

Green Book

The movies love an odd couple; dozens, if not scores, of films have explored the opening friction and the eventual connection between two disparate characters. The latest, and it is a most satisfying one, is “Green Book,” a road movie showing how, in 1962, a lug from the Bronx and a Jamaican jazz pianist roamed the American South in a weeks-long concert tour. Viggo Mortensen as the tough guy and Mahershala Ali as the pianist carry off their contrasting roles with, respectively, raw charm and taut grace.

The set-up is simple. A nightclub bouncer, Frank Vallelonga (Mortenson)—better known as “Tony Lip”—needs a job and hooks up, somewhat implausibly (although this is based on a true story), as a chauffeur for an erudite pianist, the real composer and performer Don Shirley. Their first encounter is a job interview at Carnegie Hall, where Dr. Shirley (Ali) resides, nicely presenting the gulf between the two men. Shirley’s tour will take him and his high-toned jazz trio for their first bookings in the South, still seriously segregated. Segregated enough that Tony must bring along the “Green Book,” a cautionary listing compiled for African-American travelers of where they will be welcome in the South.

The film then becomes a road picture that takes us through the vagaries of their travels, where they encounter casual racism, blatant bigotry, appreciative audiences, and themselves. They fence, they bicker, they bond. They ultimately contribute to each other. Tony loosens Dr. Shirley up and protects him bodily in tense stand-offs and during breakdowns, while the latter introduces the former to artistic genius then also helps Tony to write touching letters to his wife Dolores (a lovely Linda Cardenelli). There is a delicate, and sweet, ending.

Is it predictable? Yes. Is it sentimental? Yes. Is it corny? Decidedly no—because the two leads bring dimension, sympathy, and novelty to their roles. And those roles are intriguing in that they nicely flip some stereotypes of the period. Mortenson, as an goombah with a seventh grade education and insensitive to African-Americans, comes to appreciate and admire the skills and taste of a talented black man, enough so as to become genuinely protective of him. Ali, as an über-competent musician, comes to appreciate fried chicken and Little Richard through his animated driver, enough so as to fully trust him. Their vastly different worlds at first collide and then, with time, blend, as we would hope more cross-racial relationships might.

Peter Farrelly, best known for his goofy comedies (“Dumb and Dumber,” , etc.), directs “Green Book” and co-wrote its screenplay, along with Brian Currie and Nick Vallelonga—Tony’s son and himself an actor. Here Farrelly proves he can also do drama, getting past the goofy to the grave and the gracious while effectively creating a decent simulacrum of the early Sixties South. This is not only a “feel-good” movie, but a feel right one.

(The film runs 130 mins. and is rated PG-13.)

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