

Saturday, February 16, 2019

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‘Beale Street’: One Of The Best Films of 1959

Guess Who’s Not Coming To Dinner?

December 18, 2018 Michael Giltz

Everyone deserves to see films about themselves, films starring beautiful people that tell their stories with dignity and respect. Such movies play an important role. We all want to be seen. Yet this noble, self-conscious and pious movie feels about 60 years too late. If this were 1959, Stanley Kramer were the director and the saintly Sidney Poitier was the star, *If Beale Street Could Talk* would be applauded as a landmark. Today? It will still be applauded, but probably with polite indifference.

Of course, it couldn’t be made in 1959 since director Barry Jenkins based this new film on the fine 1974 novel by James Baldwin. In it, we witness a story of pure devotion between childhood sweethearts. (It’s a pity Jenkins didn’t tackle the far more vital, complicated and brilliant Baldwin novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*.)

In *Beale Street*, Tish (KiKi Layne) is a 19-year-old girl and the narrator. She is definitely a girl and not yet a woman, as innocent and naïve as a young black woman from modest means can be in America. Fonny (Stephan James) is her man. The movie begins with a storybook glow as they declare their love.

That moment takes place in a New York City positively alight with their wholesome and beautiful nature. They glide through streets in tasteful clothes, dine in restaurants where Fonny chats casually in another language with his waiter friend Pedrocito (Diego Luna) and discover a loft space that a genial landlord (Dave Franco) will actually rent to a young black couple. For a moment they can see the American Dream coming true right before their eyes.

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK (2/5 stars)

Directed by: Barry Jenkins

Written by: Barry Jenkins, based on the novel by James Baldwin

Starring: KiKi Layne, Stephan James, Regina King, Brian Tyree Henry

Running time: 117 min.

That dream derails when a Puerto Rican woman wrongly accuses Fonny of rape. A racist cop is to blame for the set-up. You immediately know he's racist because the film adores beauty and this sneering cop has pock-marked skin. Fonny goes to jail, Tish goes to work, her family rallies to hire a lawyer and the baby is born in one of the simplest (and cleanest) deliveries in recent cinema history.

Jenkins has followed up his welcome, Oscar-winning triumph in *Moonlight* with this dream project. It includes many of the same features: a production design that would make Douglas Sirk proud and a visual strategy where actors speaking to one another directly address the camera and thus speak directly to us.

And it's all a little...polite. The lovers are so wholesome it's a surprise to realize they've made a baby. Indeed, the scene where they finally consummate their lifelong romance is helplessly timid. Layne and James are gorgeous people, so when James takes off his shirt one might feel a rush of pleasure. Except they're so shy you're worried they won't know what to do. He looks down bashfully, she demurely removes her own shirt and they're so decorous, so tentative, so Adam-and-Eve innocent about it all that you keep waiting for the scene to fade to black.

It's a sanctifying strategy. But we don't need saints any more; we don't need Sidney Poitier to be the perfect Negro. That Sunday-best demeanor drains the story of vitality.

The novel has two set pieces I anticipated: a meeting of the lovers' two families when Tish announces she's pregnant and a dark monologue by Fonny's best friend (Brian Tyree Henry) about the dehumanizing horrors of



I'll get you a nomination. I promise.

prison. Both falter. The first should be hilarious, but Jenkins makes it too stolid to really take off. The second works a little better, but while Henry does his best, it's far too discreet to really convey the menace of the book at that moment.

In a desire to inject some cold reality, Jenkins breaks up the action with historical photos of infamous discrimination against people of color. It's like a splash of cold water. And it seems to come from a different universe than the rose-colored, dignified, quietly righteous and admittedly rather dull world of Beale Street.

Tags: Barry Jenkins, Brian Tyree Henry, Diego Luna, If Beale Street Could Talk, James Baldwin, KiKi Layne, Sidney Poitier, Stephan James

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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for many outlets, such as New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He's co-host of the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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