SON OF SPEAKER

by Dorothy Broderick

Ed. note. The debut of "The Speaker," a new ALA film, at the 1977 Annual Conference, has had many reverberations. The great conference debate over its appropriateness as an ALA product was reported in AL's July/August issue. But articles, letters, and discussions on the subject continue to proliferate in the library world. One of the first articles submitted to AL was Dr. Broderick's, which gives useful background on the issue as well as a particular point of view. Following the article are a few letters concerning "The Speaker." AL selected those representing substantially new ideas on the subject.

Following the fierce Detroit arguments over The Speaker, we can let the wounds fester, or we can keep the communication channels open in the hope that some good will come from continuing to talk with each other. Either choice will be painful, but only the second offers a brighter future.

Before any discussion of the film per se, or the reactions to it, we need to backtrack and spell out some of the conditions that led up to the fight. No confrontation occurs out of the blue, and it is my contention that the seeds for the battle were sown during the Chicago Centennial Conference, fertilized at Midwinter in Washington, and harvested in Detroit.

A number of us left Chicago feeling good about the Racism and Sexism Awareness Resolution passed by Membership and endorsed by Council. Others, not understanding the difference between awareness training and indoctrination, saw the resolution as opening the doors to censors and all special interest groups who would mold libraries in their image. A not-very-subtle campaign against the resolution was launched in the library press, most notably within School Library Journal and LJ/SLJ Hotline.

Those attacks took an interesting form: they focused on the resolution's sponsor, Brad Chambers, director of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, rather than on the resolution itself. Opponents charged that: 1) Chambers joined ALA for the first time in order to present the resolution, and 2) he rammed the resolution down our throats.

Besides being an insult to all members and councilors who voted for the resolution, this argument denies our ability to separate an idea from its proponent. (In fact, the resolution that passed bears little resemblance to the one Chambers initially presented.)

Now, it may be mere coincidence that Lillian Gerhardt, editor of SLJ and outspoken opponent of Chambers, was also a member of the (then) Children's Services Division Intellectual Freedom Committee that asked the ALA/IFC to discuss whether the Racism and Sexism Awareness Resolution was in conflict with the Library Bill of Rights. What is certain is that the members of ALA/IFC were eager to deal with the subject; it took the committee between six and eight minutes (depending upon whose watch you believe) to vote six to two to recommend rescinding the Racism and Sexism Resolution. It was that heedless action that lost ALA/IFC any semblance of credibility with many of us. It was a bit hard to take the arrogance of a committee that could, without any meaningful discussion, decide to recommend rescinding an action that had been lengthy debated by Membership and Council.

Obviously the Executive Board felt the same way, since it refused to endorse IFC's recommendation to rescind. But the Executive Board did allow ALA/IFC to assign itself to "work during the next four months in order to develop a compatible set of Association policies that reflect the clear consensus of the American Library Association against sexism and racism and our fundamental belief in intellectual freedom as set forth in the Library Bill of Rights."

Already fuming that a committee which had voted to rescind the resolution should appoint itself arbiter of the apparent conflict, a group of councilors including Zoia Horn, E. J. Josey, Nancy Kellum-Rose, and myself learned that the ALA/IFC film on the First Amendment would focus on a racist's right to speak. Given the behavior of the IFC at Midwinter, I think we can be forgiven for jumping to the conclusion that such a committee could not be trusted to deal sensitively with the issue of racism.

The predisposition to believe the film would be racist was given a large boost when word came that the Executive Board at its spring meeting had voted to ban distribution of the film until after Membership had viewed it. The ban's being lifted upon advice of ALA's attorney did nothing to alleviate the bias against the film created by the initial decision.

Special viewings were ordered for members of the ALA/IFC, some of whom brought along friends, and within a matter of weeks a campaign had been mounted to remove ALA's name from the film. The library press could not fail to report the reactions to the film, and neither could it keep from contributing to the anti-film bias that grew daily.

That much is fact. Now a few words about the range of attitudes that people held on arriving in Detroit. Some, not having followed the library press, had no preconceptions whatever; some came determined to dislike a film they had not yet seen; some came determined to defend the film; and some—me among them—came with as open a mind as possible.

Expecting it to be so bad, I was delighted at how good it actually was.

I would be lying if I claimed I went to Detroit with a completely open mind. I just knew I wasn't going to like that film. Expecting it to be so bad, I was delighted at how good it actually was. By then, however, the issue for me was not the quality of the film, but whether the Association was being asked to engage in an act of censorship.

Some of the film's opponents argued that removing ALA's name from it would not constitute an act of censorship; others didn't care whether or not it was censorship; just so the name came off. About the latter, I have nothing to say. About the former: I think our perceptions differed, and I submit the following analysis of the results removing our name would have had.

In order to remove ALA's name from the film we would have had to buy up the copyright. That fact was made clear to all of us. Okay, so we buy back the copyright. Then what? We are left with ownership of a film from which we have removed our name. Would such an action change the fact that we had made it? Hardly. But what do we do with it? Do we hypocritically sell it and make money off it? How do we justify using membership money to publicize the film, and staff time to process orders for it? Would the members who voted to remove our name sit back and let us use membership money for those activities? They would have to answer that question for themselves. All I know is that,
given the emotions bouncing off Cobo Hall's walls, I saw removing ALA's name as the first step in total suppression of the film.

I fought for the right of librarians across the country to decide the issue for themselves. If they find the film boring, let them not buy it. If they find it racist, let them not buy it. If they feel that using it will stir up trouble in their communities—as if they had invited "the speaker"—let them ignore its existence. If the film is as bad as its opponents claim, it will die the natural death of an inadequate work in the marketplace.

The initial anti-film resolution, submitted to Membership by Nancy Kellum-Rose, focused on the film's irrelevance to libraries and librarians. The resolution subsequently debated "by substitution" was that prepared by the Black Caucus. Now, these are two very different bases for discussion, and the Kellum-Rose resolution deserved as much, if not more, discussion as the Black Caucus resolution.

But the film opponents perceived, correctly, that once the film was shown to have relevance to libraries and librarians (not very difficult to demonstrate, in my opinion), the battle would be over. In a debate on the Kellum-Rose resolution, the issue would have been whether we, as an Association, fully understand that the present Library Bill of Rights "recognizes that censorship of any materials and in any guise eventually affects the library" (p. 10, Intellectual Freedom Manual).

Such a debate might well have ended up dividing us—but it would not have pitted black against white or led to name calling. We would have ended up divided by our understanding of and commitment to the principles of intellectual freedom as represented by official ALA policy statements.

We might have discovered how many librarians still do not grasp the fact that, in censorship attacks, one defines not the material being attacked but the principle of the right to read (or view). Under ALA policy, the quality of the material is irrelevant. We might have learned how many librarians fail to see what a short step it is from censoring a person to censoring the writings of that person. We might have talked about how quickly an attack in one area spreads and affects everyone engaged in providing free access to information.

Yes, we might have learned a lot about ourselves and our perceptions of freedom, but the discussion never took place. How much did the pre-screening anti-film bias contribute to blinding so many members to the issues the film raises? We will never know.

What we do know is that when perceptions differ, as they did here, there is a sizable group of members who feel that there is a right and a wrong perception, and the way to settle differences is to declare one set of perceptions invalid by a vote. Why could we not act as mature, intelligent people and agree that we disagreed, and let it go at that?

As it happened, under the rules governing parliamentary debate, we weren't allowed to make any of those points. The resolution before us limited the scope of the debate, and the issue of freedom got lost in a fight over whether the film was or was not racist. The Detroit exercise in noncommunication was the result of parliamentary procedures, with one group trying to discuss the principles involved in removing the Association's name and the other group talking about the quality of the film. Now, freed of the restraint of Roberts' Rules, let me talk about the film itself.

I did not dream that accurately reflecting racism could bring a charge of being a racist.

There is racism in the film. It is practiced most notably by all those nice white folks who do not want to stir up trouble among the black folks. They do not want to hear a speaker who may bring to the surface the suppressed racist views of many members of the community. This is a more subtle form of racism than that practiced by the KKK, but it is racism, and I would have thought the Black Caucus and other members who have trained themselves to recognize racism would have been delighted at the opportunity to talk about how paternalism is just as much a racist attitude as is belief in the genetic inferiority of blacks—and a lot harder to fight.

I thought my colleagues knew that any accurate representation of American life would present a portrait of racism as indigenous to the culture. I did not dream that accurately reflecting racism could bring about a charge of being a racist. So much for my naivété!

Nor did I expect so many members to fail to see that the film itself is not a defense of racism. This is an interesting Catch 22, since some of the critics base their objections on the film's failure to depict one person as an outright racist—but woe unto the producers had such a person been present!

Once having labeled the film racist, it was logical that the Black Caucus resolution should go on to conclude that "the subtleties and innuendos of the film contribute to deteriorating social and interpersonal relations" (among whom, the document doesn't say, but we can assume the deterioration is within ALA).

Well, there isn't much question that social and interpersonal relations deteriorated in Detroit, and that the film played the same role in our lives as the invitation to "the speaker" played in the film. We wanted to be left alone to go on pretending that ALA was some paradise where there is little variation except for our ideas. The adults in the film wondered why the students "had to stir things up" by their activities, so we wondered why ALA/IFC had to stir things up by presenting us with the most difficult challenge to our commitment to intellectual freedom—namely, approving freedom of expression for someone whose ideas we abhor.

At Detroit we, the members of ALA, replayed the film's script. I regret that no one had the sense to get Frederick Wiseman and his crew to film our reactions to the film. Titicut Follies would then be seen as Wiseman's preliminary attempt at depicting the irrational; High School would be viewed as a minor achievement in portraying social conformity conditioning. If Wiseman had filmed in Detroit, there would have been only one deviation from The Speaker script: at Detroit, Victoria Dunn did not stand alone.

The Speaker has been made; by the narrowest of margins ALA's name remains on it. Clara Jones has told us that when the smoke clears, we will find the film has been divisive. If enough people repeat that view, and more people believe it, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy: It need not be so.

The Black Caucus resolution asked us to reject the film "out of respect" for the black members of the Association. While it may be hard for some of my black colleagues to believe, I fought to retain the Association's name "out of respect" for them—not as blacks, but as committed professional librarians, who, when the smoke cleared, would see that had they won, they might have lost a far larger battle. Let me offer a specific example.

In the summer of 1968, Don Lee was a participant in a black culture conference held on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. The black students arrived early and cordoned off the center section of seats, telling us that honkies were to sit on the sides. Fear of being labeled racists led us to acquiesce. Lee began the evening poetry reading by telling us that he wrote black poetry for black people and he would accept no comments about the content or the
quality of his poetry from whites. He then proceeded to read poems that were virulently anti-Semitic.

One member of the audience was an escapee of Hitler’s Germany—a man who had experienced firsthand the effects of anti-Semitism. Because Lee is a talented poet and a charismatic person, the effect of his reading was tremendous, and the immigrant raised his voice in protest to the hatred he was hearing expressed. He talked of the family he had lost to the concentration camps; he protested that he owned no tenements or stores in a ghetto. The black audience hooted him into tearful silence as we whites sat immobilized. Lee told him that if one Jew owns a slum property, all Jews are guilty.

As we fought in Detroit over the film, I kept wondering what the Black Caucus would have done and said if ALA/IFC had chosen the black culture conference encounter as the situation to be depicted in its film. If the Jewish members of ALA had asked “out of respect” that we reject such a film, would the Black Caucus have defended Lee’s right to his perceptions and his right to express those perceptions as forcefully as he knew how? I did then, and I do now.

At Detroit, we replayed the film’s script.

We cannot, as an Association devoted to the dissemination of all ideas, be so unsophisticated as to equate defending a racist’s right to speak with being a racist. It is the right to be heard that is all important, and not the quality of the ideas. We cannot allow ourselves to lose sight of the fact that suppression of one unpopular opinion opens the door to suppression of all unpopular opinions. Nor can we afford to forget that every major improvement in society—including the civil rights movement—began as an unpopular minority opinion. Most of all, out of total self-interest, we should remember that each voice silenced contributes to the possibility of our own voices being silenced.

Being heard in the marketplace is becoming increasingly important. Recent Supreme Court decisions lead me to believe that freedom of expression will only be protected to the degree that each of us is willing to practice it. The Speaker focuses on the First Amendment, and we had all better read the superb discussion guide that accompanies the film, and read the books on the bibliography, because it is becoming clear that unless we win the battle of the First Amendment, the Fourteenth Amendment is going to end up in the trash barrel.

A few months ago, I didn’t understand that concept. I’m grateful for “the film” for opening my eyes. I’m grateful that the controversy led me to have my first personal contacts with Judy Krug, who didn’t turn out to be such an ogre after all. And for additional fringe benefits, we can ponder the importance of a film that led Gerhardt and Brad Chambers to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in voting to remove ALA’s name from it. It wasn’t all deterioration of social and interpersonal relations! Let’s talk about the positive things that emerged and work harder so that our next film is technically better, but not less provocative.

**Other Voices, Other Views**

### No Substitutes

Since ALA is a multi-racial and multi-ethnic organization, it is revealing to note that no non-black group offered to substitute for the stereotyped black characters and permit the attachment of the label “genetically inferior” to itself. After all, it’s such a harmless little film.

_Elaine F. Adams, Texas Southern University Library, Houston_

### The Determining Factor

The furor over _The Speaker_ must seem like a fresh revelation to all the film librarians in the land. I was surprised not to see a comment about this controversial film from any film librarian in your very comprehensive report of the fray at ALA Detroit as re-played in the July/August _AL_. . .

Mr. Josey and the Black Caucus responded as they should have. Josey has had a sharpened sensitivity to black/white relationships all his professional career. I just believe you over-reacted, E.J.

At the hundreds of film preview meetings I’ve sat in and/or conducted, I found the immediate reaction to a film valuable, but not all conclusive when deciding whether to purchase the film. That is why we ask the members of the preview committee to write down their comments first, then we discuss the film. It is human nature that some, if not all, will tamper their opinions after the discussion. That is why a few days later, the chairperson and a couple of the most experienced film users in the library system look over the preview sheets, tally the vote, and make a final decision to purchase or not. A real determining factor is the length of discussion evoked during the preview session.

**Probably no consolation to the Black Caucus members, but I don’t see _The Speaker_ being used beyond our own library compounds—library schools, friends groups, and library inservice training—despite the sincere wishes of the IFC. How many middle-aged people are we going to get to watch a 40-minute film on a topic most concerned with a library problem? Lee Bobker broadened the film’s scope in order to widen its appeal with good intentions, but he had a difficult assignment.**

_George M. Holloway, The Free Library of Philadelphia_

**Appealed, Disappointed, and Disturbed**

I would like to state at the outset that I am opposed to censorship; and I do support the First Amendment. So I am not in favor of censoring the film.

However, I am appalled and disappointed that to articulate its support for the First Amendment freedoms and access to all information and ideas, ALA would choose a vehicle that at the same time negates the Association’s putative stand on another basic, but very crucial issue—the elimination of racism and the promotion of human dignity. At one point, the narrator describes “a group of intelligent and well-meaning people,” yet the entire characterizations and acting of one race failed to show much semblance of intelligence.

I can understand varied individual opinions, but I am disturbed that ALA, an organization in which many blacks are loyal and supportive members, can be willing to give its stamp of approval to a film that shows such lack of sensitivity in one area and yet not resolve the issue which it purports to espouse in another.

Since people and organizations, as well, are more often judged by what they do rather than by what they say, I would hope that in the future ALA will endeavor to let its actions speak louder than (or at least as loud as) its words.

*Anne M. Jackson, Southern University Library, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

**Racism Is the Issue**

Having seen the film and heard the debates, there is no question that it is racist in its stereotyped behaviors and its treatment of the subject. This raises three questions we must deal with: 1) Is ALA not further sanctifying the institution of racism by distributing the film? 2) Why was the film not more carefully monitored since it concerned such a sensitive subject with so many possible ramifications? 3) Why were both Membership and Council not able to hear and believe those who spoke so eloquently during the debates?

The first two questions will be dealt with rationally with actions and reactions to do what can be done to alleviate the consequences. Even so, they remain major points: The credibility of the Association depends on just how they are resolved.

The third question, however, is even more difficult to resolve. The speakers during the debates were clear and specific as they identified why the film was objectionable and the grounds for the assertion that it was racist. Yet, not enough people understood. The Black Caucus has a credible record of constructive and thoughtful efforts. Yet, sufficient numbers of Membership and Council did not honor this position. The "Preliminary Guideline for Reviewing Films for Racism-Sexism Awareness" distributed at...
the film showing was a positive effort to alert viewers to this concern. Yet, this did not convince.

Can it honestly be that a majority of ALA Members and Councilors do not see that racism is the issue, do not yet see that racism should be eliminated not perpetuated when it is discovered, do not yet see that we have defined the organization by our vote? Barbara Cowley, Tabernash, Colorado

Holocaust Victim Speaks

Your coverage of the Great Debate on the Speaker omitted quite a few important details. For example, you failed to mention that the first vote taken was on the SRTT resolution [to remove ALA's name from the film]. It was first mistakenly declared as carried, whereupon a number of members left the meeting. Since membership meetings on the last day of a conference are poorly attended anyway, I consider the final vote inconclusive at best.

Further, since you found it appropriate to quote, among others, a refugee from Nazi Germany in support of the film, fairness demanded an opposing view, that genocidal theories of racial superiority do not deserve the protection of the First Amendment.

As a survivor of the Holocaust, one who went through the hell of 12 concentration camps and, in addition, lost all members of his family, I expressed my support of the resolutions against retaining the ALA label. True, my deal was very emotional, but if you consider that you only need to substitute the names of Julius Streicher or Alfred Rosenberg for the likes of Shackley (or Boyd), you will know how I feel.

Isak Arbus, Brooklyn, New York

A Historian's View

Not yet having seen The Speaker and not having been present at the Council III meeting, I was somewhat surprised to see myself quoted on p. 574 in the last issue of ALA.* Nonetheless, I have no objection to the statement attributed to me since it accurately reflects my views. It's just that as a sometime historian I want to be sure the record is clear about my not having been present at what must have been a very stormy Council session.

For most of the past fifty years the American Library Association has supported the freest possible exchange of ideas, including those which many members personally found repugnant.

We have sometimes supported court cases which involved books or films which the majority of the membership probably would neither read nor promote in their libraries. I assume we have done so on the Jeffersonian principle that it is the right of an individual in a free society to make up his or her own mind. As Jefferson expressed it concerning a weak book published by a French author in 1813, "If M. de Bécourt's book be

*An AL reporter erroneously identified as Holley the member who said his university intended to show the film because it likes to provoke debate.

Amateurish Production

The film, I think, has the same weakness that many bad films have—a poorly written script. The people are caricatures, the confrontations are simply not believable, and the dialog sounds contrived. It is an amateurish production.

If the Association chooses to use drama as a vehicle for exploring First Amendment issues, I do not choose, at the very least, a competently written piece. Better yet, go all the way, seek out something really fine. Why produce a grade B film? Better nothing at all.

The importance of the message and the good intentions of those involved in producing the film are not given weight or looking poorly. First Amendment rights are neither well expressed nor well served. Instead, they are distorted and obscured, with the result that the film itself adds to the confusion surrounding the issue rather than helping to dispel it.

In spite of the opportunity it offers to see Mildred Dunock perform, the film surely does not deserve the endorsement of the Intellectual Freedom Committee or ALA.

Carol Barry, Central State University Library, Edmond, Oklahoma

On the Cutting Edge

In The Speaker, blacks are shown exercising their right to free speech in attempting to stop a racist speaker from appearing at a community school. This right of free speech is one which the activities of blacks and individuals have strengthened, thanks to the last two decades by their struggle. Blacks have been on the cutting edge of the struggle for human rights, and they have helped to make their communities better places for all to live in.

The issue of free speech is very much alive, and the black community has helped to keep free speech alive because this community perceives that it is a trap and a snare to save the film and all ideas should be protected because ideas are sacred. People are more sacred.

Librarians know that words are more than mere words—they are also passions, emotions, and actions. Blacks, too, like any other minority, know that certain words are not without harm, that words can hurt, especially if these are words are being used as a mere inquiry, as a seeking after truth.

The debates at the ALA convention should be summarized and printed to be distributed with all copies of the film. This would make the entire community focus on just what the film is saying about the United States, about the U.S. is, what it has been, and what it might become.

For some of the speech, blacks are those who disagree with the film say so, and say why they disagree.

But the film itself is not the "speaker" and is not saying that blacks are inferior. Rather, the film shows blacks exercising their rights and exerting their power to change a potentially dangerous situation.

The film may be an inferior production, but only if people are allowed to see it can they judge its merit.

Richard V. Anglin, Ramapo-Catskill Library System, Middletown, New York