

Fruitvale Station

Based on a true story, "Fruitvale Station" traces the last 24 hours in the life of Oscar Grant, a young African-American from Oakland who was killed by transit police at the Fruitvale BART station on New Year's Day 2009. At the time, the incident produced a swirl of outrage at police authorities (reminiscent of Rodney King once upon a time). The film stands or falls on the work of Michael B. Jordan as Oscar, as he is in almost every frame of the picture. He passes that test in a revelatory performance.

In this day's span, we see Grant interact with his loyal girlfriend, Sophina (an affecting Melonie Diaz), his young daughter Tatiana (Ariana Neal), his brother, his buddies, and his mom Wanda (a touching Octavia Spencer). We also see him planning to deal drugs, trying to retrieve a job at a super market, enjoying a rich family birthday, and jumping into a fight inside a BART train. Oscar is decent yet has a temper, possesses strong family ties yet is muddled. He has done time but is struggling to get right. He is troubled yet seeking...a young guy like so many others trying to figure out a meaning for his life. Jordan is able to hit all those notes with conviction and nuance.

The day we witness hints at a possible turnaround through small incidents in Oscar's life: He is shown adoring his daughter and grandma, befriendng a dog, tossing away his drug supply, and feeling the love at his mother's birthday party. Oscar's decision to go into the city (San Francisco) with his girl and some friends to celebrate the New Year seems a good capper to the year and a worthy release from his troubles.

But, on the fateful return to Oakland on a packed BART train, a figure from Grant's prison past confronts him, which triggers a fight on the train. Grant and the others involved are spilled out onto the Fruitvale station platform where panicked transit police decide Oscar's fate (the film, incidentally, opens using the real, jumbled footage from the incident, shot on several bystanders cell phones).

The picture carries the full dimension of the tragic:

Surrounded by a most believable Oakland milieu, Grant's story traces the line of a most American tragedy: you know in advance that catastrophe is coming, yearn for it not to happen, but then must witness the worst. The story was written and directed with confidence and acuity by newcomer Ryan Coogler, himself a Bay Area native. Barely older than Jordan at 26, Coogler proves that his is a filmic talent to be watched after this first feature effort. And, as indicated above, Michael B. Jordan ("The Wire," "Friday Night Lights") is already eminently watchable in this brilliant lead performance.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 84 minutes.)

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