

Antwone Fisher

A true story of triumph surfaces this Christmas: *Antwone Fisher*, an affecting and heartening American story, the story of a young black man, parentless, who makes himself into a decent man after a lifetime of rejection, poverty and despair.

We first encounter Antwone (Derek Luke) as a 25-year-old sailor based in San Diego, lost in his dreams of a warm family life but prone to abrupt rages and fights. His fisticuffs lead to obligatory sessions with the base psychiatrist Lt. Cmdr. Dr. Davenport (Denzel Washington). He stonewalls the doctor at first, but eventually comes to reveal himself to the man, spilling out pieces of his past in flashbacks.

Born in prison of an inmate mother who never claimed him and a murdered father who never saw him, Antwone lives his early life in Cleveland as a foster child in a preacher's family, suffering endless physical and verbal abuse from his domineering foster mother Mrs. Tate (Novella Nelson) and sexual abuse from the Tate's daughter Nadine (Yolonda Ross). These experiences leave Antwone with a legacy of zero self-worth and a distaste for sex, both of which lead to his violent acting out. Dr. Davenport gently, surely leads the young man to discover himself, to realize his own accomplishments (he has made himself into an inveterate reader and poet) and to encourage him to approach another attractive young sailor Cheryl (Joy Bryant). There have been abundant portrayals of the education of the ghetto male in American popular culture, but I don't remember one more fully rounded and richer, one that creates such purpose out of pain.

Dr. Davenport's ministrations work so well that Antwone--who few have cared about in his entire life--bonds, a bit too closely, with the doctor, naturally coming to see him as a father figure. Davenport recognizes this, especially after a traumatic Thanksgiving dinner at his house, and stops their sessions. Antwone, feeling yet another rejection after so many, finds the rage forming again but is able to assuage it by returning to Cleveland (with Cheryl) to search for his own family and, thus, put his past to rest.

It's a wonder this film ever got made. The real Antwone Fisher was working as a security guard at Sony Pictures in Los Angeles when his story of survival interested producer Todd Black, who encouraged Fisher to write and rewrite a screenplay over a year, even as he was still discovering parts of his past. Once a studio had accepted the screenplay, producer Black sent the script to Washington, asking him to play Jerome Davenport. Washington liked the material so much that he wanted to make it his directorial debut.

Well, Denzel Washington's debut film is an admirable one, full of subtle and incisive commentary on young Fisher's life and times. A lush opening dream sequence shows some stylishness, and the flashbacks are cut efficiently and sharply, but the film consists mainly of searching conversations between the principals, a poignant peeling back of the layers of Antwone Fisher's psyche. And while there are many fine performances in the picture, Derek Luke's must--and does--stand out.

Luke makes his feature film debut in *Antwone Fisher*. Having made only minor appearances in a couple of TV series, he won the role over hundreds of other hopefuls. In a neat twist of fate, he was working in the Sony Pictures gift shop where he got to know the real Fisher when the latter was still writing his screenplay. His attaining the

role was a dream, and his acting of it is another kind of dream: an actor wholly inhabiting a role.

(The film is rated "PG-13 for violence, language and thematic material involving child abuse.)

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