

Dime-store redemption

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

Denzel Washington makes his directorial debut in *Antwone Fisher* and also plays a navy psychiatrist who becomes emotionally involved in the struggles of a young patient. Antwone (Derek Luke) lands in Dr. Davenport's office because he can't stop getting into fights. Eventually Davenport gets the complete story--the boy never knew his parents (an incarcerated mother, a murdered dad); he was raised by a minister's wife, who beat him, and her daughter, who sexually abused him; he saw his best friend plugged in a robbery. Everything but the bloodhounds snappin' at his rear end, as Thelma Ritter quips about Anne Baxter's tale of woe in *All About Eve*.

Davenport's love and support make the young man whole again, of course. He locates his birth mother and is welcomed into the bosom of his father's big family. He consummates his first romance, with a navy girl (Joy Bryant). And because true love is reciprocal, his affection loosens up Davenport, who has been alienated from his wife (Salli Richardson) ever since they learned they couldn't have kids, and cures their marital problems.

The ace up the picture's sleeve is that it was written by the actual Antwone Fisher. So the movie has it both ways: it's genuine stuff (the tale of a true-life lost child who found his way) and it's an actualized American dream (he found his way to a Hollywood contract).

Well, this child has Hollywood in his veins. The warm, sweet smell that comes off the screen in *Antwone Fisher* is manure, and it wafts high above the "real-folks" ad campaign, which quotes psychologists and community leaders endorsing the movie's values. The film's afterword--following the hearts-and-flowers dedication to Fisher's father, "whom I never had the pleasure and the honor to know"--is a disclaimer to the effect that the script was inspired by Fisher's life and some of the characters and events are fictional.

I'll say. The film is a composite of sure-fire melodramatic effects, like the scene in which Antwone drops by his old foster home (where the abusive daughter still lives with the sadistic mom) to announce that he's "still standing and still strong," and the

one where his newly discovered family gathers and prepares (at roughly an hour's notice) a feast that replicates the one in his dreams--the groaning board that he never got to experience as a child.

Cute episodes are also salted in, detailing Antwone's courtship of Cheryl, with glimpses of Davenport smiling his paternal approval. Davenport preps him for his first date with a role-playing session; when the boy earns his first kiss, he's so buoyant he swings by the shrink's home to share the moment. Washington does so much grinning in this picture you think his face is going to crack.

Psychologically, the movie doesn't make sense. Antwone's sexual reticence is supposed to be the result of the abuse he suffered as a little boy, and the belligerence he demonstrates among his fellow sailors--responding to racist insults--is supposed to derive from his anger at his foster mother, who, though black herself, liked to hurl racial epithets at him in an effort to break his spirit. Wouldn't you think, though, that if women were responsible for Antwone's childhood misery, women would be the target of his anger? And is there a healthy young black man who wouldn't be riled by a racist slur?

I have a particular antipathy to scenes in which the ill-treated protagonist tells off a parent (see *Lost in Yonkers*, *Shine*), because the scenes are usually rigged--wish-fulfillment fantasies--and the parent is a straw man invented for the purpose of bringing the grown-up child to self-actualization. This movie has two such scenes, including the "still standing, still strong" exchange. In the second one, in which Antwone shows his birth mother that he made it to an admirable adulthood without her help, the parent is played by the staggeringly gifted stage actress Viola Davis. Though she's only on screen for five minutes, her raw, complex performance, which focuses the unresolvable ambivalence of this woman who never thought she'd see the child she abandoned, makes everything else in the movie look like dime-store fakery.

For contrast, check out *Drumline*. It's a novelty musical like some of the B features the studios turned out in the 1930s and '40s, built around a cocky young Bronx drummer (Nick Cannon) who comes of age when he wins a scholarship to study marching-band music. This charming film, with rousing musical numbers, includes a scene in which where the hero confronts his estranged father, a one-time jazz drummer who now takes tickets in the subway.

The boy's speech is practically a replica of the one Antwone delivers to his mama, but with one important difference: here we're meant to see the boy as a callow, arrogant, ungenerous hotshot who needs to learn something about life, and the rest of the movie chronicles how he grows into his humanity. The unleashing of his self-righteous anger isn't the end point of his coming of age; it's square one.