

So What's the Real Truth About Alfred Kinsey and His Pop?

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

Feb. 11 (Bloomberg) -- Midway through ``Kinsey,''' a captivating movie about groundbreaking sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, there's a pivotal scene in which the title character questions his prudish father about his love life.

The father, who has dismissed his son's work as trivial and trashy, at first claims he never masturbated as a youngster. When Kinsey expresses disbelief and threatens to end the discussion, the father confesses that he suffered from a ``chronic condition'' that was ``cured'' when his hands were strapped together.

The scene is stunning and appears to provide keen insight into Kinsey and his father.

There's no evidence it ever happened, though.

Like so many biographical movies, including current best-picture nominees ``Ray'' and ``The Aviator,''' Kinsey'' sometimes plays loose with the facts. That's understandable. A literal retelling of even the most fascinating lives would probably put most people to sleep.

True to Life

Still, it's jarring to learn that such a crucial moment as the father-son encounter in ``Kinsey'' is a fabrication, even if it fits in nicely with the film's theme that ignorance and repression are the enemies of sexual enlightenment.

Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, a consultant on the film and author of the Kinsey biography ``Sex the Measure of All Things,''' said the incident isn't mentioned in any book and he found no such account during his research. Yet the writer has no objection to the Hollywood-created scene because, he said, it's believable and reflects the real nature of the characters.

``You shouldn't show things that could never have happened,''' Gathorne-Hardy said in a telephone interview from his home in Norfolk, England. ``You have to remain true to the person, and I think they did that in this movie.''

When books are translated into movies, writers and directors feel free to condense, cut and add new material. Likewise, portraying a life on film requires omissions,

amplifications and other diversions from the true-life script.

``You can't show an entire life in 90 minutes,`` Gathorne-Hardy said.

Martians on Grassy Knoll

But when are those changes so drastic that they distort the essence of the person and the story? In large part, it depends on how much the viewer knows about the subject before buying a ticket.

That's why I couldn't stand ``JFK,`` Oliver Stone's hallucinatory version of the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. As a dedicated student of the assassination, I knew the film was filled with errors and deliberate distortions to show there was a vast government conspiracy to kill JFK.

While there are tantalizing tidbits that seem to point in that direction, Stone ignored the most credible ones and based his film on the cockeyed ideas of New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison, whose conspiracy theory included everything but Martians firing from the grassy knoll at Dealey Plaza. Overwhelming evidence to the contrary doesn't prevent Stone from rehashing canards like the supposed forgery of photos showing Lee Harvey Oswald holding a rifle.

Pedophiles, Prisoners

I was much more forgiving of the fictive elements in ``A Beautiful Mind,`` probably because I didn't know about them at the time I saw the Oscar-winning film about John Nash Jr., a brilliant, mentally unstable mathematician with a Nobel Prize and a history of bizarre behavior.

When I later learned that director Ron Howard overlooked or minimized some of the unsavory aspects of Nash's life, including his anti-Semitic ravings and arrest for indecent exposure, it didn't retroactively spoil my appreciation of the cinematic rendering. It did encourage me to read more about Nash and conclude that, alterations aside, the movie had honest intentions.

The same is true with ``Kinsey,`` a beautifully acted film about the Indiana University zoology professor whose pioneering studies in the 1940s and '50s paved the way for the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s.

Kinsey's critics argue that the movie glosses over some troubling aspects of his work, such as his use of

pedophiles and prisoners for research and his homosexual liaisons with colleagues. Not so. While writer/director Bill Condon doesn't dwell on those subjects, he doesn't avoid them, either.

More importantly, Condon and his talented cast -- Liam Neeson as Kinsey and Laura Linney as his wife Clara play the leads with elegant understatement -- capture the suffocating sexual atmosphere of the time and the role they played in shaking up the social order.

And that's the truth.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Schatz.

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