

## *Miss Evers' Boys*



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*Miss Evers' Boys* portrays the emotional effects of one of the most amoral instances of governmental experimentation on humans ever perpetrated. It depicts the government's involvement in research targeting a group of African American males ("The Tuskegee Experiment"), while simultaneously exploring the depths of human tragedy and suffering that result, as seen through the eyes of Eunice Evers. The viewer watches as a seemingly innocuous program progresses into a full-blown ethical catastrophe—all the while taking Miss Evers through a moral journey, with her decisions having ramifications on the life and well-being of her best friends—her "boys."

### **I. Structure**

This movie deals with the ethical considerations present in human experimentation. The government, wanting to mimic the Oslo Experiments, intends to study a population of African-Americans inflicted with syphilis. The movie takes place in alternate settings, transitioning between a 1973 Senatorial hearing and the site of the actual study in Alabama, beginning in 1932 and moving forward. Miss Eunice Evers, a nurse at a local Tuskegee hospital, is the centerpiece of the movie.

### **II. Setting & Plot Summary**

With an ominous lead-in quote, *Miss Evers' Boys* begins to tell the tale of an emotionally courageous young woman and her struggle to protect her "children." Within the first few frames

of the movie, the viewer is automatically entrenched into the already tenuous history of racial tension in America—except, this time, under the auspices of segregation founded upon disease.

The movie begins, placing the viewer as an observer of a 1973 U.S. Senate Hearing, where we are first introduced to Miss Eunice Evers. Miss Evers is testifying as a nurse, one who took the nurse's oath to protect the health of those in her care. The claimed Senatorial goal is to discover the truth underlying the "Tuskegee Study." Miss Evers worked in the study from 1932-1972. The movie progresses throughout the course of the hearing, with testimony by Miss Evers and reminiscent scenes telling the tale of the study.

In the beginning, Miss Evers firmly supports the goal of the initial plan—to provide care and treatment to those suffering from syphilis. "It was the dawn of a new day," explains Miss Evers. At this point (pre-study), she believes that the government is sending her patients, and her city, the best funding and medical support available.

The viewer is then introduced to Miss Evers' Boys—a folk music group.<sup>1</sup> The musicians (four of them) are the first patients to provide blood samples, one of them being Caleb, an eventual love-interest of Miss Evers. Each of the men test positive for syphilis. At this point in the movie, everyone (including Miss Evers) is still under that assumption that "bad blood" is the culprit for the disease.

Ultimately, the funding for the initial study disintegrates. After a visit to Washington, various gentlemen confront Dr. Brodus, the head doctor in Tuskegee, with an offer for a new rationale for funding. The gentlemen explain their intentions of studying the African-American population, much like the Caucasian population in the Oslo Experiments (1891-1910). The government then reveals the true nature of the experiment—the proposed study of untreated African-Americans dealing with syphilis. The government promises future treatment and

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<sup>1</sup> The group names their band after Miss Evers when she drives them to their first musical show.

proclaims the future potential of the Tuskegee Experiment, appealing to Dr. Brodus' pride. Dr. Brodus agrees, naming the study, *The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in The Negro Male*.

412 men, afflicted with syphilis, participate in the study. In a telling interaction involving one of the first patients, Miss Evers suggests that the doctors explain to the study group that they are providing "back shots." Through her deceit, Miss Evers thus begins to involve herself in the "treatment." The tension she feels manifests itself in her facial features; the viewer can see her apprehension in this instance and throughout the movie. She is torn, but yet continues to help Dr. Brodus conduct the study.

As 6-months turns into years, Miss Evers continues to hide the secret behind the study. She urges the men to continue the study, in hope of future treatment—treatment that never comes, even through the eventual availability of penicillin.

Miss Evers' ultimate decision as to how she deals with the care and treatment of her "boys" will be left to the viewer. With the journey, however, comes a tumultuous story, exposing the hypocrisy of the United States Government through the eyes of Eunice Evers. Throughout the movie, as an audience, we want Miss Evers to defy all conventions and simply provide the necessary medicine to the patients. Yet, she struggles throughout with the pros and cons of such a decision. On one hand, she wants to support the experiment; yet, on the other, she wants to protect and comfort her friends. As we finally see in the end, as seen through Miss Evers' unique perspective, while one may question Miss Evers, it is the Senators themselves, and the government agents before them, who prove to be more worthy of moral appraisal.

### **III. Actors and Actresses**

Casting in this movie was directed by Jaki Brown-Karman and Robyn M. Mitchell. Each of the actors and actresses did an exquisite job at portraying their characters. There were some

key standouts, however. Alfre Woodard, a highly acclaimed actress, portrayed the diverse character, Miss Evers, in a very realistic manner. At no time did her emotions seem forced. Laurence Fishburne also did a fantastic job of portraying the “hero”—Caleb.

#### **IV. Cinematography and Lighting**

Overall, the choreography, by Dianne McIntyre, and the direction, by Joseph Sargent, was brilliantly simple. Directionally, this did not seem like a difficult story to re-create. With such a talented cast and the nature of the movie, there was no real need to over-direct. Instead, the director was simply able to sit back and allow his talent to portray the key features of the movie—the changing nature of emotions and the progress of the disease.

The key scenes in the movie revolved around a senate chambers and few key settings in Tuskegee, Alabama. Even with the lack of diverse settings, the cinematography crew was able to cast the characters in each scene in brilliant colors. From the boisterous nature of the many dance hall scenes to the poignant moment when Ben is by the campfire, each scene is necessarily simple, again, allowing the emotional struggle of the characters to, ultimately, touch the audience.

#### **V. Opinion - Value of the Movie in Understanding Biodefense Issues**

The goal of this movie is quite simple: to portray one of the most disastrous instances of human experimentation in United States’ history, not from an objective standpoint, but from the standpoint of understanding the emotional consequences inherent in such governmental decisions. From a general standpoint, there is no obvious connection between this movie and Biodefense issues. (The movie touches on various aspects of a study dealing with a disease—syphilis—that will probably never be used as a bioweapon.) What the movie does point out, however, is the lengths that an unchecked government may go to confirm a scientific idea. With

nothing but blunt statistical inferences, the government sought to prove a connection between race and syphilis—a connection that was never there. From a biodefense standpoint, the U.S. is at a tenuous crossroads. We have various pharmaceutical companies and government-supported agencies seeking to create vaccinations for various bioweapons. This discovery of vaccinations necessarily entails human study—human studies that, if unchecked and conducted under false auspices, creates the fears and consequences that this movie brilliantly portrays. From this perspective, *Miss Evers' Boys* successfully details the emotional consequences of such blind experimentation in the name of science.

The movie also does a good job of pointing out the deep chasm of ignorance separating the study group from the investigators. At no point, once the study commences, do any of the patients question Miss Evers or the government. They know nothing of their disease; the causes and treatment are unknown to the patients. This chasm of knowledge between the government and the patients allows for the progression of the study. Again, it points out the inherent problems in “ignorant” experimentation.

While the movie fails to provide an objective understanding of the study, it fully details the problems inherent in human experimentation from an emotional perspective. It takes the viewer through the introduction of the study under the false auspices of hope to the final conclusion of the study, with seemingly nothing of scientific value to show for it. At the least, this movie points out the need for scientific integrity and education that must accompany such studies of humans. In an era of unknown consequences of biological attacks, *Miss Evers' Boys* provides an example of why experimentation, while supporting the common good, should nonetheless be carried out in a purposeful and moral way.