

SUNDANCE

CSA: THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA ★★★★★

Starring Charles Frank, Evamarie Johnson, Rupert Pate and Larry Peterson. Directed and written by Kevin Willmott. Produced by Rick Cowan. An IFC release. Mockumentary/Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 91 min.

What if the South had won the Civil War? Writer/director Kevin Willmott, an assistant professor of theatre and film at Kansas University, speculates on this question with this slick Ken Burns-esque faux documentary. Presented as a production of the fictional British Broadcasting Service being aired for the first time on American television, "CSA" details the sweeping history of the Confederate States of America.



A confederate flag is planted on the moon's surface in "CSA," a mockumentary in which the South won the Civil War.

In Willmott's version, the Constitution of the Confederacy is modeled after the United States Constitution with one crucial difference: the legalization of slavery. Abraham Lincoln attempts to escape to Canada through the Underground Railroad, and, as portrayed in D.W. Griffith's film "The Hunt for Dishonest Abe," he's discovered disguised in blackface. Tried as a war criminal, Lincoln is eventually pardoned by President Jefferson Davis and exiled to Canada.

The Confederate flag flies over the White House, and, when the North accedes to Davis' plan to allow slavery in their states, thousands of black and white abolitionist Americans flee to Canada, leading to the construction of a "Cotton Curtain" between the two formerly friendly nations. Over the course of the first few decades of the 20th century, the CSA pursues the South's historically accurate aspiration to create a "tropical empire" by imperializing Mexico and South America. The country's ambitions demand more slave labor, acquired by striking diplomatic and financial deals with the leaders of several African nations.

Mid-century, as radio begins to communicate a world of freedom to American slaves, the government harnesses the influence of Madison Avenue to sell its new Family Values Act, projecting an image of happy slaves, happy families and an idyllic way of life.

"CSA" is a bold and thorough vision, illustrated by historical footage and cultural artifacts such as films and television programs—both authentic and made-up. The film works best when it completely rewrites history, as in the rise of a powerful political dynasty originating with Senator John Ambrose Fauntroy, one of Davis' top advisors. The Fauntroy family emerges as a centerpiece to the mockumentary as a descendant running for the presidency finds himself at the heart of a mounting controversy.

The further Willmott moves from the Civil War, however, the more difficult it is to speculate on its consequences. As a result, he forces his account to fit actual history, and it comes across as a little contrived that there was still a bombing on December 7, 1941, that launched the country's entry into World War II, but it was the CSA that incited it by bombing Japan. Or that John F. Kennedy still rose to the presidency, although as a Republican.

Still, the blend of fact and fiction is one of the film's greatest strengths and crucial to Willmott's argument that although the South may have lost the war, they "won the peace." It wasn't until after the war, he points out, that the North became segregated. And it's in the similarity between the cooked-up America he's created and the world in which we live that the film finds its power.

But even more revelatory than the film itself are the television special's invented commercial breaks, in which products such as the LoJack-like "Shackle" is promoted as a way to prevent one's slaves from running away and the Slave Shopping Network advertises a four-member family that can be broken up or purchased as a set. It's at once amusing and nauseating, and the laughter becomes more and more uncomfortable as the film progresses in a sign that Willmott is striking a nerve.

Most damning of all, a postscript reveals that some of the mock-doc's most ridiculously offensive products were actually available for purchase not only this century but in the last couple of decades. Suddenly, it's no laughing matter. —Annlee Ellingson

WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE ★★★1/2

Starring Mark Ruffalo, Laura Dern, Peter Krause and Naomi Watts. Directed by John Curran. Written by Larry Gross. Produced by Harvey Kahn, Naomi Watts and Jonas Goodman. A Warner Independent Pictures release. Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 104 min.

In the dreamy opening moments of "We Don't Live Here Anymore," two couples have gathered for an evening of drinking and dancing. At first it's impossible to determine who's with whom—a not unmeaningful narrative choice. It's not until Edith (Naomi Watts) offers to go out and get more beer and Jack (Mark Ruffalo) too enthusiastically volunteers to go with that one deduces that they're not together—though they will be soon.

Meanwhile, back at the house, Edith's casually sexy husband Hank (Peter Krause) hits on Jack's wife Terry (Laura Dern). It's a revelation that doesn't elicit the response she expects from Jack, whose affair with Edith by that time is in full swing and whose guilt would be alleviated if Terry were also cheating on him. Soon, through Jack's own unwitting machinations, Terry does sleep with Hank, a Lothario who lives by a personal code of loving his wife and daughter while sleeping with whomever he wants.

Meanwhile, the couples—both men are academics in a New England town, both women are stay-at-home moms—maintain a façade of normalcy against a backdrop of pastoral images and sounds, still getting together to jog and watch old movies on cable. But, rather than establish a workable, if awkward, contemporary compromise by simply settling into a pattern of spouse-swapping, the two couples face difficult choices driven by Jack's overriding remorse and Edith ever-hardening steely resolve.

"We Don't Live Here Anymore" is marked by the rich characterization of four starkly different people. As scripted by Larry Gross and directed by John Curran, there's a constant compare and contrast going on between Jack and Terry's household, which wakes up to hangovers and screaming kids, and the quiet idyll at Hank and Edith's; between Jack's indecisiveness and Hank's confidence; between Terry's slovenly housekeeping skills and ugly hysterics and Edith's sterile home and icy acceptance of her husband's infidelity. Because the characters are so skillfully drawn on the page and in the nuanced performances of these fine actors, their respective reactions to the turmoil in their relationships—as unexpected to themselves as to the audience—reveal true pathos and insight. —Annlee Ellingson