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Back to Basics

The power and glory of *Moving Midway*

By David Edelstein Published Sep 7, 2008

The critic Godfrey Cheshire narrates his penetrating first film, the documentary *Moving Midway*, and his point of view is always right there on the surface. At the same time he's telling a story (brilliantly), he's thinking through it, testing its underpinnings, opening it up to history and analysis and divergent perspectives; and both strands—narrative and critical—come together with hardly a seam. (The stitches that do show are rather elegant.)

Midway is his cousins' antebellum North Carolina slave plantation, built in 1848, which now sits at the side of a road that sees 55,000 vehicles a day. His amiable cousin, Charles Hinton Silver, has made the decision to transplant the main house to a site unsullied by modernity, and Cheshire has arrived to document that staggering feat. He loves Midway—he spent happy times under its roof, and carries in his DNA a nostalgia for the bygone era of easy southern living.

But he's also a New York intellectual who has, he informs us at the outset, devoted himself to scrutinizing myths and the part they play in our lives, even when we're unaware of their influence. While Midway is being moved, Cheshire ruminates on the role of the plantation in American culture, from the myth of "moonlight and magnolias" to the counter-myth of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the counter-counter-myth of *Birth of a Nation* (which reinvigorated the Ku Klux Klan) to the most enduring of all antebellum fantasias, the film of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. Producer David O. Selznick's Tara, he reminds us, was a painted backdrop, and its devoted slaves might as well have been painted, too. The movie "transports us back to a lost golden age," says Cheshire. "Of Hollywood."

In the course of making *Moving Midway*, Cheshire encounters a branch of the Hinton family he never knew existed—a line that began when the man who built Midway had a son with the African-American cook. By chance, he meets a descendant of Hinton slaves, Robert Hinton, who teaches in NYU's Africana Studies Program and grew up in an East Raleigh public housing project. It's a measure of Cheshire's openness that Hinton becomes not just subject but a collaborator, his bitterness subdued but palpable. Hinton admits that on some level he wishes Cheshire hadn't been such a good fellow so he could hate him.

Cheshire doesn't dwell too much on their (muted) resentment at having no stake in the land their ancestors worked. He wants to end on a note of reconciliation. But I wish he'd explored the alleged discomfort of some of his white cousins with their black kinfolk. I also wish he'd stepped outside America to consider cultures in which serfs were freed and their masters violently disinherited. (Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* would be a useful counterweight to *Gone With the Wind*.) But these are quibbles: *Moving Midway* is thrilling. As the plantation begins its journey, composer Ahrin Mishan's elegiac strings echo its creaking procession, and we're suddenly inside the house, looking through the windows at the Hinton clan, as if through the eyes of the fabled ghost of longtime matriarch Mimi. It's a haunting sequence—a moment in which we, like Cheshire, say yes and no at once to this beautiful, terrible legacy.