

## Brainiac Fulfillment is the Key to ‘Hidden Figures’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In America, there is the history we have, and the history that we want to have happened. “Hidden Figures” falls into the second category, but it’s presented in such a way that it fulfills the goal – tell an amazing story about a group of African American women who helped launch men into space.

The performances, the composition and the style of the film is all earnestness, but that does not distract from the purpose of the story and the fact that it is based on what actually happened. It succeeds mostly through the performances, as Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer and newcomer Janelle Monaé express the dignity, frustration and personal triumphs of having brilliant theoretic minds that were born into the obstacles of being African American (and women!) in the 1950s/60s USA. Even in the groan-worthy moments – also known as modifying history – the film reaches for a higher purpose. It becomes inspirational and aspirational.

The film begins with three African American women, Katherine (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy (Octavia Spencer) and Mary (Janelle Monaé) working on a disabled car in late 1950s Virginia. Inevitably, a police officer comes by and wonders why they are taking up his space. It turns out they all work for NASA in their “computing” department, because of their talents for working complex mathematics to launch a human being into orbit.



L-R: Janelle Monáé, Taraji P. Henson and Octavia Spencer in 'Hidden Figures'

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Releasing*

The story follows the three through the trials of being both black and brilliant. American apartheid still exists, but at NASA it's about the brainpower over the racial divide. The space program is overseen by officious Al Harrison (Kevin Costner), a no nonsense manager who doesn't have time for particulars, including naysayers like his associate Paul (Jim Parsons). If John Glenn is to orbit the planet, they will need all the creative minds on earth.

The film's intent rests on the women's stories, and that focus is the highlight. The three are in survival mode, knowing that their livelihoods depend on their abilities. The difficulties are expressed through the white supervisors who barely recognize them (symbolized through a standout portrayal by Kirsten Dunst). This kind of morality has been expressed before in films, but rarely do the African American characters work from a position of strength...and rarely is that strength just sheer intelligence.

Taraji P. Henson ("Empire") handles the brunt of the positioning as Katherine G. Johnson (who was recently recognized for her achievement by President Obama) and her performance actualizes the deep well of her confidence. Numbers and theoretical mathematics were her gift, and the expression of that gift had no barriers. Henson's portrayal is reserved yet strong, followed by the always great Octavia Spencer as an early computer expert and expressed in a different type of challenge for Janelle Monáé's character, but equally fascinating.





The 'Computing Room' Anticipates Launch in 'Hidden Figures'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Releasing

There were parts of the film that had me thinking “no way,” and why did they even need them? I didn’t read the book the film was adapted from, but I doubt that the head of the NASA space program would sledge hammer a restroom sign. America will be making up for the sin of its racism seemingly forever, but the way to healing is to show truth, not the made-up “victories” of how we wish the truth was. The women’s stories is the key to fulfillment in this film, not the white person’s reaction to it.

By the way, there are three scenes in “Hidden Figures” that also are depicted in the brilliant film “The Right Stuff.” In that film, the space race was given a jaundiced eye, and you believed the astronauts to be human. In “Hidden Figures,” they were cardboard cut-outs. When Alan Shepard says, “light this candle” (as was also intoned in “The Right Stuff”), the actor did it with all the veracity of a cream cheese commercial. Godspeed, Katherine G. Johnson.

**The staff and contributors of HollywoodChicago.com – including Adam Fendelman, Patrick McDonald, Spike Walters Jon Lennon Espino and photographer Joe Arce – wish all our readers the happiest of holidays. Keep coming back, that’s our gift.**

*“Hidden Figures” releases in Chicago on December 25th. Featuring Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monáé, Kevin Costner, Kirsten Dunst, Jim Parsons and Mahershala Ali. Screenplay adapted by Allison Schroeder and Theodore Melfi. Directed by Theodore Melfi. Rated “PG-13”*



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