

Hidden Figures [PG] 2016|USA|127 min

UK release date	17th February 2017
Director	Theodore Melfi
Screenplay	Allison Schroeder; Theodore Melfi
Cinematography	Mandy Walker
Cast	Taraji P Henson (Katherine G Johnson); Octavia Spencer (Dorothy Vaughan); Janelle Monáe (Mary Jackson); Kevin Costner (Al Harrison); Kirsten Dunst (Vivian Mitchell); Jim Parsons (Paul Stafford); Mahershala Ali (Col. Jim Johnson)

Hidden Figures is about how three black female Nasa scientists helped send John Glenn into space and was premiered a couple of days after the death of the astronaut, aged 95.

Although it looks like a movie machine-tooled to ride the wave of #OscarsSoWhite backlash, its actual ambitions seem far more modest: to entertain a lot, to educate a bit and to cheerlead pretty much constantly.

Taraji P Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe star as our boffins: Henson is Katherine Johnson, a brilliant “computer” (now 98 years old) promoted to a role in the Space Task Group that was responsible for sending Glenn into orbit. Spencer is Dorothy Vaughan, who supervises a team over at the West Computing Building, but is denied the title and pay packet to match by condescending colleague Kirsten Dunst.

Monáe, meanwhile, is Mary Jackson, who must lobby a local judge to allow her access to a local segregated school so she can take night classes that will enable her to train as Nasa’s first female black engineer. The arcs of their stories – as well as Henson’s romance with army man Jim (Mahershala Ali, who, like Monáe, turns in a strong turn following an indelible one in Moonlight) – intersect with Fibonacci precision and convenience, yet for all its formula there’s something irresistible about Hidden Figures.

It’s semi-soap: the supporting characters at least are fleshed out to a barely skeletal extent. Dunst is dealt a harsh hand, but Jim Parsons fares even worse with

his role as a snippy, racist colleague to Henson, forever rolling his eyes in unprogressive protest. Kevin Costner rides the waves of cliché with slightly more dignity as their superior: a man who cares only for the numbers, not the colour of those totting them up.

An extended riff depicting Katherine's bladder trials as she must make the 40 minute round trip from her desk to the only loos on the campus designated for black women (often, horrifically, to the soundtrack of a new Pharrell Williams track called Runnin') are among the most tonally askew in the movie. Yet Costner somehow manages to salvage some audience satisfaction from the affair, when he finally smashes down a segregated bathroom sign and declares: "At Nasa, we all pee the same colour."

Glenn, too, is a clean-cut good guy: a trouper when he first meets the girls, distinguishing himself by coming over to shake their hands and gloriously vindicated in the final reel by his endorsement of Katherine's addition assets.

The performances are uniformly winning when they need to be and hissable when they don't. There are scenes in which kids say the funniest things, bullies receive their comeuppance, hunky men propose in the cutest ways and we get impassioned monologues happy to sacrifice plausibility for whoopability.

After Catherine Shoard, The Guardian, Dec 2016

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