

Doug's Overview of the Screenplay *(As written in Feb, 2023, fourteen months before completion)*

Nearly 300 black Americans were lynched in a five-year period following World War I, several of them veterans recently returned from service. Clearly some white citizens feared that these men, having proved themselves on the battlefields of Europe, would not meekly accept second-class status at home. The 1923 lynching of James T. Scott in Columbia, Missouri, was in that respect typical of the era.

What made it atypical was that it was witnessed by hundreds of spectators, including two brave and talented young newspaper reporters who took extensive notes on the scene. One of these (Charles Nutter) published a detailed account of what of what he saw, and both testified extensively at the trial George Barkwell, the leader of the lynch mob. From their accounts and the accounts of other eyewitnesses, it's possible to reconstruct vividly the story of this lynching: the events that that led up to it, the crime itself, the perjury-laden trial that freed Barkwell, the drunken street celebration afterward.

My short book *Summary Justice* is such a reconstruction. I immersed myself for months in the first-hand accounts, not only of the lynchings, but other interactions between white and black citizens of Columbia during the period. I spent hours studying period photographs and visiting the crucial locations until I was able to see in my mind's eye what eyewitnesses saw and almost to hear what they heard. I could visualize the way the full moon lit the brick streets on the night of the lynching; I could imagine the sound of a fraternity boy playing his banjo while a rope dangled from Scott's neck.

Several readers of the book have said "this reads like a movie" or "this needs to be made into a movie," and I think they're right. A skillful screenwriter could translate the book into a script that is deeply rooted in actual events. Last spring I attempted to draft such a script. The result was to convince me that I am *not* a skillful screenwriter, though the attempt gave me a couple of ideas about the shape a movie could take.

First, there's the question of framing. The story of the lynching could be told literally and chronologically, as it is in the first 37 pages of my book, but I worry that without some contextualizing, the viewer might be bewildered or overwhelmed. ("What's the point, really? This happened a century ago.")

One alternative to straight chronology would be to start with a brief scene in the courtroom, during which the lawyer defending George Barkwell, leader of the mob, sums up his case. The lawyer *actually* began his summary with this sentence: "I believe that the evidence shows that the man who was killed was a Negro," a statement that brought an immediate objection from the prosecution! Then, cunningly, Barkwell's lawyer said that he and the prosecutor agreed strongly on one point: no man should be arbitrarily punished, let alone killed, in order to serve up a warning to a whole race. Yet the prosecution's decision to file a murder charge against Barkwell alone had amounted to just that kind of arbitrary punishment--a *lynching* intended to warn white citizens not to take the law into their own hands, even when a Negro has "ravished and despoiled" a young girl like Regina. The whole town was implicated in the execution of James Scott because the whole town was shocked by the attack and wanted to ensure that nothing like it happened again. And now the jury was being asked, without adequate evidence, to single out for punishment *one man and one man only*. "The age of human sacrifice, of offering up scapegoats, has passed," Barkwell's

lawyer said. "Jesus ended that era with a single phrase: 'Let him among you who is without fault cast the first stone.'"

With that disturbing and deeply ironic argument setting the frame, the movie could flash back to the morning when Regina Almsted was raped--not by James Scott, who actually *was* a scapegoat, but by Ollie Watson. It could then advance chronologically until we reach the scene where Barkwell puts a rope around Scott's neck and pushes him off the railing of Stewart Bridge. In the final scenes, the film could return to the courthouse to show the jury returning its unanimous not-guilty verdict, and to show the cheers and celebrations that followed. ("Wasn't the whole town implicated," the viewer might then be thinking, "but did that make Barkwell any less a murderer?" Raising this question about individual and collective responsibility seem pertinent in an age of political tribalism punctuated by acts of violence like the January 6 attack.)

A second alternative would be to start with a scene where a black man sits in his study, concentrating on what he is writing. As the movie progresses, viewers would learn that the man is George Vaughn, and that he is an NAACP lawyer who was rather heroically present on the night of the lynching. For the moment, they would only hear (as voice over) a bit of the letter he is writing: "No one in Columbia could seriously dispute what happened that night, Dr. Du Bois. There were hundreds of spectators and eyewitness accounts published in at least two newspapers. Then there is a dreadful familiarity to it all. It seems that lynching is becoming a spring ritual in this part of the country. No, what happened on the bridge that night is perfectly clear to everyone. The harder questions are what led up to the lynching, and why we found it impossible to have the murderers punished."

That opening has some historical basis, since Vaughn did write an NAACP report on the incident, and it has the advantage of establishing Vaughn's narrative voice as a guide for the viewer during transitions between scenes. Likely, Vaughn's voice would be the last we hear as the movie closes, and likely he would still be struggling with the same questions. (What is it that can reduce a relatively civilized community, a community with churches and concert halls and colleges, to this kind of savagery and lawlessness?)

I'm going to append my drafts of three passages from my attempted screenplay, not because I think they could be used as is, but because they might give a proper screenwriter launching points to do better work.

The first passage recreates the rape of Regina Almstedt, but does so without putting brutal images on the screen. It takes advantage of the historical fact that Professor Hermann Almstedt, her father, was an accomplished classical musician, and it hints at his firmness of character, which later would lead him to confront the mob on Stewart Bridge and to plead with them to return Scott safely to his jail cell. ("Don't besmirch your hands with this deed. I plead with you to let the law take its course with this man. I ask it of you in the name of law and order and the American flag.") The rape scene is followed by a scene that shows Regina's initial mis-identification of Scott and helps the viewer imagine the psychological pressures that produced it.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - CLOUDY SPRING AFTERNOON

TITLE:

COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

FRIDAY, APRIL 20, 1921

A POSTMAN walks past attractive houses, sorting letters as he walks. A uniformed black maid shakes a rug over one side of a porch and looks the postman's way. He shakes his head at her as he keeps walking.

POSTMAN
Nothing today.

As he steps onto the porch of the next house, he hears a piano playing a classical SONATA. He listens, smiles, drops letters through a letter slot beside the door.

BEGIN SONATA MONTAGE, MUSIC PLAYING OVER SILENT ACTION

INT. ALMSTEDT HOUSE, ENTRYWAY

The letters land on the wood floor of an entryway. Among the furnishings in an entryway is a table on which there is a vase of fresh-cut spring flowers.

INT. ALMSTEDT LIVING ROOM

HERMANN ALMSTEDT (middle-aged, white), sits at an upright piano, playing the sonata. His posture and technique bespeak formal training. On the back of the piano are photos of three daughters: the middle one is REGINA, (14, blonde).

EXT. SIDEWALK of STEWART ROAD [MUTED, AS THE SONATA CONTINUES]

Regina, carrying a furled umbrella, finishes a conversation with a woman pushing a baby carriage uphill. She continues downhill alone, toward the Stewart Road Bridge.

EXT. STEWART ROAD BRIDGE [MUTED]

The bridge is long and spans a deep ravine. Near the lamppost at the bridge's center OLLIE WATSON (black, 35, with Charlie Chaplin mustache and a face disfigured by smallpox scars) is staring over the railing into the ravine. As Regina approaches, he hurries to meet her.

INT. ALMSTEDT LIVING ROOM

Almstedt at the piano, playing with skill and feeling.

EXT. STEWART BRIDGE [MUTED]

Watson talks excitedly and points into the ravine. Regina looks down over the railing. He talks and points down again. Regina hurries off the bridge and climbs into the ravine. Watson pauses to look around him and then climbs down after her.

INT. ALMSTEDT LIVING ROOM

Almstedt stumbles on a difficult passage, stops, fingers more slowly through it, backs up and plays smoothly.

EXT. RAVINE [MUTED]

Regina runs, looks over her shoulder, screams. She falls and picks herself up. She stabs her umbrella at her pursuer, making the tip a weapon.

INT. ALMSTEDT LIVING ROOM

Almstedt plays on. We see the face of a grandfather clock: it reads 3:40.

EXT. RAVINE [MUTED]

Watson pins Regina to the ground. His face shows his fury and a pair of gashes from her umbrella. He slaps her. He presses one hand over her mouth while he loosens his belt with his other.

INT. ALMSTEDT LIVING ROOM

Almstedt continues playing confidently, skillfully.

EXT. RAVINE [MUTED]

Regina struggles to climb a wooded slope. She is still clutching the umbrella, now bent and tattered. Her dress is torn and soiled. She is smeared with blood.

END SONATA MONTAGE

INT. ALMSTEDT HOUSE

Almstedt's playing is interrupted by a thud in the entryway and the sound of shattering glass. He rises from the piano bench and hurries to the entryway. He finds Regina prone on the floor, her bent umbrella and the shattered flower vase beside her. He turns her to see her face.

REGINA
(eyes wandering, incoherent)
He said there was a child ... down on the tracks.

She weeps; her head rolls; her eyes, when they open, are unfocused.

Clatter of shoes on wooden stairs: MRS. ALMSTEDT, dressed for housework appears. Regina's eyes focus.

REGINA
Oh! Mother!

MRS. ALMSTEDT
Regina?! Oh, my God, Hermann! What has happened?

ALMSTEDT
She's half out of her mind. I don't think she even knows where she is.

He looks up, sees that Mrs. Almstedt is at the point of unraveling, and speaks more calmly.

ALMSTEDT (CONT'D)
We can't go to pieces. That will make matters worse. We'll put her in her bed. You stay with her. Don't leave her side. I'll call Dr. Lewis.

INT. ALMSTEDT HOUSE - NIGHT.

Almstedt talking on the wall-mounted phone. The grandfather clock shows 9:36

ALMSTEDT
If you must print the story, say this. Say that my daughter defended herself with an umbrella she was carrying, and that she then distracted the man by throwing some coins onto the ground. She arrived home in a state of great agitation.... Yes, that is correct, sir. I said she was AGITATED.... Do I need to spell that, sir? ... Correct.... No, I did *not* say she was physically harmed in any way. She was *agitated*.... No, that is all I have to say.... Good night.

Almstedt hangs the phone's earpiece in its cradle, pauses, lifts it off again sets it on the top of the phone box. He crosses the room and mounts a stairway lined with family photographs and diplomas. He straightens one of these. At the top of the stair he enters Regina's bedroom. She is tucked in, sleeping; Mrs. Almstedt has fallen asleep beside her. He closes the door.

INT. ALMSTEDT HOUSE - NIGHT

A three-quarters moon stands high in the sky. Almstedt stands alone at a window, watching it.

INT. POLICE CAR - DAY

TITLE:

SATURDAY, APRIL 21

JAMES SCOTT (36, black, barely 5' tall) is in the rear seat of a police car. He is handcuffed and in leg shackles, buffeted by the car's motion. The car stops with a jerk. We hear the driver's door open. The CHIEF OF POLICE (white, 40) opens Scott's door and grabs him by the arm.

CHIEF
Out, now!

EXT. ALMSTEDT HOUSE - DAY

The Chief muscles Scott onto the sidewalk. Now we see Scott's face clearly for the first time. Though he has a Charlie Chaplin mustache, he clearly is not the man who attacked Regina. His face is unscarred and his eyes are peculiar: one iris brown, one green.

Regina and Hermann Almstedt stand on the porch, 50 feet away. The sun shines full on their faces, directly into their eyes. Regina weeps, cringes, clings to her father's arm.

REGINA
(to Almstedt)
No closer, please.

(to the Chief, louder)
No closer, please! I can't stand to look him! Please, stay away!
Keep him away from me!

She turns her face into her father's shoulder. Almstedt signals the Chief to keep his distance.

CHIEF

It will only take minute, Miss Almstedt. And then I won't bother you no more. I just need you to look at him for just a minute, to identify him. This *is* the man who attacked you, isn't it?

Regina shades her eyes with her hands, forces herself to look briefly at Scott's face, then clings again to her father's shoulder.

REGINA

That is him. It's him! Now take him away! Take him away! I can't stand the sight of his face! I can't stand to have his eyes on me! Those eyes! Those horrible eyes!

The second passage I'm including is situated midway through my screenplay draft. It reflects a mundane historical reality about Columbia in the 1920's. Barbers were black men. Some ran shops where they cut other black men's hair, but Cal Harrison owned a shop where the patrons were all white. It's interesting to consider the situation of a black barber, razor in hand, listening to the unguarded talk of white men on a day when racial passions are running high. In this scene, if properly acted, we could get a good sense of Barkwell's personality, simultaneously bullying and patronizing, and of Cal Harrison's unstated revulsion for what he must listen to. Emmett Smith, the third character in the scene, later perjured himself at Barkwell's trial in order to secure the acquittal of his friend.

INT. HARRISON'S BARBER SHOP - DAY

GEORGE BARKWELL (white, 42, tall and brawny) is lying in a tilted-back barber chair. His face is covered by a steaming towel. Beside his chair, stropping a razor, is CAL HARRISON, a black man nearing 70. In the next chair is EMMETT SMITH (white, 55, portly), being trimmed by a second BARBER.

SMITH

That evening, the car come a-limpin' back, hood sizzling hot, Ol' Solomon at the wheel, little boy up on the seat beside him. He'd driven it all the way back to Devil's Elbow before he realized he didn't know how to switch engine off.

Appreciative chuckles (O.S.) from several men. Harrison strops his straight razor.

SMITH (CONT'D)

So he had the boy fetch a ham sandwich from the kitchen, and he drove straight back to town to ask Fred what to do. Fred kills the spark for him. But by then the engine was so damn hot the pistons just fused to it. Wrecked. Total loss. Couldn't ever start it again.

Groans and laughter from the listeners(O.S.).

A wider view shows that we are in a five-chair barber shop. All the barbers are black, all the customers white. Some of the customers waiting in the chairs around the wall wag their heads in appreciation of Smith's story; some read newspapers or magazines.

Harrison removes the towel from Barkwell's face.

BARKWELL

So, Cal, tell me what you know about this Jim Scott fellow they got down at the jail. Outsider here, ain't he? Big-city colored from Chicago?

HARRISON

Well, yes, Mr. Barkwell, I believe he lived up there until about two years ago.

Harrison lathers Barkwell's cheeks.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

He has people here, though. His mother grew up here; moved back four, five years ago, after her first husband died.

SMITH'S BARBER

She's an Akers, Mr. Barkwell. Believe a couple of her nephews, Sam and J.B., worked for you on the roads last summer.

Harrison shaves Barkwell's temples and cheeks. He has to pause as Barkwell speaks.

BARKWELL

Drives a fine car, don't he? A Hupmobile? Not many people in Columbia own a car good as that one. How do you suppose a nigger janitor could afford a car like one, Cal?

HARRISON

I couldn't say, Mr. Barkwell.

The shave continues. Barkwell purses his lips as he thinks.

BARKWELL

Maybe he sells some liquor out of that car, or maybe runs a crap game on the side? Or runs some women, maybe? You think that could be it?

Harrison wipes his razor with a towel and shaves delicately near one of Barkwell's temples.

HARRISON

I don't know much about liquor or craps, Mr. Barkwell. I know Scott's a churchgoer, same as me, and married to a schoolteacher, too.

BARKWELL

But I think we know, don't we, Cal, a few deacons that would buy and sell from the pews if they had half a chance.

Barkwell smiles broadly at his own joke; Harrison chuckles politely.

HARRISON

Probably so, but I'm naming no names.

Harrison wipes the lather away from Barkwell's cheeks and temples.

BARKWELL

It's a terrible thing, Cal, a rape. You read the TRIBUNE today?

Harrison applies the gentlest pressure with one finger to get Barkwell to lift his chin, then lathers Barkwell's neck.

HARRISON

I'm not much of a reader, Mr. Barkwell, and the shop's been full every minute.

In the neighboring chair, Smith rises. His barber unpins the drape from around his neck, shakes it lightly, reaches for a whisk and flicks it around Smith's shoulders.

SMITH

Unusually interesting paper today; educational for all, I'd say.

BARKWELL

(loudly, for all to hear)

Paper says there's no need to waste money on a trial when it's clear the man's guilty. Sound about right to you?

Harrison begins to shave Barkwell's neck, concentrating hard on his work. As he lifts his razor from a stroke:

BARKWELL (CONT'D)

Doesn't it sound about right to you?

Harrison wipes the razor on a towel, maintaining his look of concentration.

SMITH

Sounds about right to me, George. Right as rain.

Some of the waiting customers murmur their agreement. Harrison returns to the shave.

BARKWELL

How many years you been cutting my hair, Cal?

HARRISON

Most of your life, Mr. Barkwell, and a good deal of mine. I remember when we had to put the booster board across the arms of the chair.

BARKWELL

That's right, Cal, so you won't take offense if I give you a bit of advice

HARRISON

No, sir.

The shave is finished. Harrison returns the chair to its upright position.

BARKWELL

Stay off the streets tonight, and tell those sons of yours to stay off them, too. There could be trouble.

Harrison turns to pick up a hand mirror. Barkwell winks at the customers waiting in the chairs. Harrison turns back and hands the mirror to Barkwell.

HARRISON

There you go, Mr. Barkwell. I believe we're done here.

BARKWELL

(admiring himself)

Good work, Cal. Same as always.

The last scene I'll include shows the final moments of James Scott's life and closely follows Charles Nutter's detailed newspaper accounts reports, though some of the chattering dialogue between the henchmen (Hamp, Red, and Lou) is invented.

EXT. STEWART ROAD BRIDGE - NIGHT

A full moon above a bridge that spans a dark ravine. Cars are parked chaotically on the road at either end of the bridge, but the bridge itself is crowded with people, most densely beneath the streetlight at its center.

EXT. DECK OF THE BRIDGE - NIGHT

Most in the crowd are men, though there are a few women and boys. All are white. Many smokers, several drinkers. A few look into the ravine, but more focus their attention on the lamppost. They crane their necks, stand on tiptoe, jockey for position. A WOMAN IN A BONNET is mounted on a man's shoulders to get a better view.

JAMES SCOTT (36, black, just over 5') is backed against the lamppost, surrounded by taller men, including HAMP ROWLAND (40, scar across one eye), RED JOHNSON (35, flaming red hair) and LOU CARTER (30, rail thin, bow tie). The wall of tall men obscures the view of Scott, though we sometimes glimpse his Charlie Chaplin mustache.

HAMP

George has you pegged, Red. ! What kind of damn fool would think to bring a ten-foot halter rope to a hanging?

RED

I at least brought what I had. You brought nothing but your god-damned shoelaces.

LOU

Well, it won't be long now. George knows how to get things done right, and he's not a man to dawdle.

Shouts rise from the ravine:

FIRST VOICE (O.S.)

Say, what the hell's going on up there?

SECOND VOICE (O.S.)

Time's a-wastin'.

THIRD VOICE (O.S.)

You fellows getting cold feet, or what?

Carter looks over the bridge railing and is surprised by what he sees.

LOU (to himself)
Holy Crap!

From his POV we see that the ravine is teeming with hundreds of people, only dimly visible except for the glowing ends of their cigarettes. Most are looking up at the bridge, some aiming flashlights that way.

HAMP (O.S.)
Ah, here he comes. Barkwell to the rescue.

GEORGE BARKWELL shoves through the crowd, carrying a coil of heavy rope. As he approaches the lamppost, he pushes aside CHARLIE NUTTER (20, white, slender, notebook in hand), against FRANK MISSELWITZ (23, white). Both young men look up, alarmed.

NUTTER
Hey!

MISSELWITZ
Whoa there!

Barkwell grabs Scott by the shoulder and pins him, face outward, against the bridge railing. He removes a slender rope lassoed around Scott's neck and uses it to tie his hands behind his back.

LOU
(shouting over the railing)
Get ready down there. We're almost home.

Barkwell ties one end of his longer rope to the railing, fashions a noose in the other end, and loops the noose around Scott's neck. The crowd on the bridge and in the ravine grows more active, noisier.

HAMP
Attaway, George!

Barkwell picks Scott up and seats him on the bridge railing. The crowd below begins to cheer, whistle, catcall:

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Throw him down to us! We'll take care of him!

BARKWELL (to Scott)
Pray if you want to, then. That'll be the last of it.

SCOTT
Lord, have mercy on an innocent man.

Barkwell places both his hands against Scott's back.

WOMAN IN BONNET
Over the edge with him!

SCOTT
You don't need to push me. I'll jump.

Barkwell shoves Scott, who tumbles off the railing. There are cheers from the bridge; overlapping, incoherent shouts from the crowd below.

FOURTH VOICE FIFTH VOICE
Look out! Here he comes!

Hamp puts fingers in his mouth and whistles shrilly, like a man calling a dog.

I can imagine the lynching scene ending the film, but in my most recent draft of the screenplay, I opened with it. I followed it with George Vaughn's rumination: "No one in Columbia could seriously dispute what happened on the bridge that night The harder questions are what led up to the lynching, and why we found it impossible to have the murderers punished." And then I went back to the beginning, the attack on Regina.

A dozen years have passed since I did my research on the Scott lynching, and still the story haunts me. When I consider the possibility of a film, I find myself turning over all the pieces again, as if I were attempting to put together a huge jigsaw puzzle. I put one piece beside another and it raises the possibility of new meaning, new insight. When I visualize a scene, I re-imagine the inner lives of the characters. I do hope someone who understands film will take this project on.