Destin Daniel Cretton, director. *Just Mercy.* Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019.

Just Mercy is the film adaption of a memoir by civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson, starring Jamie Foxx and Michael B. Jordan. Directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, known for *Short Term 12* and *The Glass Castle*, and co-written with Andrew Lanham, the film is based on Stevenson's experiences as a young, black, Ivy League-educated attorney in rural Alabama during the 1980s and 90s fighting systemic racism and an abusive criminal justice system. This film is a social commentary on America's failed judicial system that has disproportionately incarcerated African Americans, perpetuating inequity in the black community.

The film begins with Johnny D (Foxx), as he is stopped and surrounded by police while he drives home after a day of work. They are convinced that he is guilty of murdering a white woman and haul him off to jail. The following scene shows Stevenson (Jordan), a recent Harvard Law School graduate, arriving in Alabama. It becomes apparent that he is an activist and a lawyer specializing in death penalty appeals. Stevenson's work highlights America's biased judicial system in the deep South, where African Americans are unjustly prosecuted and poorly represented, resulting in many unfair convictions of innocent people. The level of systemic racism is profound in states such as Alabama, a former slave state and participant of Jim Crow laws.

Arriving to meet his client, Stevenson is treated poorly by the prison guards who question his status as a lawyer. They demand that he is strip-searched before entering the facility, even though counselors are not subject to that type of protocol. After experiencing thorough humiliation, Stevenson meets with several prisoners whose cases were mishandled, just like Johnny D's. This film manifests into a courtroom drama as Stevenson and his colleague Eva Ansley take on cases that they deem need legal remedies.

When Johnny D first meets Stevenson, Johnny D rejects Stevenson's representation because he does not believe that there is anything anyone can do about his death sentence, let alone exonerate him for a crime he did not commit. His previous lawyer could not adequately represent him, so why would Stevenson be

any different? He does not believe that anyone would listen or care about an African American man convicted of killing a white girl. However, Stevenson researches the court documents on Johnny D's case and notices discrepancies, as well as a lack of effort from the defense. Stevenson knows he has enough evidence to reopen the case, but he is also aware that it will be challenging to convince the District Attorney and a white community of a second trial. Stevenson is forced to go to the Supreme Court of Alabama to find a judge who will hear the case and order its retrial.

Once Johnny D's case goes to trial, it is showcased on the popular evening news show *60 Minutes*, increasing its visibility to the public. After Stevenson gives his closing argument, the prosecutor in the case surprisingly agrees with Stevenson's reasoning. Ultimately, the case is dismissed, and Johnny D is released from prison, returning to his family and friends. In the end, *Just Mercy* exposes the disparities and fear that the African American community has been subjected to. It is painful to watch, especially since it exposes bigotry that occurred in recent U.S. history and not before or during the Civil Rights Movement. I highly recommend this film, as it provides evidence for how the justice system has failed black and brown communities.

Frank Rodriguez