

Why "The Hurricane" Is Hot Air

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AFTER I HAD WRITTEN a couple of newspaper columns pointing out that the movie *The Hurricane* is a hoax, I found myself on a Los Angeles talk-radio station debating the matter with Rudy Langlais, executive producer of the movie.

I talked about reading an excerpt from a 1964 *Saturday Evening Post* article on Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. The article appeared at the apex of Carter's boxing career, just before he was to fight for the middleweight championship. Carter told the writer that in his youth he used to "shoot at people."

He elaborated: "Some-times just to shoot at 'em, sometimes to hit 'em, sometimes to kill 'em. My family was saying I'm still a bum. If I got the name, I play the game."

Langlais interrupted me: "Surely you don't believe that." But he didn't press the point. For a good reason. Either Carter was telling the truth, and he is a psychopath. Or he was telling a falsehood, and he is a liar.

Actually, he's both, if his criminal record and his public statements are any indication. And as for the people who made the movie about him, they're not much better. The movie is allegedly "based on a true story," but there is only one scene in it that is an accurate depiction of a true moment in history. It is the scene in which the up-and-coming young boxer knocks out the great Emile Griffith in 2:13 of the first round of a 1963 fight.

That really happened, exactly as shown on-screen, which makes it unique in a movie full of distortions and outright lies.

The stunning upset in the Griffith fight was the highlight of a life that would soon go downhill fast. But for a few months after that fight, Carter truly looked like a fighter who—in the immortal words of Bob Dylan—"could have been the champion of the world." Actually, the only way that really could have happened was if a truck ran over all of the middleweights who actually knew how to box.

Carter was in the ring what he was in real life, brutal and thuggish. With his shaved head, goatee, and evil stare, he hoped to win the fight psychologically before the physical action even began. This worked with some of the young fighters he met on the way up, but when he got a title shot it was against Joey Giardello, a tough Italian from South Philly who had never ducked a fight in his life. It didn't work. Giardello easily solved Carter's lunging style and then gave him a boxing lesson.

You couldn't tell that from the movie, however. In the movie, Carter pounds Giardello all over the ring during the final rounds. The judges huddle. A half-hour later, they announce their decision. Carter is robbed. The crowd boos.

In real life, those final rounds were not so good for Carter. A December 14, 1964, newspaper clipping said of Carter that "under Giardello's early pounding to the body and later head shots he withered over the last five rounds." Carter lost decisively on the cards of all three judges. A poll of eighteen ringside sportswriters had Giardello winning 14-4. Giardello, now 69, recently saw the

movie and is threatening to sue over his portrayal. He has set up a [website](#) that tells the truth about the bout, complete with a video.

It's unfortunate the rest of Carter's life wasn't also captured on video so that it could be compared against the lies on screen. The pattern of that fight scene is the pattern of the movie. Carter doesn't lose fights; they are fixed. Carter doesn't commit crimes; he is framed. Carter doesn't bully people, drink, beat women, or do any of the other things that he did in real life. He is an angel.

In an early scene, for example, the young Carter is shown running through Paterson, New Jersey, with some pals and playfully tugging at some shirts on sale outside a store. In real life, Carter was arrested at the age of twelve for stealing shirts from a store. His own father turned him in, exasperated by the thieving and bullying Carter had engaged in since his first contact with the law at age nine.

Then the movie shows the innocent young lad defending himself and his friends against a child molester. He throws a bottle at the molester's head. The molester picks him up and is ready to throw him over a waterfall. Our hero pulls a knife and cuts the molester. But a racist cop pins the crime on Carter and he is sent away to reform school. He breaks out years later and joins the Army, serving honorably as a paratrooper. When his hitch is up, Carter returns to Paterson, where the racist cop tracks him down and sends him back to the reformatory. He doesn't emerge again until age 24, when he begins his boxing career.

In real life, the only true part of that story concerns the bottle. Carter did indeed break one over a man's head, but he also stole the man's wristwatch and \$55, court records show. This was his fourth juvenile arrest and the one that landed him in the slammer at age fourteen. He was paroled the next year and then committed another crime to violate his parole. He was jailed again and escaped. He did indeed join the Army, but his service was far from honorable. Court records show he was court-martialed four times in the 21 months before he was kicked out on May 29, 1956, with the designation: "Unfitness."

After another stint in the reformatory, he got out and began a career of adult crime that he later described in the *Post* article. "We'd get into lots of fights, my partner and me, to see who would hit the man first. We'd get a whim and do it. I couldn't begin to tell you how many hits, muggings, and stickups. No use trying to count them."

In the movie, Denzel Washington portrays Carter as a proud man who walks with his head held high. In real life, he descended into purse-snatching, a crime of small-minded cowardice. After a spree that included one purse-snatching and two brutal muggings on July 2, 1957, Carter was sent to adult prison. His behavior in prison was so bad that he served his maximum sentence. He was released on September 16, 1961, and had his first pro fight that same week.

When Carter's ring career was in its ascendancy, he stayed out of trouble with the law. But after the Giardello fight, he won just seven of his last sixteen fights and returned to criminality. According to a prison psychiatrist who examined Carter in 1958, he was "an emotionally unstable and aggressive individual" with "a strong paranoid orientation." It was only Carter's boxing that kept him sane, the psychiatrist observed. He stated that when "Rubin's ring aspirations do not exist, he will become more aggressive and it is predicted that a repetition of present involvement will occur."

An excellent prediction, as it turned out. Carter's career was on the ropes on the night in 1966 when two black males walked into the Lafayette Bar in Paterson and shot every white person in the joint. The prosecutor amassed a huge pile of evidence showing Carter and pal John Artis were those two men. The movie ignores this evidence and instead shows Carter socializing in a bar in another part of town when the killings occurred. And that alibi matches the testimony given by defense witnesses in Carter's first trial, in 1967.

But in Carter's second trial, in 1976, three key alibi witnesses admitted they lied that first time about Carter being at the bar. And a former Carter sparring partner named "Wild Bill" Hardney, who did not testify at the first trial, described at the second trial how Carter had asked him to lie and say he was at the bar with him on the night of the killing.

Carter got that second trial because a key witness against him, a petty crook named Alfred Bello, had supposedly recanted his identification of Carter as being at the scene seven years after the trial. At the trial, Bello had testified that he was burglarizing a building near the bar when he heard the shots. He said he saw Carter—who was easily identifiable because of his shaved head and goatee—fleeing the bar with another man, both holding guns.

The alleged recantation sparked a publicity campaign that included an awful Bob Dylan song (though one particularly bad couplet, "To the black folks he was just a crazy nigger/ Nobody doubted that he pulled the trigger" was ironically true. Carter had little support among the black people of Paterson whom he had terrorized for so many years.)

If Carter had been acquitted in his second trial in 1976, the Hurricane movie would have been made back then. But he wasn't acquitted. First alibis were recanted. Then Bello took the stand and testified that his recantation had come only because Carter's supporters had offered him bribes. And, of course, there was the unpleasant matter of that mountain of other evidence connecting Carter to the crime, including the shotgun shell and bullet found when police stopped him right after the murders in a car that exactly matched the description of the killers' car.

It is perhaps for this reason that the movie totally skips over both trials, other than to falsely state that all-white juries were impaneled for both. Instead, the movie focuses on the efforts of the members of a Canadian commune to find new evidence to free Carter after his second trial. This part of the movie is so obviously false that even Carter's supporters are writing articles pointing out the lies, so it is not worth mentioning here except for perhaps the biggest lie of all. The character of the racist cop Vince Della Pesca—you remember him, the one who has been terrorizing Carter ever since that fictional molestation incident in the late 1940s—surfaces in the 1980s to threaten the Canadian supporters' lives. In one unintentionally comic scene, Della Pesca emerges from the shadows to tell the Canadians to back off. In another, the front wheel falls off the Canadians' Volvo—obvious sabotage by Della Pesca.

In real life, the Della Pesca character—whose real name was Vince DeSimone—died in 1979. There is no record that he ever did a single one of the evil acts attributed to him in the movie. Not only that, he wasn't a racist or a thug, according to those who knew him. About the only thing the movie got right is that the actor who plays him is made up to have an unattractive face. DeSimone had a handsome face before World War II, but then a German bullet went through it. Nineteen plastic surgeries couldn't fix it. That's Hollywood for you. The disgraceful military career of Carter is made to look honorable and the war wound of a true hero is made to look dishonorable.

But the movie's biggest distortion concerns the events on the evening of the killings and their impact on the decision that finally set Carter free. Earlier that evening, a black bar owner in Paterson had been shot to death by a white man. Seven hours later, two black males entered the Lafayette Bar and Grill and shot everyone in the place without attempting a holdup.

At the 1976 trial, the prosecution argued that revenge was the motive. After the first shooting, Carter had spoken with the black victim's relatives and had inquired about a shotgun. And Carter himself had testified to a grand jury that there was talk in the black community of "shaking," a slang term for revenge.

But onscreen, the prosecution argues the motive was simply that the bar did not serve blacks. The movie then debunks its own lie by having a black actress state that she and other blacks drank at the bar regularly.

This is crucial to the technicality that finally sprung Carter. After almost two decades of judge-shopping, Carter's defense team finally had the good fortune to come up before federal Judge Lee Sarokin, the most criminal-friendly judge in the nation. Sarokin ordered a new trial on the grounds that the prosecution should not have been permitted to argue that racial revenge was the motive.

"For the state to contend that an accused has the motive to commit murder solely because of his membership in a racial group is an argument which should never be permitted to sway a jury or provide the basis of a conviction." Sarokin wrote.

By that standard, of course, the prosecution in the Texas dragging death of James Byrd Jr. would have had to find some other motive than the racism that so clearly led to the actions of the three killers.

Even Sarokin did not state Carter was innocent or that he was framed, as the movie people keep saying. In fact, the prosecutor could have tried Carter a third time but chose not to. Witnesses had died and Carter was nearing his parole date anyway. His partner in crime Artis was already out on parole. The prosecutor had succeeded in his main goal—keeping Carter off the streets until he was too old to brutalize others.

Judge Sarokin was clearly a starstruck publicity hound who was looking for a way to set Carter free regardless of the facts. Now retired, he has joined Carter's traveling circus and appears on TV with him. In fact, it seems like you can't turn on the TV these days without seeing the new, lovable Hurricane Carter.

This infuriates Carolyn Kelley. Kelley is a black community activist from Newark, N.J., who in 1974 joined the effort to free Carter at the urging of Muhammad Ali. She was and is a devout Muslim with a very optimistic view of human nature. Too optimistic.

After Carter was released on bail on March 20, 1976, for his second trial, Kelley was part of the entourage that traveled with Carter and Ali to Landover, Md., for Ali's fight against Jimmy Young. There was a minor mix-up over hotel rooms and Kelley had to go to Carter's room to discuss it. For some reason—Kelley thinks it is because Carter had just had an unpleasant encounter with Wild Bill Hardney, who would soon testify about the false alibi—Carter burst into maniacal laughter when Kelley entered his room. He began gargling some cologne, apparently for the alcohol content. "Then it clicked: I had to get out of there," she told me when I interviewed her recently. "But there he was between me and the

door. I didn't see it coming but he hit me in the face. I felt everything getting dark. I remember praying to Allah, 'Please help me,' and apparently Allah rolled me over and he kicked me in the back instead of the guts. Allah saved my life."

As usual, Carter didn't admit to the beating. He didn't do it. He was framed. Kelley had an affair with him and was a woman scorned, Carter said. Also, she had threatened to make up the story of a beating unless he gave her \$100,000, Carter said.

Both alibis are unlikely. The journalist who broke the story, Chuck Stone of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, says that even after the beating Kelley went out of her way to keep the story out of the papers. Stone, now a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina, broke the story himself for the most valid of journalistic reasons—it was a scoop, front-page news that forever debunked Carter's image as an innocent man.

Well, maybe not forever. Memories are short in Tinseltown. Hollywood has managed to recreate Carter once again as some sort of a gentle philosopher. Kelley saw him on the recent telecast of the Golden Globe awards lecturing the gullible showbiz audience on love.

"I sat there and my heart was beating out of my chest. I was in pain. How dare you talk about love? You can't love anyone, even yourself."

Her explanation of Carter's comeback is simple: "He's Satan, and Satan can fool a lot of people."

The movie, of course, totally ignores the beating of Kelley. But in real life, she remains the most visible and undeniable evidence of the true nature of the man.

"If he could do that to me, a woman who was no threat to him, then he has erased in my mind any doubt that he could kill three or four innocent people," Kelley now says.