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2-16-2017

Taking My Daughter to Hidden Figures

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard, "Taking My Daughter to Hidden Figures" (2017). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. 650.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/650

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Taking My Daughter to Hidden Figures

Abstract

"For me, *Hidden Figures* is most important as a beginning. It made me want to talk with my daughter about the conditions it takes to create more Katherine Goble Johnsons, Dorothy Vaughans, and Mary Jacksons."

Posting about a 2017 Academy Awards Best Picture nominee from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/taking-my-daughter-to-hidden-figures/>

Keywords

In All Things, movie review, Hidden Figures

Disciplines

American Film Studies

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Taking My Daughter to Hidden Figures

 allthings.org/taking-my-daughter-to-hidden-figures/

Howard Schaap

When I first saw *Hidden Figures* advertised, I felt compelled to take my sixteen-year-old daughter to see it. As the white father of a biracial daughter, *Hidden Figures* looked like required viewing for both of us.

It was, I think.

Hidden Figures pulls off what too few films even attempt: it creates complex black female characters who are heroic in their own right and sets them within one of the most dramatic of American stories: the space race. The film can do this because it actually happened. *Hidden Figures* is based on real people and events, and that means it is truly a feel-good film. On top of this feat, the film also manages to tell the story of racial conflict in America through things like high heels. More on that in a moment.

First, the basics. Katherine Goble (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer), and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) are black women who work for NASA in a basement room below a sign that says, “Black Computers.” Here, they perform behind-the-scenes calculations for NASA quietly and cheaply. However, when the Russians put Sputnik into orbit, Al Harrison (Kevin Costner), chief of the Space Task Group, finds himself in need of an expert in analytic geometry.

Harrison, of course, will not himself descend to the netherworld of “black computers” to look for the solution to his problem, so he sends Vivian Mitchell (Kirsten Dunst), and this gives us the first confrontation between Mitchell and Vaughan, acting manager of the “Black Computers” though without the title or the pay. Vaughan tags Goble as the woman NASA needs, and Goble suddenly finds herself checking calculations in a sea of white men in white shirts and ties.

It’s this set up, a lone black woman in the midst of white men of power, that creates the melodrama (a story that appeals to the emotions) of the film so perfectly.

What the film does best is the way it embodies the story of race in America in 1961. Almost immediately after arriving, Goble realizes she has to go to the bathroom, so she picks up the stack of work in front of her and starts the journey back to the “Colored Restroom” near the “Black Computers.” Down the hall. Outside. Across the street and down it. Into another building. Down the stairs. At a jog. In heels. You hear it, you see it, you sense the urgency. And Goble has to make this trip repeatedly. As both the audience and the white men in the film get more and more drawn into the drama of the space race, all of our hopes are tied up in Katherine Goble’s quest to get to the bathroom.

Eventually, Harrison confronts Goble on where she disappears to, and yes, the situation is resolved melodramatically, with Costner playing a starring role (*Dances with Wolves*, anyone?), but the whole sequence is worth it. I have never been made to feel in a film the daily indignities of Jim Crow quite like this—to say nothing of the demands upon femininity in a masculine culture. Sitting next to my daughter, that experience alone was worth the price of admission.

The film has a number of wonderful melodramatic tableaux. Goble is at her heroic best at the chalkboard. When the film opens, she works out an equation for older black students who look on amazed, and this moment prophesies her future working out equations at NASA as white men look on agog. We can definitely use more of that image in our culture, and seeing Goble at the chalkboard—a smart, strong, black woman—feels like we’re recovering something from history.

Which we are.

This is to say nothing of the romantic tableaux between Goble and her eventual husband, Colonel Jim Johnson (Mahershala Ali), which are both sweet (so sweet my daughter put her hands to her cheeks at one point) and empowering (Goble demands Johnson understand her on her own terms).

Unfortunately, the damning word about this film might be that it's the perfect movie for black history month, our dose of black history that puts us at ease about American history. This is a bit unfair. *Hidden Figures* is a good story, and if we let it be the gateway to more stories like this, stories that we don't know but should, then it might qualify as the best picture of 2017.

But there's no guarantee that viewers will walk through the door that *Hidden Figures* opens to us. The ongoing conflict between Vaughan and Mitchell delivers what is arguably the film's most interesting exchange. When, late in the film, they meet in a desegregated bathroom, Mitchell attempts to defend herself in the ongoing conflict by saying, "Despite what you may think, I have nothin' against y'all."

Vaughan responds, insightfully, "I know you probably believe that."

The audience cackled at this, as if Mitchell got her due, but for me this was the film's most insightful moment, a scene that was directed at me. Unless I do more than sit safely in a theater and think to myself, "I have nothin' against y'all," when I go home and turn on the TV to find another black person has been shot down by the rule of law or ignore the color of mass incarceration, I cannot laugh at Vivian Mitchell.

But there are very few moments like this in the film, and that light touch is the right choice, too. *Hidden Figures* keeps the camera on the heroes. In this way, the film has a lot in common with Marvel movies. It tells the story of superheroes who make their own way in the world regardless of the forces against them. We need this kind of hero to make us believe again, perhaps, and thus *Hidden Figures* may be just the superhero story we need at this time in America.

For me, *Hidden Figures* is most important as a beginning. It made me want to talk with my daughter about the conditions it takes to create more Katherine Goble Johnsons, Dorothy Vaughans, and Mary Jacksons. If *Hidden Figures* opens the door in this way—if it gets us to tell more stories and helps ensure the conditions that allow for our daughters to become heroes themselves, figuring out equations on chalkboards everywhere, then *Hidden Figures* is indeed required viewing for us all.