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Film Review: *10 Days in a Madhouse*

By Lauren Adams and Brent Bellah

The 2015 film, *10 Days in a Madhouse*, written and directed by Timothy Hines, follows the story of Nellie Bly's time at Blackwell's Island Asylum in New York. Bly's investigative story defined the history of the world of mental illness for women in 19th century America. Nellie Bly was a young journalist in the late 1880s whose investigations exposed many of the atrocities against humanity at insane asylums. Her works provided insight into the lives of female patients at Blackwell's Asylum, which eventually led to reform of mental institutions by the United States government after the publication of her works. Her significance to the history of mental illness and feminism was tremendous, and her accomplishments made her a prominent figure of women's rights in the 19th century.

Director Timothy Hines attempted to portray her as a historic figure, but his film lacked the accuracy and the respect that should be attributed to someone who accomplished as much as Nellie Bly. Nellie Bly's story is complex, based on a true narrative, and it involves a sensitive subject. Bly's story should focus on her accomplishments and their processes, but instead, the director utilized a horror-esque style for many of the scenes. The amount of publicity this film gathered throughout social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, gave the pretense that this should have been a breakout film for Hines as a director. The previews for the film did not justify the film's vision the way Nellie Bly's 1887 memoir of the same name did for its readers. Hines failed to emphasize any of Bly's important accomplishments, and the film was historically inaccurate. The lack of effort inhibited Hines from creating an effectively substantial piece of history.

Most aspects of the film were less than satisfactory, but nothing could compare to the acting. The ensemble of actors seemed less experienced than those of a high school drama class. Caroline Barry, the star of the film (in her debut), was the most talented of them all, but her portrayal of an over-enthusiastic young Nellie Bly fell flat. Her emotions seemed forced and were reminiscent of a stage play rather than a film. The talents of Caroline Barry could not save the film from its cast of untalented

actors. The supporting characters, such as Blackwell's Asylum patients Tillie Mayard and Anne Neville, were portrayed by actresses that seemed very inexperienced. Their lackluster acting caused the characters to become unrelatable and unemotional. There was not much depth to any of the characters throughout the movie to enable viewers to sympathize with them. Most of the characters remained unmemorable, and any sympathy the audience was supposed to have for them in Bly's original narrative was erased.

At the beginning of the film, Bly feigned insanity in order to condemn herself to be institutionalized. This scene was comedic in tone, which seemed inappropriate to the theme of the film and Bly's original memoir. The actress used humorous noises and facial expressions in her attempts to appear "insane," which reinforced the idea that this part of the film was intended to be comical. Bly's memoir took this far more seriously.

I remembered all I had read of the doings of crazy people, how first of all they have staring eyes, and so I opened mine as wide as possible and stared unblinkingly at my own reflection. I assure you the sight was not reassuring, even to myself, especially in the dead of night. I tried to turn the gas up higher in hopes that it would raise my courage. I succeeded only partially, but I consoled myself with the thought that in a few nights more I would not be there, but locked up in a cell with a lot of lunatics.¹

In the book, Bly braced herself for her uncertain future in the asylum, where she knew patients were being treated inhumanely. This creative liberty on the part of the filmmakers was extremely inappropriate and unjust to Bly's legacy. While it was likely an attempt to add comic relief, feigning insanity to further a cause for human rights should not be viewed as humorous; it should have been portrayed with a serious tone.

In addition to the film's terrible acting, there were design choices that made it nearly impossible to believe the reality of Bly's story. The ghastliest decision in filming was the green screen

¹ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (New York: Ian L. Munro Publishers, 1887), accessed April 08, 2016, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/bly/madhouse/madhouse.html>.

element. Although many films use green screens that aid in the setting and atmosphere of the movie, *10 Days in a Madhouse* used it so apparently that the film seemed cheap and lost its meaning. The actors' movements were not timed with the movements of the inserted background, which added to the cheap effect. The outlines of the actors in front of the green screen were also so apparent that they were obviously not in front of a physical background. Along with the green screen, the sound quality is awful, showing the lack of budget or artistic value chosen for the film.

The opening credits provided the audience with ominous music and creepy old pictures that had been animated, moving in an unsettling way. This introduction seemingly prepares the audience for a horror film, which is a stylistic element that a film dealing with the misunderstood subject of the history of mental health should shy away from. Nellie Bly's narrative was an attempt to expose the inhumane treatment of patients at Blackwell's Asylum. Her work should not be trivialized by including elements of the horror genre, such as ominous lighting, sounds, characters, and scenery. A specific scene involved a severely mentally disabled woman who stabbed a supervisor. Bly had a specific purpose for adding characters such as this to her story – to show that mentally ill people were not given the treatment they needed from the staff, and thus, reacted violently. The film portrayed some mentally ill people as fearsome beings, using them to add to the horror elements in the film. This problematic aspect of the film is potentially harmful to the already negative views of mental illness that exist within society.



An example of costumes worn in the film, Courtesy of <http://timothyhines.blogspot.com/2015/04/10-days-in-madhouse-nellie-bly-story-to.html>, 2016.

While the film attempted to follow the plot from the original narrative, the filmmakers did not seem to care about historical accuracy in the cases of the costume design. The

costumes were horrendous. Before going to Blackwell's, Nellie was seen wearing extravagant gowns made of polyester, which looked like they had been made by a Halloween party store, rather than designed by a professional costume designer. Caroline Barry's extremely cheap wig made the character look like a caricature of the woman she intended to portray. While the main character's clothing was accurate occasionally, some of the other articles of clothing were not accurate for the 1880s. Instead, the costumes resembled fashions of the 1910s, including a gown worn by the character of Louise Schanz who looked like she came out of a cheap, knock-off version of *Titanic* (1997). The director clearly misrepresented the attire the women wore while in the asylum. Bly stated in her book that the patients wore their actual dresses, which defined their waists and had full skirts. Instead, the patients in the film wore dirty looking hospital gown-like rags, which perpetuates the idea that insane asylums looked exactly like they do in horror movies, when many did not.



Example of clothing worn by patients, as illustrated in *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, 1887.

The costume design was not the only historical inaccuracy present in the film. The scenes that took place at Blackwell's Asylum were filmed at the Fairview Training Center in Salem, Oregon. This notorious institution for the developmentally disabled

was built in 1908 and is known as one of the cradles of eugenics.² The 1908 hospital was a mistake for historical accuracy. Blackwell's Asylum, where Bly's memoir takes place, was designed in the 1830s, and the architecture and interiors would have been entirely different from the ones displayed in the film. The whole building had been restyled for the film; the rooms were dark and dirty, lacking historical accuracy (due to the different eras of architecture), and extremely reminiscent of a horror film. It seemed as if a sadistic horror movie villain would pop out at any moment. Bly's narrative painted a different picture. She recognized the hopeless atmosphere of the asylum, but it was not the filthy place portrayed in the film. Upon her first glance, Bly described one of the patients' sitting rooms. "In the center of the room was a large table covered with a white bedspread, and around it sat the nurses. Everything was spotlessly clean and I thought what good workers the nurses must be to keep such order."³ This shows the blatant disregard on the part of the filmmakers to create a historically accurate setting. Instead of accurately portraying the asylum as described in the narrative, they chose to use a setting that created an atmosphere of horror, and helped perpetuate the stigma surrounding the history of madness.

Timothy Hines' stylistic choices did not fit in with the overall story, and showcased the lack of effort in portraying accurate historical events. Bly's experience in the asylum paved the way for increased rights for women and the mentally ill. The ending of the film seemed rushed, and the audience was left without the most important part of Bly's experience – her historic contribution to the rights of women and the mentally ill. There were short scenes of Nellie Bly attesting in court on behalf of the women in the asylum. A quick scene showed her trying to prove the experiences of the patients by showing judges what she had endured in the asylum, and another quick scene changed to everyone celebrating her successes. The ending continued to add small anecdotes of what she did later in her career, in an attempt to create a happy ending.

The film closes with a children's folk ballad, titled "Nellie Bly," by Ellis Paul. The song choice reiterated the poor quality of the entire film and left the audience desiring a refund. The lyrics

² "10 Days in a Madhouse (2015): Trivia," *IMDb*, accessed April 08, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3453052/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv.

³ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*.

from the song repeat “Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly the world could be yours if you try, if you try.”⁴ The filmmakers obviously did not heed the song’s advice, as the film was nothing but a disappointment due to a large lack of effort. Timothy Hines’ version of *Ten Days in a Mad-house* could have been a great opportunity for a historically accurate film. However, his attempt was not successful. He directly stated in his personal blog that he wanted to follow the book exactly, which leaves no room for artistic liberty.⁵ However, his film reflected none of his visions for accuracy and displayed too much artistic liberty. There should be respect towards such an emblematic individual as Nellie Bly, who risked being permanently locked up at Blackwell’s Asylum to bring awareness to issues faced by women and the mentally ill. Hines’ version of Bly’s story did not reflect her work’s historical significance.

⁴ Ellis Paul, "Nellie Bly," accessed April 08, 2016, http://www.ellispaul.com/index.php?page=songs&category=The_Hero_In_You&display=5627.

⁵ “10 Days In A Madhouse - The Nellie Bly Story to Screen at Marché du Film Festival de Cannes,” *Timothy Hines’ Blog*, April 30, 2015, accessed April 08, 2016, <http://timothyhines.blogspot.com/2015/04/10-days-in-madhouse-nellie-bly-story-to.html>.

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Author Bios

Lauren Adams is working on two Bachelor's degrees in history and music. In history, she is focused on public and oral history while also pursuing a certificate in museum studies. While in music, her emphasis is on piano. Lauren hopes to graduate and transfer to UCLA where she will continue her education in library sciences. Her end goal is to work in music archiving or at a museum of music. Lauren is currently involved with two internships: The Dorothy Ramon Learning Center and the Water Resources Institute at the Palm Desert campus. She is honored to be contributing to the CSUSB student ran journal, *History in the Making*. Lauren wants to thank the history department (students, faculty, and staff) for their encouragement in pursuing her education. She would like to extend special thanks to Dr. Kevin E. Grisham and Dr. Thomas Long who have been extremely supportive mentors, as well as having helped her through her educational journey. In addition, she would like to thank her good friend Casey for accepting her awkward ways and stealing schedules the very first day they began at CSUSB (specifically for urging her to submit her work to the journal). She wishes to mention her family – mom, dad, and sisters for always supporting her in all of her decisions.



Brent Bellah will be graduating with his B.A. in public and oral history, and a certificate in museum studies, in June 2016. He was involved with the Patton State Hospital Museum, a mental health history museum that was created almost entirely by CSUSB students. He is very passionate about history and wishes to help change the way the world views mental health.