

Norma Rae

By Gabriel Miller

“The Films of Martin Ritt: Fanfare for the Common Man”

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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.



Sally Field as labor organizer Norma Rae Webster. Courtesy Library of Congress

Reuben Warshovsky (Ron Leibman), the labor organizer who has come to try to establish a union among the mill workers, is first presented as he talks with Vernon Webster (Pat Hingle), who insists that he wants no part of the union. During this exchange Reuben and Norma Rae meet for the first time. Norma Rae’s life, it is suggested, is a series of dead ends – working in the factory, returning to an overcrowded home, and then going out to have affairs with married men in dingy motels. When Norma Rae decides to end the current affair, her rejected lover knocks her against the wall. Walking away with a nose bleed, she meets Reuben, who takes her in and provides ice for her wound.

The scene in Reuben’s room is filmed predominantly in medium and medium-long shots, suggesting that this relationship will open up Norma Rae’s world and expand her horizons. Noticing Reuben’s books, she asks about them and then confesses she has never met a Jew before. When she asks him what makes Jews different and he answers, “History,” Ritt films Reuben from a long angle, from Norma Rae’s point of view, thus indicating his significance, for he is the agent who will facilitate her growth.

Ritt makes little notice of Norma Rae’s home life, alluding to it mainly in scenes in which her husband Sonny (Beau Bridges) complains that she is spending too much time on the union and so neglecting the family. Early script versions do provide more scenes of the family, but Ritt apparently decided to streamline the story to focus more closely on the relationship between Norma Rae and Reuben. The two go to a lake where Reuben swims while

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.

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