

‘Beyond the Lights’ Has a Respect for Storytelling

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- [Beyond the Lights](#) [2]
- [Danny Glover](#) [3]
- [Gina Prince-Bythewood](#) [4]
- [Gugu Mbatha-Raw](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Love & Basketball](#) [7]
- [Minnie Driver](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Nate Parker](#) [10]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [11]
- [Relativity Media](#) [12]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Writer/Director Gina Prince-Bythewood, the creator of the cult favorite “Love & Basketball,” is back with another original story that she created, an intimate and romantic perspective on a singer on the path to nowhere, despite superstar-level fame. Gugu Mbatha-Raw stars as that singer in “Beyond the Lights.”

As she did in “Love & Basketball,” Prince-Bythewood adds more than just a surface story of desperate problems to go along with desperate fame. Mbatha-Raw portrays a Beyoncé-type performer, who has a passion for singing but not the trappings. The writer/director fashions a world of fans, co-performers and a mother, all who don’t understand what it’s like to maintain the profile thrust upon the singer. This pushes against the psyche of the whole story, which is part of that atmosphere that makes tension and the subsequent romance more substantial. This also gives a bit more starch to the usual love story, and provides the singer character with a little more redemption.

The film opens in the past with a stage mother (Minnie Driver) who drags her daughter Noni to a talent show. The girl performs admirably, but the second place trophy is not enough for the driven mama. The next scene is now, with Noni (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) now a hip-hop singer, waiting to break out as a solo artist. The reaction to this phase in her career has Noni teetering on a hotel balcony, and saved from jumping by her police bodyguard Kaz (Nate Parker).



Mother (Minnie Driver) and Noni (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) in ‘Beyond the Lights’

Photo credit: Relativity Media

Kaz is an ambitious law officer, using it as a step to a political career. The hero and the woman he saved play a game of cat-and-mouse,

circling each other but not committing. Meanwhile the record company is jumpy themselves, thinking the bad press of the incident will derail the upcoming album, plus Noni’s mother and rap partner don’t approve of the budding relationship. When Kaz and Noni do finally connect it means consequences for both.

The film is expertly cast, with all the main characters adding more to their roles than the easy surface. Minnie Driver nicely does the stage mother, giving enough backstory in the first scene at the talent show to follow through on her behavior with her grown daughter. Gugu Mbatha-Raw applies a superstar spirit, with that dash of dread, that makes Noni work. And Nate Parker, although a bit saintly, pulls off Kaz and keeps him three dimensional.

There is a savoriness to “Love & Basketball” that keeps it memorable, and that same feeling is in “Beyond the Lights.” There is a depth of character that separates a typical show business story and provides a rooting interest for the events, and make Noni and Kaz more interesting. The political angle for Kaz, not explored enough, had him forging the same path as Barack Obama. Whether having a Beyoncé for First Lady is possible, well there’s the sequel.

The backstage drama and romance has been around since Chaplin was in baggy pants, and this one adds a bit of spice by indicating how Noni’s sexualization may be the cause of her distress. It’s one thing to be passionate about singing and song communication, it’s another to be dressed up in purple wig and metal breastplate and twerk like a demented Gene Kelly. There are enough arrows against modern pop sensibilities to keep everyone on their toes.



Kaz (Nate Parker) is Protector and Lover in ‘Beyond the Lights’

Photo credit: Relativity Media

The surface story does suffer a bit from predictability, and the many obstacles put in the way of the lovers don’t make much sense. For example, the movie pretends the music industry doesn’t have one foot in the grave, with record executives straight out of central casting. In real life, they would be grateful for the suicide attempt, because it would move another 10,000 units with the free publicity – 100,000 if the attempt was successful.

This is a great date movie, as it were, and nothing like a little romance between two disparate souls to make that post movie cocktail more satisfying. And I-eee-I, will always love yooooou. Oops, wrong backstage musical.

“Beyond the Lights” opens everywhere on November 14th. Featuring Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Minnie Driver, Nate Parker and Danny Glover. Written and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. Rated “PG-13”



[13]

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/beyond-the-lights>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/danny-glover>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/gina-prince-bythewood>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/gugu-mbatha-raw>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/love-basketball>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/minnie-driver>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/nate-parker>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald>
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