropriate. (He’s one-up on Shakespeare there.) But he wants “wiggle room” on some things.

Spielberg’s production people called the National Archives in 2011 to get a copy of the original voting roll and to plumb deeply into the details of the vote on one of America’s most searing moral battles, even asking whether the vote was recorded in a bound volume or on loose ledger forms. That roll shows that the first two votes cast were “Nays” by Democratic congressmen from Illinois, Lincoln’s own state. Wasn’t that enough to show the tension?

Kushner explained that in his original script he thought, as in the musical “1776” or the Continental Congress or conventions, the lawmakers voted by state, so Connecticut would have been one of the first Union states to vote.

Harold Holzer, a Lincoln historian attached to the film, pointed out the mistake to Spielberg and Kushner, telling them that voting in those days was done alphabetically by lawmaker. But Kushner said the director left the scene unchanged because it gave the audience “place holders,” and it was “a rhythmic device” that was easier to follow than “a sea of names.” They gave fake names to the Connecticut legislators, who were, he said, “not significant players.”

Yet The Wall Street Journal noted, “The actual Connecticut representatives at the time braved political attacks and personal hardships to support the 13th Amendment.” One, the New

London Republican Augustus Brandegee, was a respected abolitionist and a friend of Lincoln. The other, the New Haven Democrat James English, considered slavery “a monstrous injustice” and left his ill wife to vote. When he said “Aye,” applause began and the tide turned.

I’m a princess-and-the-pea on this issue, but I think Spielberg should refilm the scene or dub in “Illinois” for “Connecticut” before he sends out his DVDs and leaves students everywhere thinking the Nutmeg State is nutty.

Kushner says that won’t happen, because this is a “made-up issue” and a matter of “principle.” But as Congressman Courtney notes: “It was Lincoln who said. ‘Truth is generally the best vindication against slander.’ ”