

# Not a single leg chain smashed

by **Cosmo Landesman**

1 No film in the past decade has had the kind of emotional impact on audiences that "12 Years a Slave" has. Hardened men and even heartless critics have left the cinema weeping. The film has won 134 awards, made more than £100m, generated vast media attention and public acclamation. Yet it has failed to do the one thing it set out to do: get the public actively involved in the issue of modern-day slavery.

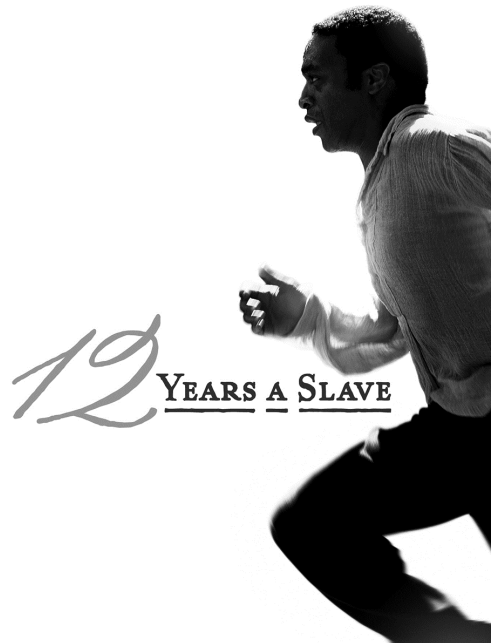
2 The film tells the true story of a freeborn black man called Solomon Northup who was drugged, kidnapped and sold into slavery on a cotton farm. It shows in disturbing detail the shocking reality of 19th-century slavery in America. When it was released in the United States in 2013 (and this year in the UK), anti-slavery organisations were quick to see the potential of the movie as an aid to increasing public awareness and public action over the issue of present-day slavery. This term covers a multitude of sins, from bonded labour in India to the sex trafficking of young women to Britain.

3 The new mood of optimism was summed up by Bradley Myles, chief executive of Polaris Project, an anti-slavery and anti-trafficking organisation based in Washington: "The opportunity to eradicate slavery is truly before us. Now let's rise to the challenge to seize it."

4 Myles's optimism was easy to understand. Not only did the anti-slavery cause have a powerful film that could stir people's hearts, it also had a passionate, high-profile advocate in its British director, Steve McQueen, who could change minds and get people to respond.

5 At a star-studded Bafta award ceremony in February, McQueen told the assembled audience that "as we sit here tonight, 21m people are still in slavery". This month, at the Academy awards ceremony in Hollywood, McQueen ended his acceptance speech for best film with much the same message — only this time he was reaching an audience of more than 43m Americans.

6 All the anti-slavery organisations then had to do was sit back and wait for the rush of new members, volunteers, donations, celebrity endorsements, online hits and Facebook "likes". Only it didn't happen.



7 "No, there has not been the groundswell of activity we'd hoped for,"  
said Aidan McQuade, the director of Anti-Slavery International. He had  
hoped that the film would produce something more than "anguished hand-  
wringing" as people left the cinema. Now he admits to feeling  
"disappointed".

8 Other groups 26. A spokesman for the UK branch of International  
Justice Mission (IJM) told me: "Since the release of "12 Years a Slave",  
IJM UK has seen no significant increase in the number of inquiries,  
donations or sign-ups compared to that which is usually experienced."

9 Following McQueen's Bafta appearance, Anti-Slavery International  
had 516 hits on its website, just 146 more than its monthly average of  
370. Compare this with the late 18th-century British campaign of abolition,  
when 390,000 people signed petitions against slavery.

10 The film's political impact has been disappointing, too. It has earned  
praise from the likes of Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary-  
general, but the UN shows no sign of taking up the cause of anti-slavery  
as one of its developmental goals, much to the frustration of activists.

11 Does this matter? After all, you might argue that a film has no  
responsibility to anything but itself. But McQueen has made it clear that  
his film isn't just another movie to be watched, wept over and forgotten.  
As he told the audience at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles last  
November: "The reason for making the film is to put things right."

12 Consider the way Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" — for better or  
worse — played a large role in revitalizing the green movement and helped  
to put the idea of global warming in the public mind.

13 The anti-slavery cause is a victim of Hollywood's own success. Thanks  
to films such as Steven Spielberg's "Amistad", Quentin Tarantino's  
"Django Unchained" and now McQueen's "12 Years", people assume that  
slavery belongs to the past. It doesn't matter what modern-day film-  
makers such as McQueen say at award ceremonies; what they show at  
the cinema is the key to popular perceptions and thus possible change.

14 Theresa May, the home secretary, is set to introduce a Modern  
Slavery Bill, cracking down on modern traffickers and gangmasters, but  
the movement needs to find 28 Solomon Northup for her bill to have  
the impact it deserves. So far, despite numerous documentaries, books  
and online footage, present-day slavery hasn't yet had its equivalent of  
"12 Years a Slave".

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