

Emancipation (2022 film)

Emancipation is a 2022 American historical action thriller film^{[3][4][5]} directed by Antoine Fuqua, written by William N. Collage, and co-produced by Will Smith, who stars as a runaway slave headed for Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the 1860s, after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to end slavery in secessionist Confederate states,^[6] surviving the swamps while being chased by slave catchers and their dogs. Ben Foster stars as a ruthless slave hunter and Charmaine Bingwa as an enslaved wife and mother.

The film is loosely based on the life of a self-emancipated slave, known as either Gordon or "Whipped Peter".^[7] That story was made famous by the photograph of a man's bare back heavily scourged from an overseer's whippings, which was published worldwide as magazine illustrations in 1863, and gave the abolitionist movement proof of the cruelty of slavery.^[8] Producer Joey McFarland began researching that story in 2018, and hired Collage to write the script.

The film was officially announced in June 2020, with Fuqua to direct and Smith to star. Filming was in Louisiana between July and August 2021, with Apple paying US\$130 million to acquire the rights to the film, outbidding several other studios.

It was screened in Washington, D.C., on October 1, 2022, and released in select cinemas on December 2, 2022, then streamed on December 9 on Apple TV+. The film received mixed reviews from critics, who praised Smith's performance, but criticized the screenplay and its handling of real-life events.

Plot

In a cotton plantation in 1863, Peter is seen sitting on the floor of a house knelt before his wife, Dodiene, alongside their children sitting around him. Suddenly, a group of white men appear at the doorway and snatch a reluctant Peter out of the house, with him putting up a fight until one of the men points a gun at his wife's head. Peter is then hit in the back of his head, put into a cage at the back of a carriage, and is taken away from his family to a different site. He shouts to his wife and children that he will come back and they should stay together. On his journey, he

Emancipation



Official release poster

Directed by	<u>Antoine Fuqua</u>
Written by	<u>William N. Collage</u>
Produced by	<u>Todd Black</u> <u>Joey McFarland</u> <u>Jon Mone</u> <u>Will Smith</u>
Starring	<u>Will Smith</u> <u>Ben Foster</u> <u>Charmaine Bingwa</u>
Cinematography	<u>Robert Richardson</u>
Edited by	<u>Conrad Buff IV</u>
Music by	<u>Marcelo Zarvos</u>
Production companies	<u>Apple Studios</u> <u>Westbrook Studios</u> <u>McFarland Entertainment</u>

sees slaves working at the roadside and the heads of killed slaves on poles. Peter is then sent to work on constructing a railroad in Clinton, Louisiana.

The slaves are treated with cruelty by white guards and their boss, Fassel. They are whipped, set upon by dogs, branded and dragged by horses if they try to run away or shot if they stop working because of exhaustion. Peter tells the disheartened slaves to just believe in God and pray.

One day, Peter has had enough, and he uses an opportune moment to fight back at the white men along with other slaves. They escape and run away, while being chased by the white men on horseback and vicious dogs. One slave is unable to swim across a river due to fear of alligators and is caught. After revealing the other slaves' locations to Fassel, he is then freed and tries to cross the river, but he is then shot and later eaten by the gators. The three remaining men split up and go about their separate ways. Peter has many close encounters with being found, but somehow manages to stay hidden from his enslavers. When Peter is close to Baton Rouge, Fassel catches up to him and is about to shoot him, when he is suddenly shot in the neck by a black member of the 1st Louisiana Native Guard.

Peter is taken to a hospital to recover. A photograph of his back is then taken and is vowed to be shown all over the world to aid the end of slavery. Peter then decides to join the army to help free his family. After a victorious battle against Confederate soldiers, he returns to various cotton plantations to free the slaves, while also reuniting with Dodienne and their children. In the epilogue, the text states that it is thanks to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that by 1865, over 4 million slaves have been freed.

	<u>Escape Artists</u>
Distributed by	<u>Apple TV+</u>
Release dates	December 2, 2022 (United States) December 9, 2022 (Apple TV+)
Running time	132 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$120–162 million ^{[1][2]}

Cast

- Will Smith as Peter
- Ben Foster as Fassel the slave hunter
- Charmaine Bingwa as Dodienne, Peter's wife
- Jayson Warner Smith as John Lyons, cotton plantation owner
- Austin Alexander as Trapp, white plantation worker whom Peter bites
- Britton Webb as Bijoux, white plantation worker helping Trapp
- Jesse C. Boyd as Mike Hurley, white plantation worker who puts a gun to Dodienne's head
- Steven Ogg as Ordnance sergeant Howard, a Confederate soldier guarding slaves at the railroad camp
- Grant Harvey as Leeds, a Confederate soldier guarding slaves at the railroad camp
- Gilbert Owuor as Gordon, Peter's slave friend who escapes the railroad camp and makes it separately to the Union Army in Baton Rouge
- Michael Luwoye as John, the branded slave skeptical of Peter who escapes the railroad camp but doesn't make it to freedom
- Jabbar Lewis as Tomas, Peter's slave friend who escapes the railroad camp but gets shot by Fassel in a river
- Ronnie Gene Blevins as Harrington, Fassel's white slave-hunting assistant
- Aaron Moten as Knowls, the former slave who works with Fassel and Harrington capturing runaway slaves, whom Peter calls "the worst kind"

- Imani Pullum as Betsy, Peter's older daughter
- Jeremiah Friedlander as Scipion, Peter's son
- Jordyn McIntosh as Laurette, Peter's young daughter
- Landon Chase Dubois as Little Peter
- Mustafa Shakir as Captain André Cailloux of the First Louisiana Native Guard in the Union Army
- Paul Ben-Victor as Major G. Halstead who inducts Peter into the Union Army
- David Denman as General William Dwight

Production

Development and casting

On June 15, 2020, it was reported that Antoine Fuqua would direct Will Smith in *Emancipation*, based on a spec script written by William N. Collage.^[9] Producer Joey McFarland, who had started researching and developing the film in 2018, recruited Collage to write the script.^[10] Fuqua said:

It's almost two years now from when I first read the script. It hit my heart and my soul in so many ways that are impossible to convey but I think you understand. We're watching some of the feeling that I had, in the streets right now. There's sadness, there's anger, there's love, faith and hope ... That's important to see, and the most hopeful thing that I'm seeing, that they're not going to stand for it anymore.^[9]

Warner Bros, MGM, Lionsgate, and Universal Pictures bid on the film before Apple ultimately won distribution rights for over \$130 million.^{[8][11][12]} In August 2021, Ben Foster, Charmaine Bingwa, Gilbert Owuor, and Mustafa Shakir joined the cast.^[13] Smith was paid \$35 million for his involvement.^[14]

Filming

Principal photography was expected to begin on May 3, 2021, in Los Angeles.^[15] It was later set to begin on June 21, 2021, in Georgia,^[16] but on April 12, it was announced that the film would be shot elsewhere due to the recently-enacted Election Integrity Act of 2021. Smith and Fuqua said in a joint statement: "We cannot in good conscience provide economic support to a government that enacts regressive voting laws that are designed to restrict voter access."^{[16][17]} The location move was reported to have cost approximately \$15 million.^[16] Filming was announced to take place in New Orleans from July 12 to August 21, 2021.^[18] On August 2, filming paused for five days due to several positive COVID-19 tests.^[19] Additional casting for the film was announced in November and December.^{[20][21]}

Music

The film score is by Marcelo Zarvos, who described the music as "spiritual and untraditional" per Fuqua's suggestions.^[22] He employed a 70-piece orchestra, a 40-member choir, and soloists from around the world, for traditional American and African sounds. The soundtrack was released by Lakeshore Records on December 9, 2022.^[23]

Release

A screening of *Emancipation* was held at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's 51st Annual Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., on October 1, 2022, with Smith and Fuqua in attendance to give a subsequent Q&A discussion.^[24] It was screened in Los Angeles, on October 24, 2022.^[25] The film premiered in theaters on December 2, 2022, and was streamed on Apple TV+ on December 9.^[26]

While Smith had been attached to the film in 2020,^[9] and principal photography had moved forward in the summer of 2021,^[18] the controversy over Smith slapping Chris Rock at the March 2022 94th Academy Awards was cited in May 2022, when the film's release was delayed to a tentative 2023 date; production delays and an overcrowded film release schedule from Apple were also cited in the May announcement.^[27] It was subsequently moved to its final date.

Reception

Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 45% of 155 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 5.6/10. The website's consensus reads: "*Emancipation* works as an action movie – albeit one that's uncomfortably at odds with its awkward handling of the real-life events that inspired its stirring story."^[28] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 53 out of 100, based on 41 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[29]

The slapping incident was referenced in some reviews;^[7] in a positive first-day review from *Screen International*'s Tim Grierson, before the collective mixed to average reviews had been published, he hoped that enough positive reviews might overcome the possibility that the "scandal may temper audiences' enthusiasm" to see the film.^[30]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>Black Reel Awards</u>	February 6, 2023	<u>Outstanding Breakthrough Performance, Female</u>	Charmaine Bingwa	Nominated	[31]
		<u>Outstanding Cinematography</u>	Robert Richardson	Nominated	
<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	November 16, 2022	<u>Original Score in a Feature Film</u>	Marcelo Zarvos	Nominated	[32]
<u>NAACP Image Awards</u>	February 25, 2023	<u>Outstanding Motion Picture</u>	<i>Emancipation</i>	Nominated	[33]
		<u>Outstanding Directing in a Motion Picture</u>	Antoine Fuqua	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Costume Design</u>	Francine Jamison-Tanchuck	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture</u>	Will Smith	Won	
		<u>Outstanding Ensemble Cast in a Motion Picture</u>	The cast of <i>Emancipation</i>	Nominated	
<u>Women Film Critics Circle</u>	December 19, 2022	Invisible Woman Award	Charmaine Bingwa	Won	[34]

See also

- List of films featuring slavery

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