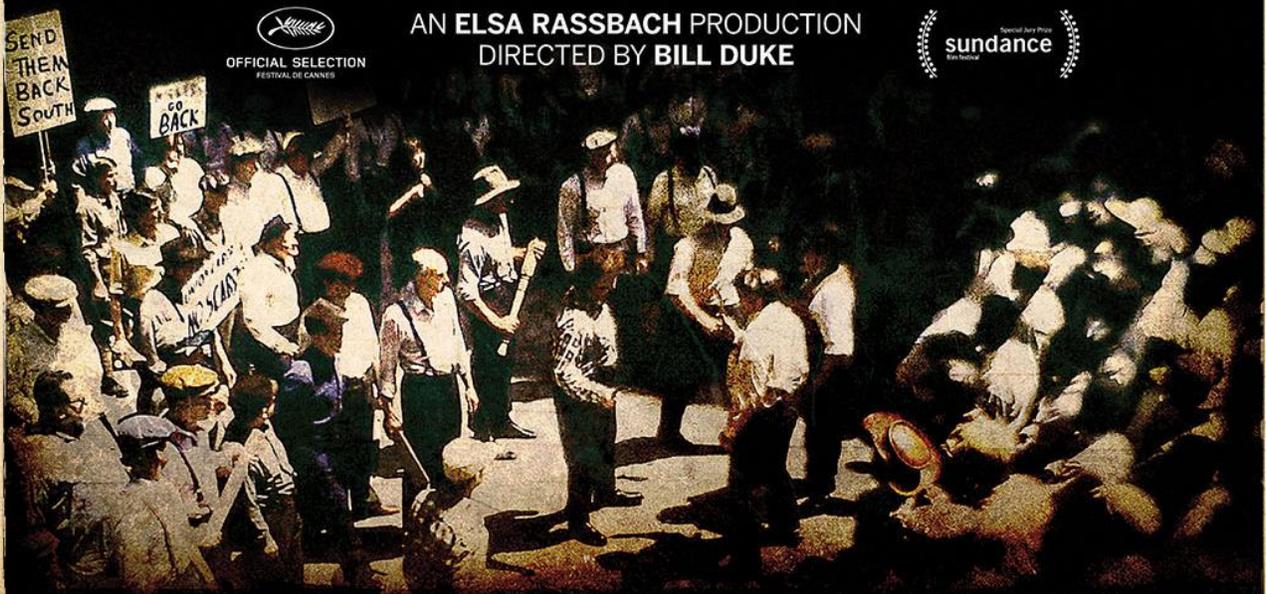


"RICH AND REVEALING, A CRY OF HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS."  
-VARIETY



DAMIEN LEAKE - ALFRE WOODARD - CLARENCE FELDER - MOSES GUNN - DENNIS FARINA

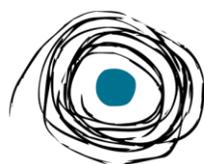
# THE KILLING FLOOR



  
OFFICIAL SELECTION  
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

AN ELSA RASSBACH PRODUCTION  
DIRECTED BY BILL DUKE

  
Special Jury Prize  
Best Feature



FILM MOVEMENT<sup>®</sup>  
CLASSICS

presents

# THE KILLING FLOOR

AN ELSA RASSBACH PRODUCTION | DIRECTED BY BILL DUKE

starring

**DAMIEN LEAKE | ALFRE WOODARD  
CLARENCE FELDER | MOSES GUN | DENNIS FARINA**

1984 | USA | English Language | 118 minutes | 1.33:1 | Stereo

Praised by *The Village Voice* as the most “clear-eyed account of union organizing on film,” *The Killing Floor* tells the little-known true story of the struggle to build an interracial labor union in the Chicago Stockyards. The screenplay by Obie Award-winner Leslie Lee, based on an original story by producer Elsa Rassbach, traces the racial and class conflicts seething in the city’s giant slaughterhouses, and the brutal efforts of management to divide the workforce along ethnic lines, which eventually boiled over in the Chicago Race Riot of 1919.

The first feature film by director Bill Duke, *The Killing Floor* premiered on PBS’ American Playhouse series in 1984 to rave reviews. In 1985 the film was invited to Cannes and won the Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Award. It has been showcased at the Lincoln Center and festivals around the world.

## **NEW 4K RESTORATION**

Laboratory services by UCLA Film & Television Archive Digital Media Lab; Audio Services by Deluxe Entertainment Services Group, Inc.; Digital Color Grading by Planemo (Berlin) and Alpha-Omega digital (Münich). Special thanks to Elsa Rassbach and the Sundance Institute Collection at UCLA Film & Television Archive.

### Press Contacts:

Michael Krause | Foundry Communications | (212) 586-7967 | mkrause@foundrycomm.com

### Film Movement Booking Contacts:

Jimmy Weaver | Theatrical | (216) 704-0748 | jimmy@filmmovement.com  
Maxwell Wolkin | Festivals & Non-Theatrical | (212) 941-7744 x211 | maxwell@filmmovement.com

## THE MAKING OF *The Killing Floor*

Directed by Bill Duke & Produced by co-writer Elsa Rassbach

***“The Killing Floor is a truly compelling, blistering, and vital historical document.”***

– Jen Johans, *Film Intuition*

***“The Killing Floor is thrillingly watchable, profoundly stirring and perennially relevant. And it’s an exemplary exercise in how to dramatize history and ideas.”***

– David Bax, *Battleship Pretension*

***“A vast amount of research clearly went into writing it. The Killing Floor presents, in fascinating dialectical wrangles, the large-scale political events of the time: an original and fruitful template for the cinematic analysis of social systems and confrontation with history.”***

– Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*

Many reviewers have praised *The Killing Floor* for its approach towards illuminating history through drama and for the strong sense of authenticity it achieves. At the same time, the film uses self-reflective (distancing effect) techniques, as Brody notes elsewhere in his review, both "to set off the dramatizations as latter-day artifices and to verify them as authentic parts of the historical record."

A key theme of the film is racial and class solidarity: both how essential it is for progress to be made and how difficult it often is to achieve. Likewise, solidarity was key in the development of the content and style of the film through an unusual collaboration of African-American and white artists, scholars and intellectuals. And solidarity also played an important role in making the production of this ambitious historical drama financially viable on a very modest public television budget.

Premiering on PBS in the *American Playhouse* series in 1984, *The Killing Floor* was also the pilot production for producer and co-writer Elsa Rassbach's proposed public television series on the history of American workers, *Made in U.S.A.* In the series she planned to present ten dramatic films exploring experiences of working people of different races, ethnicities and genders in various times and places whose lives were impacted by industrialization. (A description of the proposed series is on the website of the distributor Film Movement under *The Killing Floor* > Media & Press Kits > Discussion Guide.)

In producing *The Killing Floor*, Rassbach worked in four separate phases, collaborating first with historians (ca. three years of research for the overall series), then working with leading African-American creative talent to bring the story to life: the acclaimed playwrights Ron Milner and Leslie Lee (ca. five years), then the director, Bill Duke (ca. three months), and then the editor John Carter (ca. seven months).

As was usual in Director's Guild public television contracts of that time, Duke was engaged for prep, principal photography and the first weeks of editing. As the series' executive producer, Rassbach had overall creative control, because she was setting the style for her proposed series via the pilot, as described by John J. O'Connor in his review of the television premiere of *The Killing Floor* for *The New York Times* in April 1984.

## Overview: The Four Phases of the Production

**1) HISTORICAL RESEARCH (1975 - 1978):** Rassbach's commitment to historical authenticity and her continuing close collaboration with historians, also in the screenwriting and editing phases of *The Killing Floor*, were key to achieving some of the qualities of the film that have been most acclaimed. The work with historians was supported by the lead funder of the labor history series, The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which provided development financing for the labor series in 1975 and again in 1977. Leading historians consulting on the series (such as Eric Foner, Herbert Gutman, Alice Kessler Harris, and David Brody), as well as the younger scholars working with the project, were well-versed in "the new social history", a major growth field of scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s that saw as its task: 1) documenting large structural changes; 2) reconstructing the experiences of ordinary people in the course of those changes; and (3) connecting the two.

The research team scoured historical archives, seeking original source material with dramatic potential for the planned series of ten films, above all documents that would shed light on individual personal experience: newspaper stories, diaries, letters, transcripts of trials and other official hearings in which working people had testified. Rassbach then wrote the series' stories under contract as a member of the Writers Guild, including an 80-page treatment for *The Killing Floor* that describes the main characters and plot development in story form. Professor David Brody became the leading historical advisor for *The Killing Floor*. He consulted with Rassbach during research and story-writing, and he also reviewed and made dramaturgically useful comments on each draft of the screenplay. (The source material for *The Killing Floor* is described on page 5.)

**2) SCREENPLAY (1978-1984):** In selecting the screenwriter(s) for *The Killing Floor*, Rassbach held individual discussions with several African-American writers who had read her story as the source material for the screenplay. In 1978, she engaged African-American playwright Ron Milner, who wrote a draft script that provided a richer psychological development of the central characters, Frank Custer and Austin "Heavy" Williams (including Heavy's song, "Down on the Killing Floor"). From 1979 through the post-production of the film in 1984, she worked closely with the Obie Award-winning African-American playwright and screenwriter, Leslie Lee. She wrote most dialogues of the white workers and officials, which he incorporated into the screenplay. Rassbach later engaged Lee to write a script on young white women working in a textile mill. The two became lifelong friends.

**3) PRODUCTION (1983):** After a suitable authentic "killing floor" location was found in Chicago, the production office was set up there in January 1983. The experienced low-budget line producer, George Manasse, who had prepared the production budgets, joined Rassbach in Chicago, as did Jim Dennett, an experienced DGA Unit Production Manager from California. Almost all remaining crew that were hired were living in or near Chicago. Based on the screenplay that had been set in consultation with historians, Rassbach interviewed several African-American DGA directors and selected Bill Duke. The two travelled to New York and LA to audition leading cast members but selected most of the cast from among the talented Chicago film, television and stage actors.

**4) POST-PRODUCTION & FURTHER SCREENWRITING (1983-1984):** After Bill Duke completed the ca. two-week television director's cut provided by the DGA contract, he had further television directing engagements. The African-American editor John Carter agreed to complete the editing working with Rassbach. The two agreed that it would be beneficial to restructure the

film somewhat during editing. They added material that had not been in the original screenplay, including:

- a voiceover narration of the lead character, Frank Custer. Rassbach directed Damien Leake's performance of the voiceover, which Leslie Lee wrote in consultation with her and John Carter;

- external film material, such as: authentic black and white documentary archival film of the period 1917-1919 to create historical "chapters"; establishing shots of some well-dressed period street scenes from Hollywood stock shot libraries; and color documentary material of the slaughterhouses that had been shot in the Chicago Stockyards before they were they were closed in 1971.

- titles at the beginning of the film to establish that the main characters were based on historic persons, as well as titles at the end of the film to inform the audience of the longer-term results of the efforts of the main characters and of what happened later in the lives of the characters about whom further information could be found in the historical record.

Rassbach supervised the sound mix, with music by Elizabeth Swados, as well as the final color grading of the 16 mm film. She delivered the film to PBS in March 1984, one week before her only child was born. He was just six days old when he watched with her the premiere on television.

## **Sources of *The Killing Floor* Characters and Story**

***Just as I got right at the gate, six or seven or eight Polacks grabbed a colored fellow out there and carried him on the wagon, and said, "You son of a bitch, you will join the union!"***

\*– Testimony of Joe Hodges, black stockyard worker, June 1919

***It seems as though they bring a bunch of colored men from Texas here to Chicago in order to break the power of the union...They are not only making agitators on that floor, but they are making them all over Chicago. ...Supposing race trouble starts, I am a colored man, and I love my family tree, and I ain't going to stand for no white man to come imposing on my color.***

\*–Testimony of Frank Custer, black stockyard worker and shop steward, June 1919

Rassbach literally followed up on a footnote of history to develop the story for a stirring drama about labor, race, and ethnic conflict among Polish, German and African-American workers in the World War I Era Chicago Stockyards – a conflict which erupted in the bloody Chicago Race Riot of 1919 and was repeated by white supremacist attacks (so-called "race riots") in cities throughout the U.S. in that year. She came across a provocative footnote in William Tuttle's landmark historical work, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*: In a 1919 government hearing in front of a white judge, one African-American slaughterhouse worker had screamed an expletive at another.

Curious about the background of this conflict between these two African-American workers, she located the obscure testimony on which the footnote was based in the National Archives. In thousands of pages of testimony before federal Samuel Alschuler in a hearing of the U.S. Labor

<p>*Source: U.S. Department of Labor Hearing: "Violation of Agreement by Employees," Hon. Samuel Alschuler, Arbitrator, June 20, 1919</p>
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Department, the characters of the film leapt out – among them Frank Custer, an African American labor organizer torn in a conflict between union activism and loyalty to friends like Austin "Heavy" Williams and his sidekick Joe Hodges, tough older black workers who trust no whites; and Bill Bremer, a German-American shop floor union leader who is trying to win the black workers to the concept of building a multiracial union for the first time in the Chicago Stockyards.

Through extensive further research in union newspapers of the time, government and journalist's reports on the "race riots" (including one by the poet, Carl Sandburg) and original letters of African-American migrants and Polish immigrants to Chicago, Rassbach reconstructed a "true story" of the first attempt to forge a multiracial meatpacker's union in the face of increasing racial violence.

Pieced together bit by bit, document by document, the story takes place approximately ten years after the events depicted in the renowned novel by Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. It is a story of men working with knives in the blood-soaked "killing floor" of the Wilson meatpacking company, men who increasingly had to fear for their own lives in the atmosphere of conflict and racial violence – a story which, according to *The London Evening Standard*, "mainline Hollywood hasn't tackled since the humanist talents of Kazan, Huston, Ray and Jules Dassin..."

The racial tension due to unemployment culminated in the Chicago Race Riot of 1919, through which the union effort, based on the concept of racial solidarity, was crushed. Nevertheless, as the film indicates, the efforts of black and white workers like Frank Custer, Bill Bremer, Robert Bedford, who are largely unknown in history books, sowed the seeds for the success, in the 1930s, of the American industrial union movement and later for the Civil Rights movement.

A search for surviving relatives of the film's authentic characters who worked on "the killing floor" (Frank Custer, "Heavy" Williams, and Bill Bremer, Robert Bedford and Dan Michora) was unsuccessful; their fate after the summer of 1919, when they testified before Judge Samuel Alschuler, remains unknown. This is why a title near the end of the film states that these characters "disappeared from the historical record," even though most or all of them likely lived on.

The film also portrays more well-known figures in the history of the American labor movement, such as John Fitzpatrick, head of the Chicago Federation of Labor; Dennis Lane, Secretary-Treasurer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America; and Jack Johnston, a radical young organizer from Scotland who later worked with the early U. S. Communist Party and then with Gandhi in India.

## **Financing the Production through Solidarity**

The complexity and difficulty of the research was only the first obstacle the project faced. In February 1980, shortly after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as U.S. President and Republicans had taken charge of the U.S. Senate, the labor series and its pilot production, *The Killing Floor*, became the object of a heated national debate. Stories were published in leading newspapers (such as *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*) on the issue of whether it would be appropriate for a series on the history of American workers to accept partial financing from U.S. labor unions.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) ultimately determined that it would be appropriate for the producers to accept up to one third of funding from unions, as the usual corporate underwriters for U.S. public television had initially not shown much interest in sponsoring the project. More than forty unions as well as Xerox and American Home Products Corporation made

contributions. The majority of funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the PBS *American Playhouse*, which offered a licensing agreement to showcase the pilot production of the labor series.

However, the funding received was not enough to produce *The Killing Floor* while paying normal union rates for the large cast and crew. In the end, the film could only be made due to the good will of the writers' and actors' guilds, WGA and SAG, and the production unions, IATSE and the Teamsters. They provided special conditions to the non-profit independent production company, Public Forum Productions, Ltd., for the production and distribution of the film so as to help tell an authentic story about the oppression of African-American workers. Thus, interracial solidarity played a key role throughout the production.

## On Location in Chicago

Many emerging talents received on *The Killing Floor* their first chance to work on a significant feature-length dramatic film: the Director Bill Duke, who has since made *Rage in Harlem*, *Sister Act II*, and *Deep Cover*; the Art Director/Production Designer Maher Ahmad, a theater set designer who became a top Hollywood production designer on films like *Goodfellas*, *Married to the Mob*, and *The Paper Chase*; the Chicago theatrical Costume Designer Kaye Nottbusch, who later designed the costumes for well-known films like *Sleepless in Seattle*; and the Cinematographer Bill Birch, an experienced Chicago news and documentary cameraman whose father, also a news cameraman, had founded the Chicago IATSE camera local.

Many actors who later became well-known had first or early feature film roles on the film, including Dennis Farina, John Mahoney, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Ted Levine, Wanda Christine, Patrick Nugent and Ernest Rayford. Due to strong interest in the subject matter of the film, *The Killing Floor* was also able to attract well-known stage and screen actors like Alfre Woodard, Moses Gunn, Clarence Felder, Mary Alice Smith and Damien Leake.

The historical and contemporary social situations dovetailed during shooting of *The Killing Floor*. Principal photography followed shortly upon the 1982 election of Harold Washington, the first African-American Chicago Mayor, and racial tensions in Chicago were again high. The African-American campaign workers for Washington served as extras for the film on a volunteer basis. Unemployed steelworkers from Chicago's South Side, many of them Polish, also volunteered, playing the many Polish workers in the Chicago Stockyards during the time the film takes place. In realistic fashion, Polish is scattered throughout the film's dialogue. Today, more people of Polish heritage live in Chicago than in any other city except for Warsaw. Henryk Derewenda, a Chicago actor who was previously a stage actor in Warsaw, plays the legendary Chicago Polish union organizer John Kikowski in the film.

Working conditions on the authentic Chicago "killing floor" where the film was shot were quite perilous. Animal blood made the floors dangerously slippery; frozen cow carcasses were constantly in danger of melting under the hot lights. As in the World War I era, the majority of the workers employed at the last existing Chicago killing floor in 1983, when the film was shot, were African-American migrants and Polish immigrants. Their tutoring of the actors added to the film's authenticity.

(More details about work on location can be found in Bill Duke's interview <i>The Moveable Fest</i> , on page 11.)
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<https://www.timeout.com/chicago/news/the-killing-floor-co-writer-elsa-rassbach-talks-about-the-significance-of-the-chicago-race-riot-of-1919>

## ***The Killing Floor* co-writer Elsa Rassbach talks about the significance of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919**

JULY 23, 2019 2:10 PM  
by MICHAEL GLOVER SMITH

One of the most important cinematic events taking place in Chicago this year is the Logan Center's preview screening of the 4K restoration of *The Killing Floor*. The locally made film, which originally aired on PBS in 1984 before screening at prestigious festivals like Sundance and Cannes, tells the true story of a poor black Southerner, Frank Custer (Damien Leake), who migrates from the rural south to Chicago in the early 20th century to work in a slaughterhouse. Upon arrival, he becomes involved in labor struggles involving a controversial and newly formed union, and eventually witnesses the notorious Race Riot of 1919. It's an important history lesson, a compelling drama and a lovingly recreated period piece all rolled into one. The screening will take place on July 27 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the riot and will be followed by a panel discussion with the film's producer and co-writer Elsa Rassbach as well as community and labor activists. We spoke with Rassbach in advance of the screening.

**Tell me about your background as an artist and activist and the production company you founded that produced *The Killing Floor*. How did you end up making an independent film about this important chapter in Chicago history?**

Though my family was neither left-wing nor union, I've been drawn to the struggle for social justice ever since high school, when we engaged in sit-ins at Woolworth's in my hometown, Denver, in protest against the firm's segregationist policies in the South. Following college in the U.S., I studied at the film academy in West Berlin, where people scoffed at the saying that "messages are for Western Union" and honored the work of politically committed artists like Berthold Brecht. My first short films were on feminist themes, but I soon developed a passionate interest in untold stories of history. I returned to the U.S. in 1972 and began reading more and more about the fascinating history of working people, who have played such an important role in our history, for which they have never been recognized. I found it astounding that I had never learned about these stories in school or college. Meanwhile I had been hired at the public television station in Boston, WGBH, to work on the first seasons of the *NOVA* series, and I received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a public television series on the history of the American labor movement. In William Tuttle's book about the Chicago Race Riot I happened upon a footnote in which I discovered the two main characters in *The Killing Floor*: Frank Custer and Heavy Williams. These two black men, who both worked on the killing floor of a Chicago slaughterhouse, were testifying before a white federal judge, and the two were entirely at odds with each other in how they viewed the causes of the mounting racism from which they were both suffering. I was drawn to the complexity – the race riot was of course not just about black people vs. white people. So I ordered from the National Archives the entire transcript of the hearing in which the two testified. All of the characters who work on "the killing floor" in our film, both black and white, leapt out of the thousands of pages of

testimony by a group of workers at the Wilson Meatpacking Company in June of 1919. I knew immediately that a film about them had to be made. I felt that the film needed not only to be dramatically compelling but also to be as accurate as possible – people should know this really happened. In the film the names of the main characters have remained the same as in the original testimony. And I founded a nonprofit production company to tell this story.

**Leslie Lee was already an Obie Award-winning playwright when you engaged him to write the screenplay but what made you feel that Bill Duke, a terrific director who at that point had only directed television episodes, was the right person to helm this project?**

Before I met Bill, I had worked closely with playwright Ron Milner and then with Leslie Lee on the script. Of the several directors I considered, Bill had the clearest and deepest understanding of what we wanted to achieve with the screenplay. I felt he had a visceral relationship with the characters. Beyond his experience directing action-packed television episodes, such as *Hill Street Blues*, Bill is also an alumnus of the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, which is known for producing plays about complex, sometimes disturbing, and often ignored aspects of the black experience and the American experience. Leslie Lee later became the company's executive director. And many of the fine actors in the film had also been involved in the Negro Ensemble Company, including Moses Gunn, Alfre Woodard, Stephen Henderson, and Mary Alice. I felt that Bill was right for this project, and he even surpassed my expectations. He was able to handle the complex logistics of the film, which among other things involved shooting in a real killing floor where cattle were still being slaughtered in Chicago. He was also able to hold to the emotional core of this complex material throughout, directing fine, subtle and compelling performances that give the twists and turns of the story authenticity and dramatic power.

**When I interviewed Duke a few years ago, he mentioned that Harold Washington was elected at the same time shooting on the film began, which felt auspicious for the production. Can you talk a little about what the atmosphere was like in Chicago, politically and otherwise, at that time?**

I was so absorbed in producing the film that I was not out and about much in Chicago. But I was quite astounded and grateful at how much support we received to make this film. It was support that we desperately needed, because we really did not have enough money to do what we were trying to do. People who had worked on Harold Washington's election campaign organized hundreds of volunteers who were willing to be extras in the film, and a steelworkers local on the South Side led by Ed Sadlowski did the same. Per an agreement with the Chicago entertainment unions, virtually everyone who had a paid job on the film deferred half of normal guild or union wages to make the production feasible on our scant budget. Not only the entire cast, but also the lighting crew, the makeup and hair stylists, and the Teamster drivers, among others, deferred half their wages, and we on the production staff did the same. In 1983, the workers at the Lincoln Meat Corporation in Chicago, where we shot the killing floor scenes, were mainly southern blacks or Poles just like the killing floor workers in 1919. They volunteered for many hours to teach our actors the ropes of working in a slaughterhouse. It was two and a half years since Ronald Reagan had taken office as President. People were already feeling the impact of the plans to decimate the American labor movement, and to some supporting the film was one way of pushing back.

**The screening at the Logan Center will take place on the 100th anniversary of the 1919 Race Riot. Do you see any parallels between the era depicted in your film and the present day? Are there lessons in the film that you feel are particularly relevant to contemporary viewers?**

I don't know about lessons, but *The Killing Floor* explores an era that does have some important parallels to our own time. U.S. unions had been pretty much crushed in the 1890s. The film is set twenty-five years later, during and after World War I, when people were still searching for a way to reorganize and develop some bargaining power – for the sake of human dignity and democracy as well as to improve material conditions. When people do not have their own strong organizations bringing them together in a spirit of solidarity, competition for "the crumbs" begins. In the battle for scant resources, people can easily be set against each other, and racism mounts. Following the severe attacks on the labor movement that began in the McCarthy Era and have intensified in the 1980s until this day, we are now experiencing a truly frightening rise in racism reminiscent of 1919. This is happening not only in the U.S., but also in Europe, where migrants and refugees from the Global South are competing for resources in northern cities. It is important to realize that while the protagonists in *The Killing Floor* were not able to prevail in their struggle for solidarity in 1919, their work sowed the seeds for important victories only 15 years later, in the 1930s, when benefits and reforms were won that we still enjoy today. Now we are in a time when we have a long way to go to rebuild the strength of the people's organizations. Both courage and patience are called for.

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<http://moveablefest.com/bill-duke-killing-floor/>

## Interview: Bill Duke on the Strength of Solidarity in *The Killing Floor*

**On the ongoing relevance of his debut feature about the unionization drive at a Chicago meatpackers' plant, now seen in its full glory thanks to a new restoration.**

JUNE 19, 2020 10:07 PM  
by STEPHEN SAITO

Bill Duke can still remember when Chicago elected its first African-American mayor Harold Washington in April of 1983. The actor/director had been in town to shoot his first feature *The Killing Floor*, but it had been hard to concentrate when no matter where you were in the city, the streets were trembling just beneath.

“The night that people found out he had been elected, I can’t describe it,” recalls Duke, sharing one of the few good stories he left out of his beautiful memoir *My 40-Year Career on Screen and Behind the Camera*. “When I say people, I’m talking about hundreds and thousands of people running down the street, screaming and shouting, it was like Obama time. The streets went crazy – for days.”

As it happened, more than a few of Washington’s supporters had shown up to appear as extras in *The Killing Floor*, a drama recounting the push to unionize the Chicago stockyards in the late 1910s through the eyes of a young African-American organizer named Frank Custer (Damien Leake), which only gave further credence to Duke’s idea that despite all the period-appropriate set dressing and costumes, he was hardly making a film about the past.

Recently restored by the UCLA Film and Television Archive and made available for the first time digitally this week by Film Movement after being long out of circulation, the film feels more timely than ever as it observes how the colors of black and white are superseded by green as the workers who spend countless hours butchering and cleaning up after cow carcasses aren’t treated much better than the meat they process and a coalition forms between those who find that the promise of greater opportunity in Chicago, whether it’s African-Americans relocating from the South or immigrants from Poland and Ireland who may not get stopped by cops as frequently as their co-workers yet nonetheless are marginalized due to their tenuous citizenship status. Still, one faction of the workforce was more welcome than the other into the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butchers Workmen of North America and Custer’s disorientation from being recruited to fight for a common cause while feeling unequal is vividly depicted, showcasing Duke’s keen eye for telling provocative stories with visuals that cut through the complexities as well as for talent when there’s a slew of early featured roles for Alfre Woodard as Custer’s wife, Stephen McKinley Henderson as a local fixer, the late Dennis Farina as a stockyard manager and the late John Mahoney as a company middleman.

*The Killing Floor* was initially intended to be the first in a series of films about the labor movement in America spearheaded by Elsa Rassbach, but the single production was a struggle enough, with the producer taking seed money from her connections in public television and

ultimately securing its release through American Playhouse, but building a budget from contributions made by union locals across the country. The road to release may have been difficult, but the result is uncompromised, likely part of why it remains so arresting even today and as the revival opens in virtual cinemas this week, Duke took a moment to reflect on recapturing this history so richly on a shoestring budget, the benefits of having such a strong cast and how the past year has brought a new appreciation of his films including his two collaborations with Laurence Fishbone *Deep Cover* and *Hoodlum*.

### **How did you get interested in this?**

Its universal theme. It dealt with a family, it dealt with discrimination. It dealt with the labor union being created. It dealt with blacks and whites coming together for one purpose. These are all themes that I related to and when I read the script, it's definitely something I wanted to do. I had worked on several things at PBS and Elsa [Rassbach] saw that and we talked. We had a similar vision of the film and we got together and the rest is history.

### **What was it like putting actual history on screen?**

As a period piece, it's always interesting. We had a location scout who understood cost of shooting, which is when you have a small budget, the biggest thing you have is the move – moving from one set to another – so if we were shooting in one neighborhood, he could find a house in that same neighborhood for the interiors and then if you're going to drive around the block, you can get in a car and drive around the same block, so that helped us not move and be efficient in terms of the way we were shooting. And I wanted to be able to go and dress the street, but we just didn't have the budget, so stock footage was very important for us and we used as much of it as we could afford. But a lot of it we created ourselves — the [cinematographer], the writers and myself, we came up with ideas that gave it an authenticity visually based on the budget we had.

### **Was it tricky to recreate an authentic stockyards?**

At that time, there were still slaughterhouses in Chicago, but we had to redress things. When I was doing my scouting, I had never seen a cow slaughtered before and cut open and the guts dropping and then the skin coming off of it...you know, it made me want to be a vegetarian. [laughs]

### **What was it like getting a cast for this?**

We brought some names on, but there's a lot of local talent in Chicago, so our auditions were great. We were very, very fortunate – the great Moses Gunn and Alfre Woodard and other people, that was a gift. The limited budget for a period piece is not always easy, but when we had great actors, after the second take, it was so good, you didn't really need to do three or four or five or six takes. We didn't. That's what saved us the actors.

### **I was so taken with how the power dynamics were reflected in the blocking of scenes – did you have strong ideas about how to shoot this from the start?**

Yes, at that time, I wanted to do almost like a documentary style and not having the camera too imposing, but really observing the phenom of what was occurring more than interfering with it and being too tricky with the camera. I didn't want attention brought to the camera. I wanted attention brought to the story.

**What was it like presiding over those big crowd scenes at the union protests and rallies?**

[laughs] Challenging, but thank God I had a great staff and a great first AD working with the extras because handling that, no one person can do it. No matter what a director tells you, if [they] don't have an infrastructure that can do that, you're not going to survive. It's too many people, but luckily we had great staff. And the history that was made at that time by workers, just the common man coming together, was wonderful. What's fortunate and unfortunate is that some things have changed, but as you see today, some things have not, so the film still has relevance in terms of unemployment market, in terms of the unions, in terms of a lot of things, so it's an ongoing challenge.

**It was interesting for me to connect this to *Hoodlum*, the first film of yours I saw as a director where you see gangsters Bumpy Johnson, Lucky Luciano and Dutch Schultz having it out with each other, but the inference is they all work in the underworld since America won't have them above ground. Since this pre-civil rights period for Black Americans is rarely covered in Hollywood filmmaking, was this era always of interest to you?**

Yes, of course, and seeing people that thought they had opposite positions come together for one cause. That was exciting for me. They had different causes, they thought, but they were under one rule and when they realized that they could come together and march together and did things together, that was exciting and it's relevant still for today.

**This was the start of a wonderful directing career in features. Did you feel it was sustainable after making *The Killing Floor*?**

Well, it's not a kind business. You're only as good as your last job, so when you finish something you're thinking, "Mmmm, I hope this gets me my next job." You're not guaranteed that, but you always are grateful for being able to work and this led to other opportunities, let's put it that way.

**With the revival of this and the retrospective at the Metrograph and the recent celebration of *Deep Cover*, has it been nice to see your work appreciated today?**

It's been wonderful. It's my legacy, so to have people celebrate my work and appreciate it has been a blessing to me on so many levels, I cannot tell you. It's been a very positive thing and I'm grateful for that.

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## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

### DAMIEN LEAKE – "Frank Custer"

**Damien Leake (born August 12, 1952)** is one of the most versatile performers on the American theater scene. He has performed as an actor/ singer/ dancer/ director/ musician/ composer/ musical director/ vocal arranger/ playwright/ stage fight choreographer and ventriloquist at various points in his 50-year career. As an actor he has appeared on Broadway in: *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Whose Life is it Anyway?* and August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Off Broadway in: *Black Eagles*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*. He has performed in regional theaters throughout the country in a variety of classical, contemporary, dramatic and comedic roles, including Othello for Portland Stage and Prospero in *The Tempest* for PCPA. On Television he has appeared as Dr. Kenneth Clark in *Separate but Equal*, and the daytime dramas *As the World Turns*, *General Hospital*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Also in *Married with Children*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *The Cosby Show*, *New York Undercover*, *Ask Harriet*, *Family Law*, *Boston Legal*, *Resurrection Boulevard*, *Boomtown*, *Numbers*, *Nip/Tuck*, *CSI Miami*, *The West Wing*, *Without a Trace*, *Eleventh Hour*, *Prison Break*, *Men of a Certain Age*, *The Mentalist*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Good Girls* and *NCIS*. His film credits include *Serpico*, *Sea of Love*, *Born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July*, *He Said She Said*, *The Cotton Club*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Devil's Own*, *Mighty Joe Young*, *88 Minutes*, *The Experiment*, *The Great Debaters*, and *Breaking In*. Also included is one of his most intense and rewarding experiences as a film actor, playing Frank Custer the independent film *The Killing Floor*. A self-taught musician/composer, his first musical *Child of the Sun* won the Richard Rodgers Production Award. His other compositions are *Living in the Rhythm Section* and *Drip by Drip by Leake*. He has authored the dramatic plays *Till Sundown Tomorrow (Stories My Father Told Me)* and *We Boys*. He is currently working on a new musical *The Ghost of Johnny Hero*. He is also a world class Master's Track and Field athlete, competing in the 100 and 200 meters as well as long jump with multiple national championships and a World Record to his credit. And is most proud of the young athletes he coaches in his spare time.

### ALFRE WOODARD – "Mattie"

**Alfre Woodard (born November 8, 1952)** is an American actress, producer, and political activist. She has been named one of the most versatile and accomplished actors of her generation. She has been nominated once for an Academy Award and Grammy Award and 18 times for an Emmy Award (winning four) and has also won a Golden Globe Award and three Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Woodard began her acting career in theater. After her breakthrough role in the Off-Broadway play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1977), she made her film debut in *Remember My Name* (1978). In 1983, she won major critical praise and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Cross Creek*. In the same year, Woodard won her first Primetime Emmy Award for her performance in the NBC drama series *Hill Street Blues*. Later in the 1980s, Woodard had leading Emmy Award-

nominated performances in a number of made for television movies, and another Emmy-winning role as a woman dying of leukaemia in the pilot episode of *L.A. Law*. She also starred as Dr. Roxanne Turner in the NBC medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, for which she was nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in 1986, and for Guest Actress in 1988.

In the 1990s, Woodard starred in films such as *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Heart and Souls* (1993), *Crooklyn* (1994), *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995), *Primal Fear* (1996) and *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996). She also drew critical praise for her performances in the independent dramas *Passion Fish* (1992), for which she won an Independent Spirit Award and was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actress, as well as *Down in the Delta* (1998). For her lead role in the HBO film *Miss Evers' Boys* (1997), Woodard won Golden Globe, Emmy, Screen Actors Guild, and several other awards. In later years, she has appeared in several blockbusters, like *K-PAX* (2001), *The Core* (2003), and *The Forgotten* (2004), starred in independent films, and won her fourth Emmy Award for *The Practice* in 2003. From 2005 to 2006, Woodard starred as Betty Applewhite in the ABC comedy-drama series *Desperate Housewives*, and later starred in several short-lived series. She appeared in the films *The Family That Preys* (2008), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Annabelle* (2014), and *Juanita* (2019), and has also worked as a political activist and producer. In 2019, she received critical acclaim for her performance in the drama film *Clemency*. Woodard is a founder of Artists for a New South Africa, an organization devoted to advancing democracy and equality in that country. She is a board member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

(Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfre\\_Woodard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfre_Woodard))

## MOSES GUNN – "Austin 'Heavy' Williams"

**Moses Gunn (1929 – 1993)** was a leading actor of his generation who played a wide variety of roles on the stage, in films, and on television in a career that spanned more than 30 years. Gunn was perhaps best known as a Shakespearean actor, taking part in many productions of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Despite his status as a leading player on the stage, however, Gunn most often played supporting roles in the movies and on television, limited by the few parts available to black men.

Gunn was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the eldest of seven children. His father was a laborer. At the age of nine, Gunn demonstrated talent in the field that would eventually become his life's work when he began performing dramatic readings. Three years later, after his mother died, Gunn went to live with a foster family, headed by James and Jewel Richie. His foster mother taught English and diction, and she encouraged Gunn to develop his talents.

As a senior in high school, Gunn was offered six college scholarships, choosing to attend Tennessee State University. While studying there, he majored in speech and drama and helped to found a group of student actors called Footlights Across Tennessee, which toured black colleges throughout the South and the Midwest, performing classic plays, modern works,

and comedies written in dialect by black playwrights. Gunn served in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1957. He earned his degree from Tennessee State in 1959.

Gunn attended graduate school at the University of Kansas, where he first played the title role in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. His first role in the 1960s was that of an understudy in an Off-Broadway production of French playwright Jean Genet's *The Blacks* in 1962. Following this break, Gunn landed a part in a second New York play, called *In White America*, which ran from 1963 to 1964. Also in 1964, the actor took part in a regional theater festival in Antioch, Ohio, playing a variety of Shakespearean roles. His Broadway debut was in *A Hand is on the Gate*, an evening of African-American poetry. Gunn made his film debut in 1964 in the movie *Nothing but a Man*.

The following year, Gunn acted in the New York play *Day of Absence*, and in his first New York production of Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*. During the mid-and late 1960s, Gunn gained a reputation as a first-rate interpreter of Shakespearean roles, taking part in a number of productions at the New York Shakespeare Festival, run by legendary producer Joseph Papp. In 1967 Gunn won an off-Broadway Obie award for his portrayal of Aaron the Moor in a production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. At the same time, he helped to found a new group of actors, the Negro Ensemble Company. By the end of the 1960s, Gunn had firmly established himself as a leading dramatic player.

In 1968 Gunn appeared in two Shakespeare productions, *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*, as well as a play called *Sky of the Blind Pig*. Gunn further enhanced his career in the movies by taking supporting roles in the 1970 films *WUSA* and *The Great White Hope*.

In the early 1970s, he portrayed the mobster Ellsworth Raymond in *Shaft* (1971), and *Shaft's Big Score* (1972). He began to make his way onto the small screen, acting in the television movie *Haunts of the Very Rich* in 1972, in addition to work on the series *Kung Fu*.

In 1975 Gunn won a second Obie award, for his work in Leslie Lee's play, *First Breeze of Summer*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company. A year later, this play was presented as a dramatic special on television. His work on *First Breeze* was bracketed by his participation in another play, the Broadway production *The Poison Tree*, in 1973 and again in 1976, for which he was nominated for a Tony Award as best actor. In 1977 he took part in the groundbreaking television epic *Roots* playing Kintango, the leader of a 17th-century secret African sect that preserved and performed the rights of manhood, for which he won an Emmy nomination.

Gunn continued to appear in movies, plays, and television shows throughout the 1980s. In 1981, his portrayal of Booker T. Washington in the film *Ragtime* won him an NAACP Image Award. He played the character Austin 'Heavy' Williams in the Sundance-Award winning independent film, *The Killing Floor*, that premiered in 1984. That year he also had supporting roles in the films *Firestarter* and *The NeverEnding Story*, playing Cairon, the Childlike Empress' imperial physician. Two years later, he completed *Heartbreak Ridge*.

In the late 1980s Gunn joined a theater group called Actor's Enclave, a non-profit company of well-established actors dedicated to serious theater. He also began to pursue stage work in regional theater, such as the Yale Repertory Theater, where he acted in plays by prize-winning South African playwright Athol Fugard, including *Blood Knot* and *My Children, My Africa* in the early 1990s. On the West Coast, he appeared at the Los Angeles Theater Center. It was there that he took part in *Fool for Love*, winning a second NAACP Image Award. Gunn also turned to off-Broadway plays in New York. In 1988, he took the leading role in the Hudson Guild Theatre's

production of *Tapman*. Later that year, Gunn acted in an experimental version of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at the New York Public Theater.

In addition, Gunn took a wide variety of roles on television series, appearing on the situation comedies *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons* in the 1970s and 1980s and the police dramas *NYPD Blue* and *Homicide* in the 1990s, among other programs during the years. Gunn continued to work into his sixties, stepping down from the stage only when forced to by illness. In 1989, Gunn appeared in two episodes of *The Cosby Show* as two different characters. His final acting role was as murder suspect Risley Tucker in "Three Men and Adena", an episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street*.

(Sources: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/gunn-moses-1929-1993> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses\\_Gunn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Gunn))

## CLARENCE FELDER – "Bremer"

**Clarence Felder (born September 2, 1938)** is an American character actor who has starred in films and on television, and co-starred in ten Broadway productions. He is also a playwright and director. His play *Captain Felder's Cannon* was adapted as the feature film *All for Liberty* (2009), in which he starred.

### Overview of career

Felder's first feature film performance was in *Man on a Swing* (1974); his other films include *After Hours* (1985), *Ruthless People* (1986), *The Hidden* (1987), *The Last Boy Scout* (1991), and *The Ride* (1997). He stars in the award-winning feature film *All for Liberty* (2009), portraying his ancestor, Capt. Henry Felder, an American Revolutionary War hero of the Backcountry of South Carolina. It was based on his play *Captain Felder's Cannon*.

His starring role on a television series was as Insp. Bobo Pritzger in ABC's 1980s hit series *Hooperman*. Felder has starred in many TV movies, including *Playing for Time*, *The Mystery of the Morro Castle*, and *The Killing Floor*. He has made numerous guest appearances on primetime TV series, including *Kojak*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Alien Nation*, *Dream On*, *L.A. Law*, and *NYPD Blue*.

On Broadway, Felder co-starred with Christopher Walken in *Macbeth*, with Glenn Close in *Love for Love*, Colleen Dewhurst in *Queen & the Rebels*, and Meryl Streep in *Memory of Two Mondays*. He played Debbie Harry's father in *Teaneck Tanzi*.

He is the co-founder of Actors' Theatre of South Carolina and their film division, Moving Images Group.

### Personal life

Felder was born and grew up in St. Matthews, South Carolina, where his family had deep historical roots. He went away to college and became involved in acting, spending much of his career in Hollywood. He is married to actress/writer/director, Chris Weatherhead. He has one daughter, Helen Huggins.

## ERNEST RAYFORD – "Thomas Joshua"

**Ernest Rayford (deceased ca. 2017)** was an African-American stage and screen actor.

His first roles were in the 1980 short film, *Answer*, and in the 1982 Cheech and Chong comedy, *Things Are Tough All Over*, directed by Thomas K. Avildsen in Chicago. In the early 1980s, he also played roles in several Chicago stage productions.

In *The Killing Floor*, Rayford played Thomas Joshua, who travels north to Chicago together with Frank Custer (Damien Leake), joins the U.S. Army to fight in Europe, and is killed in Chicago during the 1919 Race Riot.

In 1987, Rayford appeared in *Nothing but a Lie*, a play written and directed by Nancy Rawles and presented by Chicago Theater Company. He played Sam in the 1990 Chicago film *Love Your Mama*, written and directed by Ruby Oliver, and was Spencer in the 2001 film *30 Years to Life*. He was Cecil Jiggs in the 1993 independent film, *Let's Get Bizzee*, and also appeared in *Far from Heaven* (2002), *Inside Man* (2006), and *Five Minarets in New York* (2010).

Rayford's last role was as Josh the Waiter in the film *BlackKkKlansman*, directed by Spike Lee and released in 2018.

(Sources: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0713133/> and <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-09-17-8703100625-story.html> and [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/ernest\\_rayford](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/ernest_rayford))

## DENNIS FARINA – "Supervisor"

**Dennis Farina (1944 – 2013)** was an American film and television actor, TV presenter, narrator and former Chicago police officer. He was born and raised in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood, a working-class neighborhood with a broad ethnic mixture, with Italians and Germans predominant.

Before becoming an actor, Farina served for three years in the United States Army during the Vietnam Era, followed by 18 years in the Chicago Police Department's burglary division from 1967 to 1985. He was hired as an expert burglary consultant by director Michael Mann for the movie *Thief* (1981), who then cast Farina in a bit part in the movie. Farina then started moonlighting as an actor in Chicago theaters and in small roles in Chicago-based TV-movie productions.

Farina was still working in the Chicago Police Department when he played the supervisor, Harry, on a slaughterhouse "kill floor" in the independent film, *The Killing Floor*, shot in Chicago in 1983. The film premiered in 1984 on PBS in prime time and won a Sundance Film Festival award in 1985.

Mann brought Farina on for guest appearances in the first seasons of his *Miami Vice* series, which premiered in 1984, playing Al Lombard in the episodes "One Eyed Jack" and "Lombard" and in the fifth season in "World of Trouble." Farina also played FBI Agent Jack Crawford in Mann's 1986 film, *Manhunter*, and in Mann's *Crime Story* series, which aired on NBC from 1986 to 1988. He appeared in two television network miniseries based on Joe McGinnis's true-crime books, *Blind Faith* (1990) and *Cruel Doubt* (1992).

Farina played a baseball manager in the 1994 film, *Little Big League*, won an American Comedy Award as best supporting actor for his performance as "Bones" Barboni in the 1995 film, *Get Shorty*, and played in the 1996 comedy, *Eddie*, starring Whoopi Goldberg. In a leading-man role and a departure from his usual parts, he co-starred in 1997 with Bette Midler in a romantic comedy, *That Old Feeling*, directed by Carl Reiner.

In Steven Spielberg's 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*, Farina played the battalion commander who advises Capt. John Miller (Tom Hanks) of the mission which forms the basis of the film's plot. In 1998, he also played the mob boss Jimmy Serrano in *Midnight Run* and starred as the title character in *Buddy Faro*, a private-detective series on CBS. In 2000 he played "Cousin" Avi Denovitz in *Snatch*.

In 2002 he appeared in *Stealing Harvard*, a comedy in which he played a tough-talking, overprotective father-in-law. He also starred in a television sitcom, *In-Laws*, from 2002 until 2003. From 2004 to 2006, he played Detective Joe Fontana in the television series *Law & Order*. Working as a voice-actor beginning in early 2005, he provided the voice of aging boxer-turned-superhero in *Justice League Unlimited*. He had a comic role opposite Ed Harris and Helen Hunt in the HBO production of *Empire Falls* in 2005. He played in the 2007 film, *You Kill Me*, opposite Ben Kingsley, and in the 2008 films, *What Happens in Vegas* and *Bottle Shock*. From 2008 to 2010 he was the new host of *Unsolved Mysteries* on Spike TV. He then played the title role in a 2011 independent film, *The Last Rites of Joe May*, written and directed by Joe Maggio, shot on location in Chicago. He co-starred in the 2012 HBO horse-race gambling series *Luck*, with Dustin Hoffman, directed by Michael Mann. In early 2013, he voiced the father of Daffy Duck's girlfriend on *The Looney Tunes Show*. He had a recurring guest role in 2013 in the television comedy series *New Girl*, though his character was killed off prior to his death.

He played himself in one of his final acting roles in the animated series *Family Guy* called "The Most Interesting Man in the World," which aired posthumously in 2014. Also released after his death was the film *Authors Anonymous*, in which he was one of the stars, playing a "wannabe" novelist with a fantasy of becoming another Tom Clancy. Farina's last film role was as an aging Italian playboy in a film version of the Off-Broadway musical *Lucky Stiff* co-starring Dominic Marsh, Nikki M. James, and Jason Alexander. The film, also released posthumously in 2014, was dedicated to his memory.

(Sources: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis\\_Farina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Farina) and [https://miamivice.fandom.com/wiki/Dennis\\_Farina](https://miamivice.fandom.com/wiki/Dennis_Farina))

## CREW BIOGRAPHIES

### BILL DUKE – Director

**Bill Duke** is an Actor, Director and Producer in Hollywood with more than 40 years of experience on screen and behind the camera.

His acting credits include recent television and feature film roles in shows like *Black Lightning*, the critically acclaimed new film, *Mandy*, and the highly anticipated Stephen Soderbergh film, *High Flying Bird*. He is also known for roles in *Predator*, *American Gigolo*, *Car Wash*, *Action Jackson*, *Commando*, *Menace II Society*, *Bird on a Wire*, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, *X-Men 3*, *Henry's Crime*, *The Big Bang*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Fastlane*, *Karen Sisco* and *Lost*.

He is known for his directing prowess and agility in television and film, with credits including television series *Falcon Crest*, *Fame*, *Hill Street Blues*, and PBS' *The Killing Floor*, for which he won the Sundance Special Jury Award in 1985.

The accolades continued with a feature film directorial debut in 1991 for *A Rage in Harlem*, which was an official selection of the Cannes Film Festival and a contender for the prestigious Palme d'Or. This global recognition led to further opportunities including directing feature films: *Sister Act 2*, *Deep Cover*, *Hoodlum*, *The Cemetery Club*, *Cover*, *Not Easily Broken* and the documentary *Dark Girls*, which aired on OWN and succeeded as one of the most successful programs in the network's history. Most recently, Bill directed the feature film, *Created Equal* and is currently working on the documentary, *Never Stop*, about the adoption and foster care systems. Bill's autobiography, *Bill Duke: My 40-Year Career on Screen and Behind the Camera*, was released in 2018.

Throughout the course of his career, he has been recognized by prestigious leaders and institutions for his work in television and film. He was appointed to the National Endowment of Humanities by President Bill Clinton and the Board of the California State Film Commission by Former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. He has also served on the Board of Trustees at the American Film Institute and as the Time Warner Endowed Chair in the Department of Radio Television and Film at Howard University. He was also recognized by his peers with a Lifetime Achievement Tribute from the Directors Guild of America's African-American Steering Committee in 2010.

In addition to working on creative projects in Hollywood, Bill created Duke Media Entertainment to bring quality "Edutainment" to audiences around the globe. He has coined the word to symbolize entertainment that also includes and an educational element for its audiences. Formerly Yagya Productions, Duke Media has successfully produced critically acclaimed film and television content for more than 30 years. Additionally, Duke Media is in process of expanding the brand to involve itself in the development of new media technologies, i.e. cell phone apps, games, and virtual world experiences. Since the early 70s, Bill Duke along with industry veterans Michael Shultz and Gordon Parks, have long paved the way for the furtherance African American actors, writers, directors, and producers in the entertainment and technology industries.

Giving back has been a large part of Bill's Hollywood legacy, too. Bill also runs the Duke Media Foundation, which for the last ten years has prepared youth for the future by exposing them to specific new media tools and financial literacy tools that will enable them to compete, survive and thrive. The economy is experiencing a paradigm shift far beyond film and TV to media. Film and TV are still important parts of the entertainment landscape, however new media content has shifted into virtual worlds, games, cell phone apps, mobile TV, animation and webisodes. So, he encourages students to explore and master new technology as it emerges and evolves.

The Youth Media Camp is the inaugural project of the Duke Media Foundation. The camp is a training and educational program that teaches youth the trade and craft of media production which includes film and video production, screenwriting, producing, directing and editing. The camp has helped youth develop the art of storytelling by using media tools.

### **LESLIE LEE – Screenwriter**

Tony-Nominated Playwright, **Leslie Lee**, a highly esteemed playwright of national and international reputation, was born in Bryn Mawr, PA. Writing widely for Theatre, Television and Film, he lived and worked for most of his professional life in NYC.

After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology and English from The University of Pennsylvania, he worked for several years in cancer research at Wyeth Laboratories in Villanova, PA. He earned his Master of Arts degree in Theatre from Villanova University. A much sought after and admired teacher of dramatic writing, Mr. Lee taught for The Goldberg Department of Dramatic Writing Program at the NYU Tisch School the Arts, MiddleSex Community College, Hunter College, Wesleyan College, Rutgers University, The New School University, Goddard College, The Negro Ensemble Company, and The Frederick Douglas Playwriting Workshop. In 2008, the U.S. Department of State sent Mr. Lee as a Cultural Envoy to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe to teach Playwriting at the Intwasa Arts Festival.

His many plays include: *The First Breeze of Summer*, *Black Eagles*; *Elegy to a Down Queen*; *Between Now and Then*; *The Book of Lambert*; *Colored People's Time*; *The Ninth Wave*; *Blues in a Broken Tongue*; *Legends*; *Mina*; *Sundown Names and Night-Gone Things*; *The War Party*; *The Rabbit's Foot*, a new version of the musical *Golden Boy* with songs by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams; *Phyllis*, a musical in collaboration with Micki Grant, and an adaptation of August Strindberg's play, *Playing with Fire*. He most recently wrote *Apples and Oranges*, *Cherokee Rose*, and a musical about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., titled *Before the Dream*, in collaboration with composer/lyricist Charles Strouse, which had a recent pre-production reading in New York.

His acclaimed play, *The First Breeze of Summer*, originally produced by The Negro Ensemble Company, won an OBIE Award for Best New American Play and the Outer Critics Circle Award. Subsequently, the play was produced at the Palace Theatre on Broadway, where it received a Tony Nomination for Best Play, and was filmed and presented for the PBS *Great Performances* Series. It enjoyed a successful 2008 revival with The Signature Theatre Company, starring Leslie Uggams.

His Television and Film projects include: an adaptation of Richard Wright's short story, *Almos' a Man*, with LeVar Burton, selected by the U.S. Department of State and shown at the Ionesco Film Festival in Paris; *The Killing Floor* with Alfre Woodard and Moses Gunn for *American Playhouse* PBS, winner Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Award; a co-adaptation, with Gus Edwards, of James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*; *Two Mothers, Two Sons*; *The Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth Regiment*; *Langston Hughes: The Dreamkeeper*, a documentary for PBS; *Summer Father*; *Ralph Bunch: An American Odyssey*; and *Born to Trouble: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, written in collaboration with Jill Janows and nominated for best documentary writing by the Writers Guild of America. Further TV work includes, *The Vernon Johns Story* with James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, and scripts for the NBC soap opera *Another World*. His 2009 travel to St. Petersburg, Russia, to conduct research for his screenplay on Alexander Pushkin, titled *Pushkin*, was sponsored by a Likhachev Foundation Cultural Fellowship.

Mr. Lee's other prestigious awards include, the Arthur Miller Outstanding Playwright's Award from the University of Michigan, the National Black Theater Festival August Wilson Playwriting Award, the Isabelle Strickland Award for Excellence in the Field of the Arts, and the Joe A. Callahan Award. He received a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Fellowship, a Shubert Foundation Playwriting Grant, and a Mississippi TV Award. He received special mention for an award among Black Film-Makers. He was honored with The Knights of Columbus and Kappa Alpha Psi Awards, and on the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts Walk of Fame. Mr. Lee was named a Kentucky Colonel. Most recently his career was celebrated by two Audelco Awards and the NAACP Image Award.

A longtime member of New Dramatists, he has served as head of its Alumni Association. He was a founding artist of La MaMa e.t.c., and an active playwright since the 1970s for The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). Recently he has been the Executive Director of NEC and a Playwright-in-Residence with The Signature Theatre Company. He directed three plays by Sophia Romma: *Coyote Take Me There*, *Defenses of Prague*, and *Sickle*. The Black Rep in St. Louis and Crossroads Theatre Company in New Jersey, among countless others, have produced many of his plays.

The long and successful career of playwright Leslie Lee has enriched media, artists and audiences. He is beloved and celebrated for his writing, teaching and sharing of ideas and stories that profoundly explore the many challenges involved in efforts to attain human equality, respect and love. His vision is an inspiration, greatly celebrated and loved. It will endure.

(Source: Leslie Lee Legacy Foundation: <http://www.leslieleelegacy.org/menu>)

## RON MILNER – Adaptation

**Ron Milner (1938 – 2004)** was a playwright, writer, editor, critic, and director who was known affectionately as the “people's playwright” for his ongoing commitment to using Black theater for the advancement of Black people.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, Milner graduated from Detroit's Northeastern High School. He attended Highland Park Junior College, Detroit Institute of Technology, and Columbia University in New York. He then received two prestigious literary grants, the John Hay Whitney Fellowship (1962) and a Rockefeller Fellowship (1965), to work on a novel, *The Life of the Brothers Brown*, which has never been published. Milner has also taught widely and was writer in residence at Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) from 1966 to 1967, where his friendship with Langston Hughes, who urged him to use a personal voice in his writing, matured.

His first major play, *Who's Got His Own*, premiered in Harlem in 1967. Together with his friend, the producer Woodie King, he joined the American Place Theatre, where *Who's Got His Own* and *The Warning: A Theme for Linda* (1969, published in *A Black Quartet: Four New Black Plays*, 1970) were conceived and performed. *What the Wine-Sellers Buy*, which earned over a million dollars in 1974, deals with a young Black man choosing between good and evil while simultaneously addressing the issue of Black male responsibility.

From 1979 to 1981 Milner lived in California, teaching creative writing at the University of Southern California and doing community work. He then returned to his hometown, Detroit. Milner's *Roads of the Mountaintops* (1986) deals with the internal struggle of Martin Luther King, Jr., following his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. *Checkmates* (1987), which starred Denzel Washington, portrays the potential strength of Black love. *Don't Get God Started* (1988) is a gospel-tinged musical play done for the family singing group the Winans.

A lesser-known work from Milner's career is his short story “Junkie Joe Had Some Money,” which was anthologized in Langston Hughes's *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967). Milner's other published plays include *The Monster* (*Drama Review*, 1968), *M(ego) and the Green Ball of Freedom* (*Black World*, 1968), and *What the Wine-Sellers Buy* (*Samuel French*, 1974). In “Black Magic, Black Art” (*Negro Digest*, Apr. 1967; *Black Poets and Prophets*, 1972), Milner proclaimed that Black Art must affirm, inspire, and touch the souls of Black people.

Perhaps Milner's most significant contribution to the field of African-American letters is *Black Drama Anthology* (1972), coedited with Woodie King. One of the earliest and certainly one of the most respected anthologies of Black plays, it documented important works by Milner, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Langston Hughes, among others.

(Source: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100158957>)

## JOHN CARTER – Editor

**John Carter (1922 – 2018)** was the first African-American to join the American Cinema Editors society. He put his editing touch to more than 50 feature films,

Carter was born in Newark, New Jersey. After a stint in the U.S. Army as a staff sergeant, he trained at the New York Institute of Photography and then took an apprenticeship with the Signal Corps Pictorial Center. He was hired by CBS in 1956 and became the first African-American editor for network television in New York. For the last four of his twelve years with CBS, he served as the supervising film editor for the award-winning documentary unit, "Eye On New York." In 1968, he left CBS to form John Carter Associates, Inc., where he co-edited the George Plimpton film *Paper Lion* (1968).

As his second film, he co-edited with Lora Hays the three-hour documentary *King: A Filmed Record ... Montgomery to Memphis*, produced by Ely Landau and directed Sidney Lumet and Joseph L. Mankiewicz, with appearances by Harry Belafonte, Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, Burt Lancaster and James Earl Jones. *Montgomery to Memphis* screened as a "one-time only" nationwide event in 1,000 theaters on March 24, 1970, received an Oscar nomination for best documentary feature.

Carter then edited *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), a comedy co-written and directed by Ossie Davis. In 1972, he received a BAFTA nomination for editing *Taking Off*, Milos Forman's first American film. He edited *The Heartbreak Kid* (1973) and *Mikey and Nicky* (1976), both directed by Elaine May.

In 1982, Carter edited a PBS historical drama, *A House Divided: Denmark Vesey's Rebellion*, that focused on the true story of a carpenter and former slave (played by Yaphet Kotto) who planned to seize the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and stage a rebellion. In 1983-1984, working with producer and co-writer Elsa Rassbach, he edited *The Killing Floor* (1984), which premiered on PBS *American Playhouse* series, followed by two more films for the series: *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984), directed by Gordon Parks and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. *Charlotte Forten's Mission: Experiment in Freedom* (1985), starring Melba Moore as the African-American abolitionist and educator who taught former slaves in South Carolina.

In 1988, he edited German director Bernhard Sinkel's four-part miniseries, *Hemingway*. Subsequent films he edited include: *Lean on Me* (1989), starring Morgan Freeman; *The Karate Kid Part III* (1989), one of three features he did with director John G. Avildsen; *Men of Honor* (2000), and the Eddie Murphy comedy *Boomerang* (1992).

The director Bill Duke then engaged Carter as his editor on *Deep Cover* (1992), *Sister Act 2, Back in the Habit* (1993), and *The Cemetery Club* (1993). Later films edited by Carter include the Ice Cube comedies *Friday* (1995) and *Barbershop* (2002); Martin Lawrence's *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate* (1996); Alec Baldwin's *Shortcut to Happiness* (2003), and *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), the last film he edited.

(Sources: <https://www.thewrap.com/john-carter-film-editor-friday-lean-dies-95/> and <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/john-carter-dead-pioneering-african-american-film-editor-was-95-113727>)

## ELSA RASSBACH – Executive Producer & Story

**Elsa Rassbach** is an activist, journalist, and filmmaker who has devoted her 50-year career to bringing stories of resistance to the screen and into the political mainstream in the United States and in Germany.

Her paternal grandfather, a German-American businessman, was part of the conservative anti-Nazi resistance movement most known for a failed assassination attempt against Hitler in 1944. Her father left Germany in 1938 and came to the U.S. in 1939. Her mother, whose roots were Irish, was from Colorado, where Rassbach grew up. As a high school student, she held a part-time job in a Sears & Roebuck store and was president of the Rocky Mountain Association of Liberal Religious Youth and active in the Civil Rights movement and on behalf of migrant field workers.

As a scholarship student at Smith College, she received the B. A. *magna cum laude* in Art with a minor in Philosophy in 1965. With the assistance of a German government DAAD scholarship, she then studied philosophy and comparative religion as a graduate student at the Free University of West Berlin, where she first learned German. In 1967 she was the second woman admitted to the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin (DFFB), where she studied filmmaking with colleagues like Wolfgang Petersen, Harun Farocki, and Helke Sander, receiving the Diploma in 1972. During her student years in Berlin, she was also a well-known activist against racism and the Vietnam War, as described in several books.

Her first film, *HIS-STORY* (1972), an ironic docudrama about the German feminist leader, Clara Zetkin, became a feminist classic in Germany and is still often screened. Thereafter, she began work on a documentary about the Flint sit-down Strike in Michigan in 1936-37; she shot material with the auto union strike leaders who had fled to Paris during the McCarthy Era and returned to the U.S. in 1972 to complete research and production on the film. In 1973, she wrote a treatment for an extended public television series on the history of American labor for WGBH, the Boston public television station.

She was then invited to join the team that launched the long-running WGBH *NOVA* series, where she worked on diverse programs, including "War from the Air," a compilation documentary; "The Woman Rebel," a docudrama starring Piper Laurie as birth-control campaigner Margaret Sanger, and on *NOVA*'s most popular first season program, "Strange Sleep," a docudrama about the discovery of anaesthesia and winner of the Peabody Award, for which she received a writing and directing credit. While working on *NOVA*, she continued to develop her concept for a major public television series on the history of American workers, *MADE IN U.S.A.*, for which *The Killing Floor* became the "pilot" production.

In 1975, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) provided development financing for the series, with Rassbach as Series Producer, and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations also contributed. Working closely with leading historians of labor and social history, such as Herbert Gutman, David Brody, Philipp Taft, Eric Foner and Alice Kessler-Harris and many others, as well as younger scholars engaged in pathbreaking research, she reached out to a large community of professional screenwriters and directors who were eager to tackle this long-neglected subject matter. Loring Mandel became the dramatic Script Consultant. In 1977, she founded the nonprofit company, Public Forum Productions, Ltd., to which NEH provided further significant development support. In 1980 she was named the series' Executive Producer in a co-production agreement of her firm with WGBH.

It was decided that the *MADE IN U.S.A.* Series would be made up of ten full-length dramatic films taking place in different times and places during the first American century of industrialization (ca. 1835 - 1945), each film focusing on an "untold story". With the assistance of historians, Rassbach pieced together the life experiences of little-known historical protagonists through original research in archival source materials such as letters, diaries, newspaper stories, and transcripts of hearings and trials. She wrote treatments for all ten films, focusing on dramatic conflict related to gender, race, and ethnicity as well as to social class.

For three of the film projects, she engaged Writers Guild (WGA) screenwriters to write screenplays based on the full-length stories with detailed character and plot development that she had written. The screenplays included *Lost Eden* (working title "Lowell Fever"), about New England farm girls who became feminists and labor activists when working in the textile mills in Lowell, MA, in the 1840s; *McLuckie's Luck* about the mayor of Homestead, PA, a skilled steelworker and union leader who in 1892 faced a corporate lockout backed by federal troops; and *The Killing Floor*, about black and white slaughterhouse workers in Chicago, on which she had collaborated with Obie-Award-winning African-American playwright Leslie Lee for several years. For these three film projects she also secured locations and worked with Producer George Manasse to develop production plans and budgets. The three screenplays with production budgets were submitted to NEH in 1979.

In February 1980, NEH selected *The Killing Floor* as the first film of the labor history series to be produced and offered partial production financing. Matching financing needed to be obtained, but the usual corporate underwriters of public television programs had shown little interest. However, following Rassbach's interview with *The New York Times* in February 1980 regarding difficulties in financing the labor series, PBS was finally persuaded to also allow unions to contribute matching financing. Over the following two years, she obtained donations to her firm from more than forty unions as well as special waiver agreements with the entertainment guilds and unions that reduced labor costs for the production. Donations from two corporations and a license agreement from the new PBS *American Playhouse* drama series (without a theatrical window) completed the modest \$1.2 million budget.

Rassbach opened the production office for *The Killing Floor* in Chicago in January 1983. She then engaged Bill Duke to direct the film based on his strong record as an actor and television director as well as his deep feeling for the subject matter. Many others who later enjoyed successful careers in the entertainment industry received first feature film credits on *The Killing Floor*, including Production Designer Mahed Ahmad and Chicago actors Dennis Farina and Dan Mahoney. In post-production, she worked for seven months in NY with pioneering African-American editor John Carter and composer Elizabeth Swados. Her son and only child was born a week after she delivered the completed film to *American Playhouse*.

Following the PBS premiere in April, 1984, *The New York Times* praised *The Killing Floor* and stated that the film made a strong case for the extended series. In 1985, she received the Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Award on behalf of the production, followed by many more awards and festival invitations for the film, including from Cannes.

Despite these accolades, the obstacles to financing production of the complete labor series had only increased during the Reagan years. Rassbach therefore decided to produce and direct her screenplay for *Lost Eden*, about the women textile workers in Lowell, as her feature film debut. NEH and unions provided partial production financing to her new nonprofit firm, Made in U.S.A.

Productions, Inc. but financing from public television to complete the budget was not forthcoming. In 1993 she directed scenes from her screenplay on location in Lowell and was then invited to the American Film Institute Conservatory as a Directing Fellow or a Screenwriting Fellow, at her option.

Instead Rassbach returned to Berlin to write a dramatic screenplay based on her experiences as a student activist there in the 1960s and 70s with support from the Hessian public film foundation. She was then able to relaunch the film project, *Lost Eden*, about the mill workers in Massachusetts, as a German production with development support from public film-financing foundation headed by Dieter Kosslick, later the director of the Berlinale. She was producer-writer-director of the film project, and the Polish director Agnieszka Holland was her directorial mentor. But the German co-production company was part of the German Kirch Group media consortium that went bankrupt in 2002. Rassbach retains all rights to this film project and others in the labor series.

Since 2003 Rassbach has become internationally known as a peace-and-justice activist, working on diverse projects and themes in this arena, and has organized and led successful press campaigns, speaking tours, events, and lobbying efforts. She leads the German and international efforts since 2012 -- which have so far been successful -- to persuade the German parliament (Bundestag) not to authorize the acquisition of armed drones for the German military on ethical grounds. She is a frequent public speaker and has written numerous articles in German and in English for publications ranging from scholarly journals to newspapers; she has also conducted a number of noteworthy interviews. She has made several independent short films in conjunction with her peace work, including *We Were Soldiers in 'the War on Terror* (2012), distributed by Displaced Films and Amazon, *Seeing Gaza, Where Our Bombs Fall* (2014), an Official Selection of MEDIMED 2015, the Euro-Mediterranean Documentary Market, and *Resistance at Gate 9* (2018) on civil disobedience at a northern German drone base.

Her current film project is a feature-length semi-dramatic autobiographical documentary, *Dad Has a Strange German Accent* (working title), that explores the long-term impact on her father, herself and other U.S. family members of her mysterious German-American grandfather's involvement in the failed resistance against Hitler and the Nazi regime. The film was financed for development by Medien- und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Württemberg, the Media Program of the European Union and the Rias Berlin Commission. The film, which is now in post-production, is based in part on Rassbach's extensive original research and was shot from 1994 to 2017 in the U.S. and in Germany.

## PRESS QUOTE SELECTIONS

“Rich and revealing, a cry of historical dimensions....”

– *Variety*

“A rare American labor union drama centered on Black experience, *The Killing Floor* is minor miracle of narrative history, succeeding as drama, as pedagogy, and as a model of independent, inclusive, collaborative, local, unionized filmmaking. *The Killing Floor* draws on familiar tropes and narrative conventions, but lends them a charge by introducing an alienated Black gaze to typically white spaces, pointedly validating the cultural knowledge that Black southerners bring as spectators to both the union hall and the historical drama. Celebrated dramatist Leslie Lee’s screenplay further makes virtues of archetypes and blunt expository dialogue; such immediacy is critical to the film’s educational economy, which captures the riot’s myriad underlying causes – the Great Migration, the First World War, the growth of organized labor, the European diasporas, and the centuries of exploitation and disenfranchisement of African Americans – in broad yet affecting strokes... *The Killing Floor* wasn’t so much a product of its time as a renegade in it – and a treasure in ours.”

– Michael Metzger, *Cine-File*

“As compelling dramatically as its historical analysis is fascinating ... Surprising that a film from the U.S. can be so frank and explicit in its exposure of the class struggle.”

– James Leahy, *Sight & Sound*

“A classic study in class hate, greed and stubborn idealism. You won’t forget it.”

– *Newsday*

“Brilliantly captures the drama of the moment as well as the historical forces that produced it.”

– James R. Barrett, *The Journal of American History*

“...a particularly brilliant example of a cinema which knows how to use all the resources of fiction, without ever allowing its historical documentary side to be marred.”

– *La Revue du Cinema*

“...fascinatingly recreated period reality, in performances that combine political faith with artistic force....”

– *London Evening Standard*

“A very powerful, very surprising film.... Well documented and researched, brilliantly acted by Damien Leake in the principal role, *The Killing Floor* displays another kind of militancy, above all narrative and carefully concerned with objectivity and accuracy.”

– *Le Monde*

“*The Killing Floor* is part of our nation's history – a fascinating and bloody episode in the history of the U.S. labor movement... a powerful, personal drama....”

– Marilyn Preston, *Chicago Tribune*

“Maybe what makes *The Killing Floor* so moving and absorbing is the way it succeeds in giving human scale and human impact to a moment in America's industrial history. What makes *The Killing Floor* memorable is its evocative re-creation of Chicago and the social milieu that existed there at the time of World War I. From the polemic tensions of the union meetings to Custer's visits to 'Miss Dean's Social Shop' – to dictate, at 50 cents apiece, his letters home – the film breathes the color and life of the period.”

– John V. Hurst, *The Sacramento Bee*

“Mr. Leake, a talented and always ingratiating actor, provides a strong and intensely charged dramatic core. His wife is affectingly played by Alfre Woodard. This pilot certainly makes a strong case for an extended series.”

– John J. O'Connor, *The New York Times*

“Filming history responsibly is one of the fundamental challenges of the modern cinema: How to reflect the gap of time separating filmmakers from the events they're depicting, while still managing to depict those distant events with emotional immediacy? (These questions were of less concern in the era of classical cinema, when filmmakers took for granted their ability to represent all forms of experience, recent or ancient.) Bill Duke's first feature, *The Killing Floor*, from 1984 (a digital release from Film Forum), displays an ingenious approach to the matter, bringing a straightforward story and a distinct historical period movingly, passionately to life...”

– Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*

“A revelatory historical drama that offers a powerful template for social analysis in fiction.”

– Richard Brody, *The New Yorker* (“*Goings On About Town*”)

“Powerful, hard-hitting, but still exceptionally and tenderly crafted....”

– Jen Johans, *Film Intuition*

“*The Killing Floor* is a striking illustration of the need to synthesize class and race. Based on the experience of trying to build a trade union in Chicago's stockyards during WWI, it is an object lesson on the need to abandon 'white privilege'. *The Killing Floor*... belongs alongside *Salt of the Earth* and *Matewan* as truly engaged, working-class cinema.”

– Louis Proyect, *The Unrepentant Marxist*

“Leake is terrific, as is Ernest Rayford as Frank's best friend who goes off to war in the film's first act....”

– David Bax, *Battleship Pretension*

“Bill Duke’s underseen and recently restored directorial debut, *The Killing Floor*... is technically a made-for-TV movie; it debuted via PBS’s American Playhouse series. But it has all the heft and energy of a theatrical movie epic, which suits its subject: the fight, among Black and white stockyard workers in early-20th-century Chicago, to form an interracial workers union. “

– K. Austin Collins, *Vanity Fair*

★★★★★

“While the events depicted in this film happened over 100 years ago, it's easy to see how they've helped to shape contemporary realities. These events and issues, the intersecting of labor, class, race, ethnicity, and immigration, are brought into a remarkable clarity with *The Killing Floor*, and decades since its release, it's a movie that remains all too relevant... For families looking for more historical context on the systemic racism that many Americans are starting to attempt to better comprehend, *The Killing Floor* is essential viewing. The acting is magnificent across the board, and the story doesn't shy away from thorny complexities and ugly truths. It should inspire discussion about what has and hasn't changed since the events depicted in the movie, how events like these continue to haunt the American backstory, the development of the labor movement, and where we go from here as we strive to make a more just society. “

– Brian Constello, *Common Sense Media*

“*The Killing Floor* came together, barely, in Chicago in 1983, 12 years after the demise of the Union Stock Yards. Chicago film history remains the richer for its existence and its recent digital restoration.”

– Michael Phillips, *Chicago Tribune*

“Recently restored by the UCLA Film and Television Archive and made available for the first time digitally this week by Film Movement after being long out of circulation, the film feels more timely than ever as it observes how the colors of black and white are superseded by green as the workers who spend countless hours butchering and cleaning up after cow carcasses aren’t treated much better than the meat they process and a coalition forms between those who find that the promise of greater opportunity in Chicago, whether it’s African-Americans relocating from the South or immigrants from Poland and Ireland who may not get stopped by cops as frequently as their co-workers yet nonetheless are marginalized due to their tenuous citizenship status.”

– Stephen Saito, *Moveable Fest*

“The extensive background research guiding Lee’s script is realized not just in the film’s depiction of the unionization process, but also in the language employed by the characters, as well as in the archival footage used as interstitials between scenes. And the function of those qualities adds up to far more than just period detail and regional texture: The film’s relationship to established facts and records are what drives its narrative momentum – and what eventually grants it true purpose. *The Killing Floor* reveals itself to be an intrinsically American historical epic. “

– Jake Mulligan, *DigBoston*

“*The Killing Floor* is a marvelously acted and incisively nuanced exploration of how racial and ethnic divisions have been historically used to break up labor organizing. It’s an instant essential discovery, the kind of film I hope someday plays in classrooms to teach kids about parts of our country’s past that some teachers neglect to mention. Needless to say, it’s even more necessary viewing in an era when simmering tensions in our history are boiling over.”

– Nathan Smith, *Nashville Scene*

“Few American movies have this kind of reach. Executive producer Elsa Rassbach, who worked on the story with black playwright Leslie Lee, was educated in West Germany, and *Brecht Lives* in the jaunty narration that accompanies speeded-up newsreel footage and in the filmmakers’ detachment – the way their characters act logically (if shortsightedly) in response to dire economic conditions.”

– *The Village Voice*

“A tribute to the superhuman efforts of dedicated filmmakers like Rassbach....”

– Peter Biskind, *American Film*

“This film succeeds in telling the untold truth at a time when we are exposed only to revisions of the same old story. As we careen blindly through these numbed out days of historical and cultural amnesia, any restoration to memory of time actually lived brings with it a kind of revelatory shock, an insistent shaking up of the deaf-, dumb-, and blindness that constitute a simulated present.”

– Barbara Kruger, *Artforum International*

“It’s an important history lesson, a compelling drama and a lovingly recreated period piece all rolled into one.”

– Michael Glover Smith, *Time Out*

# THE KILLING FLOOR

AN ELSA RASSBACH PRODUCTION | DIRECTED BY BILL DUKE



Photography Credit: **Jim Taylor**  
(Courtesy Film Movement)

## ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT

Founded in 2002, Film Movement is a North American distributor of award-winning independent and foreign films based in New York City. It has released more than 250 feature films and shorts culled from prestigious film festivals worldwide. Its catalog includes titles by directors such as Hirokazu Kore-eda, Maren Ade, Jessica Hausner, Andrei Konchalovsky, Andrzej Wajda, Diane Kurys, Ciro Guerra and Melanie Laurent. In 2015, Film Movement launched its reissue label Film Movement Classics, featuring new restorations released theatrically as well as on Blu-ray and DVD, including films by such noted directors as Eric Rohmer, Peter Greenaway, Bille August, Marleen Gorris, Takeshi Kitano, Arturo Ripstein, Sergio Corbucci and Ettore Scola. For more information, visit [www.filmmovement.com](http://www.filmmovement.com).