

## On the Set: Rank Racism: 'THE AFFAIR' ON HBO SETS A TRUE 'ROMEO AND JULIET' TRAGEDY IN THE ENGLAND OF WORLD WAR II

By NANCY MILLS OCT. 8, 1995

SOURCE: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-10-08-tv-54440-story.html>

It wasn't a good idea if you were an African American GI in England during World War II to date any of the local white women. If caught, you might be hanged on trumped-up rape charges because prejudice ruled the segregated U.S. Army, even on foreign soil.

HBO dramatizes one such tragic and true episode in "The Affair," executive-produced by Harry Belafonte and premiering Saturday.

"In Britain, the most you'd get for rape was 10 to 20 years," says Courtney B. Vance, who plays the alleged rapist. "In America, you'd be hung. The Department of War allowed the institution of Jim Crow to be transported overseas. They allowed the Army to stay segregated. There were several cases of black soldiers being condemned to death for having relationships with white women."

Standing on an English farm where the first scene of "The Affair" is being shot, chickens on the loose and hay bales in piles, Vance expresses outrage at what he learned researching his role. "When I finished reading this script, I was so angry," the Harvard history and Yale Drama School graduate says with disgust. "The things our fathers and grandfathers had to deal with and put up with were inhumane."

"In the midst of fighting fascism, black soldiers were also fighting racism. In 1948, President Truman ordered the Army to stop segregating, but it took until the '60s for his order to be put in place. Bases would be integrated, but those at the top refused to get involved in housing. President Kennedy finally said all commanders had to exert their influence."

As whiffs of manure waft faintly past, Vance, in civvies, watches a scene that will change his character's destiny: While loading large cans into the back of a truck, two Englishwomen (played by Kerry Fox and Beatie Edney) discuss the arrival of American soldiers in town.

Fox's husband is off at war, and soon she meets Vance and they begin a love affair. "My character is trapped within herself--her culture, her upbringing, her class," Fox says. "She's unfulfilled and looking for a bit of adventure. But she doesn't know that at the start."

The relationship flourishes until her husband comes home unexpectedly and finds them together. He files rape charges against Vance and blackmails Fox into backing him up by threatening to take their young child away. Despite Vance's protests that the relationship was consensual, the Army does not mount an investigation but instead proceeds toward the death sentence. Fox then has second thoughts about what she's done.

"It's a tragic romance, a great 'Romeo and Juliet' story," says Paul Seed, the British director of the HBO Showcase/BBC production. In Seed's view, "The villain is the American government. At the time, British people were totally naive about interracial problems. The difference between the races was new and fascinating. The big problem was the arrogance of some of the white soldiers.

Harry Belafonte takes this story personally. "Yes, it has a decidedly personal resonance for me," the singer-actor-activist says. "I served in the U.S. Navy during the Second World War and, like other African Americans, I was fighting on two fronts--the enemy abroad and the enemy at home. I was very much in tune with what was happening with black servicemen everywhere, and I knew it could very well be me next.

"When HBO made me aware of this project, there was no question that I'd put myself at their disposal to help it get on its feet. I was pleased with the integrity they wanted to bring to it and the absence of traditional stereotypical interventions. I've been around too many projects where the intentions were noble and the results disastrous."

As Belafonte talks, all the young black actors on the set watch him with undisguised admiration. Bill Nunn, who plays the liaison between the Army and the black soldiers, had earlier recalled, "I can remember my family talking about Harry when I was a boy."

For much of his life, Belafonte has found himself trying to improve the lot of African Americans. "I didn't become what I became after I established myself in the arts community," he says. "I was always this way. The arts community gave me a platform to become more articulate. I grew up at a time when such acts were not terribly singular. Martin Luther King was my closest friend, and Paul Robeson and Dr. W.E.B. DuBois were my mentors."

For the past two decades, Belafonte, 68, has deliberately absented himself from Hollywood. "As much as I love cinema art, I turned my back on it because I found it a total waste of human effort," he explains. "There was no honor in any of it. But recently I found among my colleagues on all levels a willingness to deal more sensitively and more in-depth with African American experiences."

In the next few months, Belafonte will be seen on screen in two new films--"White Man's Burden," opposite John Travolta, and "Kansas City," directed by Robert Altman. He and director Jonathan Demme plan to make a film about the civil rights struggle based on the 1989 Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Parting the Waters."

And he will debut as a director on "The Port Chicago Mutiny," now in development at TNT. He describes the film as "another experience we had in serving our country during the Second World War. These stories have to be told. They are important for social development and human understanding. And now there are people willing to give us opportunities to tell them."

---

This article was processed by the instructor for this class. Images and textboxes, if present, may not have been part of the original. All rights reserved. Copyright by their respective owner(s).