Attenborough doesn't fully address issue of apartheid

Cry Freedom

By MANAVENDRA THAKUR

RECENTLY, A REVIEWER for the Boston Phoenix called the film "a marvelous example of liberal Pavlovian movie making." This is a far more apt label for Cry Freedom, Sir Richard Attenborough's new film about Stephen Biko (Denzel Washington), the Black South African student activist leader, and his friendship with Donald Woods (Kevin Kline), a white South African newspaper editor who considered this his own liberal views as his contribution to the struggle.

Cry Freedom begins by showing Woods' initial contact with Biko in 1973 and ends with escape of Woods' family from South Africa after Biko's death under mysterious circumstances while in police custody in 1977.

Technically, the film is thoroughly conventional. Sir Richard himself said that this was the easiest of his films to make. There are inspired moments, however. The sound montage that accompanies a sequence of freeze-frame images of a pre-dawn raid by police on a shantytown is quite effective as part of the film's opening sequence. Flashbacks are sparingly used, and there is a sense of this was the easiest of his films to make.

The first half of the 160-minute long film focuses on the power of Biko's charismatic personality as Biko leads Woods to understand for the first time the harsh realities that blacks face, both as third class citizens and as "hunted" persons. The depth of Biko's confidence in the humanity of himself and his fellow blacks is demonstrated time and again as Biko refuses to succumb to the extremists' provocations. The genius of Stephen Biko is that even as he urges Woods and others to "Drink up!" while relaxing in a bar in a black township, he is able to point out the stark contrast between Woods' opulent lifestyle and the poverty of black shantytown inhabitants. That is to say, these individuals and events in South Africa are allowed to speak for themselves that the film is at its greatest.

Unfortunately, Biko's death comes almost exactly halfway through the film. In order to make the film palatable to Westerners—who is to say white audiences—the second half of the film concentrates on the Woods family as they flee South Africa and on the personal turmoil Biko's family faces after a spectacular explosion of the Afrikaans language which is to say white audiences away from the film's central issue of racism, yet know little or nothing about the details of South Africa's past laws and other restrictions, will find this a moving and distressing film. The film will challenge them to seek ways to help dismantle apartheid in whatever small way they can. Those who have kept up with current events and know more about South Africa's racist policies alive in the film. Indeed, some may even consider the "liberal Pavlovian" second half distancing and insulting because of its typical Hollywood oversimplification.

In spite of all this, Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable.

Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulated for creating the film in the education of a white liberal. Sir Richard's humanity and conviction are unassailable. Nevertheless, given his stature and his avowed purpose to help educate people about apartheid, this film is a disappointment that his film's box-office success. It is unfortunate that Sir Richard must be congratulate...