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Review: Belle

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Belle, DVD, directed by Amma Asante, Twentieth Century Fox, 105 Minutes, 2013.

Belle (2013) is an intriguing period drama based on the true story of the first black aristocrat in 18th century Britain, Dido Elizabeth Belle. With artistic flair, British Director, Amma Asante, brings Misan Sagay's script alive by juxtaposing drama with romance, tragedy with compassion, and social convention with intense personal conviction.

Gugu Mbatha-Raw plays Dido, the daughter of John Lindsay, a British Navy captain, and Maria Belle, an enslaved African woman. Dido is raised at Kenwood House, the home of her great-uncle, Lord Mansfield, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Murray, in London. "Too high in rank to dine with the servants but too low to dine with her family," Dido's unusual circumstances add a twist to the class, gender and racial tensions of 18th century British society.

Lord Mansfield was Lord Chief Justice and adjudicated the prominent slavery case of the *Zong* ship in 1783. In this case, owners of the *Zong* submitted a claim to their insurers for the loss of their "human cargo," hundreds of slaves thrown overboard because of disease on the ship. When the insurers refused to pay, the case went to court. Indeed, the classification of human life as property is an all-pervasive theme throughout the story. The meaning of "property" inserts itself even into the romantic life of Dido and her half-cousin, Elizabeth, where the latter sorrowfully laments that women are but the property of men. Other characters also pass comment on property: a flustered Lady Ashford blurts out in annoyance that such "a fuss" is being made "over dead cargo" while the passionate John Davinier, son of a vicar, agonizes over the question of whether the law has a duty "to progress morality" and overturn the category that human life is property. For as with other cargo, the slaves on the *Zong* ship were insured by the ship's owners; it was not an uncommon practice in English maritime that insurance would compensate for slaves who had died under certain circumstances. Whether their deaths were caused by illness, wounds, or during an insurrection on board a ship, insurance companies would be obliged to compensate the ship's owners for their lost "cargo." In *Belle* John Davinier gives voice to the outcry that historically was heard in response to the *Zong* case. Even if not directly related to the latter, it is noteworthy that the Abolition Society formed soon afterwards in 1787. The *Zong* case set in bold relief the inhumanity of the slave trade. This tragic case serves as the dramatic focal point of the film and yet culminates in a surprisingly brief—rather too brief—final court room scene.

Inevitably, romance waxes and wanes throughout the story's tapestry. Dido becomes attracted to John Davinier as well as to the noble cause for justice which he so ardently champions. In the meantime, her interfering aunts hope to see her married off to Oliver Ashford; after all, although Dido happens to inherit a good income, her unique circumstances seem to preclude her from enjoying the usual marriage prospects. Both Dido and Elizabeth are desperate to marry, yet neither are exactly conventional candidates for marriage: Dido carries the "evidence" of her mother's race; Elizabeth is illegitimate. Both want to belong to a man they love, yet clearly neither desires to be simply their "property," even though their circumstances class them socially as "desperate."

Belle is an elegant, thoughtful, and well-acted film which carefully portrays, in Austen-like fashion, both the beautiful and the beastly aspects of 18th Century British culture. Asante has invested much into also making the film as delightful to the eye as any good period drama would hope to do.

Cast

Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Dido Elizabeth Belle, **Tom Wilkinson** as Lord Mansfield, **Miranda Richardson** as Lady Ashford, **Sarah Gadon** as Elizabeth, **Sam Reid** as John Davinier, **Matthew Goode** as Captain Sir John Lindsay, **Tom Felton** as James Ashford, **Penelope Wilton** as Lady Mary Murray

Director

Amma Asante

Screenplay

Misan Sagay

Cinematography

Ben Smithard

Drama

Rated PG for thematic elements, some language and brief smoking images

105 minutes