

Program Title: Fight Hate with Love
Program Subject(s): Activism; African Americans; Artists; Prisons; Prisoners; Crime
Year Produced: 2017
Directed by Andrew Michael Ellis
Produced by Samie Khan
Distributed by MediaStorm
Reviewed by Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time: 82 minutes
Color or B&W: Color
Awards Received: N/A
Audience Level: General Adult
Review:

Fight Hate with Love is a difficult portrait of Philadelphia-based activist Michael “OG Law” Ta’Bon. Incarcerated in his late teens for armed robbery, Ta’Bon, now seven years out of prison and forty years of age, spends his days wearing an orange Department of Corrections jumpsuit, leg shackles slung around his neck. From a makeshift cage on the street or from the “Unprison Cell,” a twenty-foot trailer painted to look like a prison block, Ta’Bon lectures, raps, and harangues passers-by about staying out of trouble and out of prison. He travels around, sometimes with an assistant and often with his young stepson, Sir Rahn Jackson, speaking at youth centers, rallies, and on random street corners about how “the game” of crime is really a trap, especially for young black men.

Ta’Bon is committed to and passionate about the work he sees as his mission, but as the film goes on it also becomes clear that he can be volatile and emotionally immature. In several scenes, Ta’Bon and his wife, actress and Broadway singer Gwen Jackson, argue about the time he is missing with her because of his work. In his responses to her, Ta’Bon shows both old-school religious chauvinism of the “the man is the head of the household” type, as well as grandiose presumptions of his own importance and a savior complex. His interactions with stepson Sir Rahn Jackson, who calls Ta’Bon “Dad” and who clearly idolizes him, are similarly troubled. In one scene he can be gentle and patient with the boy, while in the next he can be harsh and short-tempered when he is worried about getting the next performance exactly right. Ta’Bon is jailed after an aggressive outburst at a rally in Selma, Alabama, and Gwen, citing his “lack of control,” files for divorce.

The film is well-made, and the filmmakers had intimate access to Ta’Bon and his family, capturing them in and between performances, and dealing with the fallout of Ta’Bon’s single-minded pursuit of his mission. At times he seems confused about what that mission really is. He variously refers to it as the “Unprison Movement” and the “Education Over Incarceration Movement.” Initially he seems focused on educating young people about making better choices to avoid legal trouble, an approach that ignores larger issues of racism in policing and the realities of mass incarceration. Later in the film he attends the “Rally for Our Lives” in Washington, DC (where he commits the faux pas of chanting “All Lives Matter” through a megaphone) and seems to gain some deeper insight, but that awareness does not filter into his message or mission. The viewer is left with the impression that Ta’Bon’s mission, first and foremost, is about exorcising the demons implanted in his own psyche by fifteen years in prison.

In the end, Ta'Bon is an engaging figure, whose faults enrich and add complexity to the documentary. However, it is difficult to identify educational uses for this film. For that reason, this film is Recommended with Reservations.

Reviewer Rating: Recommended with Reservations