In the seventies, director Martin Ritt generally followed up a significant and ambitious film with one or more that seem slight in comparison. Thus “The Molly Maguires” was succeeded by “The Great White Hope,” “Sounder” by “Conrack” and “Pete ’n Tillie”, and “The Front” by the modest but entertaining “Casey’s Shadow.” Then Ritt seemed ready again to tackle a weightier subject, and he found it in the story of Crystal Lee Jordan, who was instrumental in helping to unionize the textile industry, particularly the J.P. Stevens Company in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

Ritt became interested in the story when he read Henry Leifermann’s article in “The New York Times” on the difficulties – physical threats, ostracism by fellow workers, and community hostility – faced by union organizers. In a 1978 letter, Ritt described his initial reaction: “When I first heard about the situation in this industry, I could not believe that I was not reading a period piece, and further excited to find how many women were in the forefront of the struggle for civil and economic rights.” When Leifermann eventually turned his article into a book, “Crystal Lee: A Woman of Inheritance,” Ritt bought the rights and determined to make it into a film.

Not surprisingly, he had trouble selling the film to the studios. Most executives found the subject matter too depressing, as did Alan Ladd Jr., the president of Twentieth Century Fox. Ritt countered by demanding to know what was so depressing about a story of a girl who becomes a woman, “who is as close to a complete woman of superior dimensions as any in film history.” Convinced by Ritt’s argument, Ladd decided to back the film.

Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr. were asked to prepare a script for “Norma Rae,” which during its early stages was called “Crystal Lee.” The part of Norma Rae herself was offered to two prominent actresses who turned it down before Ritt turned to Sally Field. While preparing the film, Ritt had some problems with Crystal Lee Jordan, who made it clear through her attorney that she wanted certain scenes omitted from the film; Ritt refused. She also insisted on script control, but Ritt declined to give it to her. He even made a trip to Durham, North Carolina, to meet with her personally, but as Ritt wrote to his own lawyer, “[S]he was not present at meetings, nor had she any intention of showing up.”

“Norma Rae” opens with a series of shots of factory machines processing cotton into cloth, followed by a series of scrapbook photographs of Norma Rae. In the first of these Ritt focuses in on a baby picture until it fills the frame, enforcing an effective contrast of innocence with the realities of factory life that preceded the image.
Norma Rae washes his clothes and then joins him in the water. It is the most idyllic moment in the film, with erotic overtones, as they swim naked together. Both reminisce, delighting in each other’s company in their one shared moment outside the factory and the town.

Norma Rae’s story reaches its climax in the triumph of the union. Her marriage to Sonny remains strong despite some setbacks and her extraordinary growth. Just before the end, Ritt offers an emotional set piece that has become one of the most often shown clips from his work. Norma Rae has just been fired for copying a notice from management designed to incite whites against blacks. As she is being escorted from the mill, she gets up on a table, writes UNION on a piece of cardboard, and holds it up for all the workers to see. In a series of quick cuts, Ritt shoots her first from a low angle, then in a medium close-up, then in a long shot that takes in most of the room. One by one, the workers shut off their machines in a show of support, as Ritt’s camera slowly circles around her.

The film concludes with Norma Rae and Reuben saying good-bye after the successful vote for the union, displaying the same remarkable restraint that has characterized their dealings throughout the film. Despite occasional hints at sexual attraction, the two never compromise their professional relationship; this makes it all but unique in Hollywood films. They part without so much as a kiss, but with a strong bond that has been cemented through hard work and shared commitment.

“Norma Rae” received almost uniformly positive and enthusiastic reviews, which far outstripped the film’s box office. It was a great success at the Cannes Film Festival and received three Academy Award nominations, including “Best screenplay based on material from another medium,” “Best Actress,” and “Best Song.” Sally Field won the Oscar, as did David Shire and Norman Gimbel for their song, “It Goes Like It Goes.”

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.