



# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY  
DECEMBER 10, 2017  
2:00PM • WHITNEY  
HUMANITIES CENTER

# AMISTAD

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



In 1839, 53 West African captives on “La Amistad,” a Spanish schooner carrying them from Havana to another Cuban port for resale, broke out of their chains and took over the vessel. They hoped to return to Africa, but they were captured off the coast of Long Island and incarcerated—in New Haven, Connecticut. The ensuing events included an international dispute, a dramatic trial, a national debate over slavery, a clash between two U.S. presidents, and a significant decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1992, New Haven commemorated the Africans’ bravery, especially that of their leader Joseph Cinqué (Sengbe Pieh), with the Amistad Memorial, a three-sided bronze sculpture installed in front of City Hall, which is on the site of the old jail. And five years later, Steven Spielberg created another memorial: the \$40 million production AMISTAD. It originated with the film’s co-producer, African-American dancer-choreographer Debbie Allen, who wanted Spielberg to direct because she admired SCHINDLER’S LIST (1993). Spielberg eagerly embraced the project. It was a decisive change of pace from THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK, released earlier in 1997, and, more importantly, he felt compelled to make the Amistad events widely recognized: “This is a story that people of all nationalities and races should know.” The film was the first he directed for his new company, DreamWorks.



Spielberg and Allen provided AMISTAD with some box-office insurance with rising star Matthew McConaughey (as New Haven attorney and future Connecticut governor and U.S. senator Roger Sherman Baldwin, Yale College 1811), Morgan Freeman (as a fictional composite of several former slaves-turned-abolitionist leaders), and Anthony Hopkins (giving a flamboyant, Oscar-nominated performance as John Quincy Adams), but they avoided the usual Hollywood practice of populating the film with star cameo appearances (minor exception: Anna Paquin as the child queen Isabella). The captives are portrayed by West African actors and non-professionals, and the film’s dominant figure is the previously almost-unknown Djimon Hounsou (born in Benin) as Cinqué. AMISTAD also features two screen debuts: 88-year-old retired U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Harry A. Blackmun as Supreme Court Associate Justice Joseph Story and 20-year-old Chiwetel Ejiofor as the translator James Covey.

DIRECTED BY **STEVEN SPIELBERG**  
WRITTEN BY **DAVID FRANZONI**  
MUSIC BY **JOHN WILLIAMS**  
PRODUCED BY **DREAMWORKS SKG**  
(1997) 155 MINS. RATED R

STARRING **MORGAN FREEMAN, ANTHONY HOPKINS, DJIMON HOUNSOU, MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY, NIGEL HAWTHORNE, PETE POSTLETHWAITE, STELLAN SKARSGARD, CHIWETEL EJIOFOR, AND ANNA PAQUIN**

Much of AMISTAD is low-key, both visually—cinematographer Janusz Kamiński employed desaturated colors, patterned after Goya’s paintings—and dramatically, with emphasis on often intricate legal arguments. However, there are also many intense, overpowering moments. Most vividly, almost exactly half-way through the film we experience a harrowing flashback, from Cinqué’s point of view, showing the horrors of his kidnapping and of the captives’ passage across the Atlantic. Spielberg, often accused of presenting sugar-coated stories, does not hesitate to show the slaves’ ordeals graphically, and this nine-minute sequence is among his most formidable achievements. As Janet Maslin observed in *The New York Times*: “Power in Hollywood: AMISTAD demonstrates what it really means. It’s the ability to use images like this flashback...to create the full empathy and immediacy this subject matter deserves. It’s the creative means to bring any experience home to an audience, whether it comes from a faraway planet or from our underexplored past...to make (an expensive) holiday movie about a shameful chapter in American history simply because one thinks that’s the right thing to do.”

AMISTAD opened throughout the U.S. on December 10, 1997, exactly 20 years ago today. Several days earlier, the Yale Film Study Center presented an area premiere in this auditorium, thanks to Steven Spielberg and then-President of DreamWorks Walter Parkes (Yale College 1973), who donated a 35mm print to the Yale film collection. We are proud to show this print again today.

**DID YOU KNOW:** ALTHOUGH MUCH OF AMISTAD TAKES PLACE IN NEW HAVEN, NONE OF IT WAS FILMED HERE. THE CITY’S HARBOR WAS RECREATED IN MYSTIC, CONNECTICUT; THE STREETS, SQUARES, JAIL, AND COURTHOUSE IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND.

**NEXT UP:** JOHN SAYLES’ CONTEMPORARY WESTERN MYSTERY **LONE STAR** (1996) FEATURES A POWERFUL CAST INCLUDING FRANCES MCDORMAND, CHRIS COOPER, KRIS KRISTOFFERSON, MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY, AND JOE MORTON. IT SCREENS ON 35MM ON **SUNDAY, JANUARY 21 AT 2:00 PM.**