John Q & Training Day: A Comparison

By Angie Tonucci

As early millennial films addressing themes of injustice and corruption within prominent American systems, both *John Q* and *Training Day* succeed in connecting their audiences to their poignant messages. For this reason, regardless of their quality as films, both movies are important as contributions to modern African-American pop culture. They do both, however, contain elements of great films, and though most critics deemed *John Q* a subpar feature, the general public gave both movies a warm reception. According to Flixter.com, critics give *Training Day* a score of 72%, while *John Q* earns a cringe-worthy 23%. But Flixter users are much more generous, respectively giving them 89% and 78%. Because each film tackles heavy subject matter, it is easy to be overly critical of the scripts and directorial choices and to be left wondering how things could have been handled better. But overall, both films are action-packed and thought-provoking, and each contains a hero facing a moral dilemma, which is necessary for any good story.

Most of the criticism towards either film is directed at their scripts and not at their casts, for one thing on which even those who reviewed the films negatively seem to agree is that the actors' performances carry the films and make them entertaining despite any flaws in the plots. This is especially true for Denzel Washington, who excels in both performances and certainly earns his Academy Award for his against-type role as corrupt detective, Alonzo, in *Training Day*. And his raw emotion and relatability as devoted father, John Quincy Archibald, in *John Q* help the audience to sympathize with his plight. Ethan Hawke, Kimberly Elise, and Daniel E. Smith, give equally stunning supportive performances.

John Q and *Training Day* are appropriate films for comparison because, while not evident at first glance of their plot synopses, their themes are quite similar. As noted already,

they each deal with systemic problems within everyday American institutions—*John Q* with a seriously flawed and unjust healthcare system and *Training Day* with a corrupt police force and criminal justice system—both of which disproportionately affect People of Color in this country. While neither film seems to bring up the race of Denzel's characters, the fact that he is a Black man is relevant in the racially-charged environment of the past several decades in the United States.

While people of all races, backgrounds, and education levels are affected by poverty, unemployment, illness, and inadequate healthcare, the fact remains that racial minorities bear these burdens more often than more privileged groups. The choice to cast Black actors as the Archibald family in *John Q* gives the film an extra layer of relatability as it portrays an unfortunately accurate cross-section of low-to-middle-income Americans. Add to that the true accounts of outlandishly expensive medical costs and the greedy, uncaring health insurance mega-corporation machine, against which it is impossible for John to fight using the legal options available to him, and this film is almost too real to be considered fiction. It is this authenticity that hooks the audience and keeps them rooting for John Q until the very end.

In contrast, *Training Day* is less relatable to the general population, not because police corruption, drugs, and gangs aren't real issues, but because those issues affect a smaller percentage of people than poor healthcare. What *Training Day* lacks in everyday relevance, however, it makes up for in complexity and unpredictability. For example, *John Q*'s audience can relate so well to John's frustrations as he runs out of options to save his son, that his final move in taking hostages to force the hospital's hand seems inevitable and predictable. The hospital administration and insurance company are portrayed as the "bad guys" from the very beginning while John is portrayed as a good, loving man who will do whatever it takes to protect

his family. The audience hardly questions John's actions; many feel they would do something similar if put in the same situation.

Training Day, on the other hand, takes its time revealing Alonzo's vile and brutal nature, and though Ethan Hawke's supporting character, Jake, is often overshadowed by Denzel in the lead, Jake ends up being the hero of the story. Jake's path is far less predictable than John Q's as he is faced with moral questions presented to him by Alonzo, who sometimes appears as the clear devil over Jake's left shoulder, and at other times speaks reasonably as if he is the angel on the right. Some of Alonzo's arguments seem morally justifiable enough for consideration; Jake is clearly conflicted most of the time, and so is the audience. Though he makes the right choice in the end, there are certainly moments when many in the audience are unsure of which path they themselves would have chosen.

In conclusion, *John Q* is undeserving of its poor critic score, for as the Archibalds win the hearts of the hostages and nearly the entire nation within the movie, John's love for his family and selfless actions to overcome real obstacles win the hearts of its audience. And *Training Day* is a fast-paced, unpredictable ride ripe with ethical quandaries that cause its audience to think critically. One film is not empirically better than the other; both films are excellent in their own special ways!