

Film Review – Hidden Figures

✘ Hidden Figures

Direction: Theodore Melfi

Screenplay: Theodore Melfi, Allison Schroeder

Cast: Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monáe,

Length: 127 minutes

Rating: PG

Based on a true story, this biographical drama chronicles the hidden figures that worked at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the effort to help the United States win the space race against Russia during the 1960s. Katherine Goble (Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Monáe) are the three African-American women who act as the focus of the film and whose experiences we follow as they navigate life and work together during segregation.

All three are exceptional mathematicians who commute to work at the Langley Research Facility in Hampton, Virginia. Goble works as a human computer performing calculations in the West Area Computers division before being assigned to help the Space Task Group in a cold marble building with segregated bathrooms. Vaughan is the unofficial supervisor of the Programming Department but doesn't receive the title or pay of an official supervisor. Jackson has aspirations to become an engineer but is refused attendance to night classes to obtain the degree as it would mean learning in a whites-only school.

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Racism and sexism such as this is made against them openly and constantly. At the opening, the car in which the three women are travelling breaks down resulting in particularly tense

encounter with a white male police officer.

In order to access the coloured bathrooms at some distance from her workplace, Goble must run, laden with documents, there and back in all weathers only to be criticised for leaving her post for so long as well as being uncredited for the work she produces. Vaughn is berated then escorted out of a public library for daring to search for books in the whites-only section.

Jackson must acquire a court order to give her permission to study in an unsegregated class. Ironically, they were needed for their skills but not wanted as people, viewed only as a necessary evil for the greater good, but it was these unprovoked humiliations from which they drew their strength to succeed and progress.

Despite the incalculable contribution that these women were making to their country, they were daily affronted and disrespected but instead of collapsing under the pressure, they excelled.

Unfortunately, the film does contain historical inaccuracies, however these don't detract from the overall aim of the story. Existing mostly to simplify potentially complicated sub plots for cinematic drama and compromising significant dates of achievements instead of the actual milestones made by the women themselves, it doesn't threaten the audiences' experience.

In real life, Katherine Johnson became the first woman in the Flight Research Division to be credited for co-authoring a research report in 1960.

She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2015 at 97 years of age.

Dorothy Vaughan became the first black supervisor at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) after being promoted to the post of supervisor of West Computing in 1949.

Mary Jackson successfully completed her courses and became the first black engineer at NASA. These women were pioneers in so many ways; women could take leadership of others, compete with men for professional jobs and have family and careers, regardless of race.

What is also equally extraordinary is the fact that this story has only now been made into a film, half a century after the events it depicts. Whatever the reason, the wait has been worth it.

We are rewarded with a glowingly uplifting story with three inspiring women at its heart as well as featuring impressive period detail and stately cinematography. Hidden Figures has been nominated for a BAFTA, two Golden Globes and three Oscars, including for Best Picture, winning the cast awards from the Screen Actors Guild and National Board of Review.

Mon e is relaxingly confident in her supporting role and Spencer has received Oscar and Golden Globes nominations for her supporting role, while deserved for its subtlety, should really have gone to Henson whose story is the heart of the film.

Despite being marketed as the leading role, she delivers a strong yet emotional performance; standing up to injustice and simultaneously being a single parent to three young children, traveling the furthest of all of the characters while not overshadowing the other cast members and their own storylines.



It seems shamefully astonishing today, but the uncomfortable world that is portrayed before us was once an accepted part of society. With messages supporting civility and equality

essential for any time, they seem especially apt given the current uncertain political climate of seemingly shaded prejudice and xenophobia.

We are therefore presented with an earnest and absorbing but nevertheless serious and poignant warning of the human cost of returning to the dangers of the past. While human rights and civil liberties have come a long way from the time of the film there is still work to do. Celebrating the hope and resilience of the human spirit, this film reminds us that acceptance of people and co-operation with people will allow us to achieve the unimaginable no matter what they look like. Not even the sky is the limit.

Hidden Figures is in cinemas now.

8/10

Images courtesy of 20th Century Fox