Aaron Sorkin, writer/director. *The Trial of the Chicago 7.* Netflix, 2020.

Best known for his work on *The West Wing* and *A Few Good Men*, Aaron Sorkin is a critically acclaimed screenwriter and director. He has won multiple Golden Globe, Academy, British Film Academy, and Primetime Emmy nominations and Awards throughout his prodigious career. While Sorkin is no stranger to legal and political dramas, his most recent film adds history to that list. *The Trial of the Chicago 7* tells the story of eight men charged with conspiracy following the disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention.

The events of the Chicago police riot echoed into the next presidential administration and are well worth recalling even today. 1968 was a chaotic year at the tail end of a tumultuous decade in the U.S. Many Americans had grown tired of the war in Vietnam and chose to exercise their discontent by protesting at the Democratic National Convention. However, the city of Chicago was dead set against giving the protestors a forum near the convention. Though continually denied the permits to protest at Grant and Lincoln Parks, the protestors decided to assemble anyway. Police and protestors clashed during the days leading up to the convention leading to hundreds of injuries and even more arrests.

As many Sorkin productions do, the story begins with a fast-paced introduction of the main characters, usually while walking briskly down a hallway. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin led the Youth International Party (Yippies). Tom Hayden led the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) with the help of Rennie Davis. David Dellinger led the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (The Mobe). Bobby Seale was the Chairman and cofounder of the Black Panther Party. Lee Weiner and John Froines were the final two men of the Chicago 8, though they play a lesser role in this film. These men from disparate backgrounds came to Chicago in 1968 intending to protest the Democratic National Convention along with hundreds of others like them. The treatment they received at the hands of the police and the

American legal system is evocative of more recent police clashes with protestors under the Trump administration.

The film skips right over the bedlam of the ‘68 Chicago riots and jumps into the courtroom drama. In just over two hours, the film slowly pieces the story back together with ample use of flashback scenes to recreate the events in the courtroom. From the very beginning, Sorkin clarifies that this trial was politically motivated by a newly emboldened–and recently insulted–President Nixon, a point that Abbie Hoffman often repeats in the film. In fact, much of the movie highlights how the defendants were mistreated by an ill-tempered and possibly senile Judge Julius Hoffman. Especially noteworthy is the treatment of the mystery eighth member of the Chicago 7, Bobby Seale, who was forced into trial without representation and eventually bound and gagged in court after multiple attempts to, justly, protest his lack of counsel.

Released just before the 2020 election, Sorkin takes a lot of artistic liberty with his historical inspiration to make a point to his audience. Not only does the story parallel the violence unleashed upon political protestors in recent years, so too does the choice between the greater and lesser evils of two entrenched political parties. Much like today, Progressives then had grown tired of what they saw as an unwillingness to fight back against conservative influences in this country. Unfortunately, Sorkin too was reticent to display the whole truth of Bobby Seale’s treatment at the orders of Judge Hoffman even though it highlights all too well the racial hierarchy of the American justice system. A hierarchy we see present to this day. Bobby Seale was portrayed as bound and gagged only briefly in the movie. In reality, Mr. Seale was kept in that state for three days of trial until the judge was convinced to separate his case from the rest of the Chicago 7. Until that point, Judge Hoffman had charged him with sixteen counts of contempt amounting to four years in prison. While Sorkin definitely takes some artistic license, his more important message of history informing us about our present state of affairs is quite clear.

Where Sorkin fails to recreate history faithfully, he succeeds in bringing history to life. His engaging writing about political ideals clashing with reality is precisely what made *West Wing* such a hit, and it’s what makes this moment in history perfect for his narrative touch. I highly recommend this film to

anyone politically active in America as well as anyone looking for an engaging recreation of a pivotal trial in American history.

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