

Movie Review: 'Chicago 10'

by Lee Grant

As a movie, "Chicago 10" isn't a 10, but it is a nine.

In a creative juxtaposition of animation and archival footage, this unusual documentary captures 1968, that turbulent year in which Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were killed. Chicago, meanwhile, steered by a thuggish mayor, was the site for the Democratic national convention that erupted in chaos, a sorry chapter in American political history.

'CHICAGO 10' - In 'Chicago 10,' director Brett Morgan animatedly illuminates jowly judge Julius Hoffman presiding over the trial of anti-war protestors. CNS Photo courtesy of C7 Films. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) The unpopular Vietnam War roared, not unlike a current unpopular war, claiming thousands of American lives.

In Chicago, a town dictated by law-and-order, "shoot-to-kill" Mayor Richard J. Daley, the Democrats gathered to nominate Hubert H. Humphrey for president. Showing up, also, filling the streets and sleeping in the parks, were throngs of protesters against the war and espousing other causes.

In vivid detail, "Chicago 10" revisits the bloody confrontations between authorities and mostly young people, and the subsequent trial of the men who became known as the Chicago 7, arrested for conspiracy to start a riot. In titling his film, director Brett Morgen includes two defense attorneys and Bobby Seale, co-chairman of the Black Panther Party.

In the works, incidentally, is a major studio film, Steven Spielberg's "Chicago 7," featuring Will Smith and Sacha Baron Cohen.

The defendants' names linger in protest history - among them Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, David Dellinger and Seale. On grainy stock in press conferences and when leading marches, the men come off young, idealistic and often humorous. Images on screen drift from the past - poet Ed Sanders, journalist Paul Krassner, writers Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer.

Morgen's stop-motion animation catches strikingly a circus of a trial overseen by Judge Julius Hoffman (voiced by the late Roy Scheider). He's all quivering flesh and mispronunciation, calling Dellinger "Dillinger."

Jeffrey Wright, so fine in "Angels in America," voices Seale, and his presence, even when bound-and-gagged, blazes animatedly on screen.

Courtroom transcripts were used verbatim with voice performances by Hank Azaria (Apu on "The Simpsons") as Hoffman, Mark Ruffalo as Rubin, Liev Schreiber as defense attorney William Kunstler, and Nick Nolte as prosecutor Thomas Foran, all nailing the late-'60s attitude.

There's no doubt Morgen constructed his film in a manner to encourage 2008 activism aimed at the current U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. For instance, there's an address by President Lyndon B. Johnson ordering a surge in the number of fighting forces headed to Vietnam.

Morgen utilizes the vintage news footage brilliantly in weaving action inside the convention hall and out. There's avuncular news anchor Walter Cronkite, sitting at his CBS desk on the eve of the event, observing, "The Democratic Convention is about to begin in a police state." There are the violent activities outside, bloody heads of young people pummeled by the nightsticks of Daley's blue-helmeted cops wearing gas masks.

"Chicago 10" is a movie for parents and grandparents to take their older children and grandchildren. It's worth a field trip for high school and college American history classes.

At one point, a reporter asks defendant Hoffman what he thinks of the trial. "I have a great seat," he said. "It's a good show."

"Chicago 10" is a good show.

"Chicago 10." Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes. Rated: R. 3 1/2 stars.

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