

If Beale Street Could Talk

This film version of James Baldwin's fifth novel, written and directed by Barry Jenkins, is a splendid follow-up to the director's Academy-Award-winning "Moonlight" (2016), working out with sympathy and spirit the story of young love thwarted yet finally redeemed. It's a wonder that it has not been filmed before.

The setting is 1970's Harlem and features 22-year-old aspiring sculptor Fonny Hunt (Stephan James) and 19-year-old Tish Rivers (Kiki Layne), friends since childhood who are engaged and hope to settle on the mythical "Beale Street". Their hopeful lives are turned upside down when Fonny is falsely accused of rape by a Puerto Rican woman (Emily Ross), in a case trumped-up by a resentful white policeman, Officer Bell (Ed Skrein).

Fonny is well aware of the trials of prison time from his friend Daniel (Brian Tyree Henry) who has recently been released. Still, he is jailed and awaiting trial when Tish learns that she is pregnant. Tish's family, led by her steadfast mother Sharon (Regina Hall), is fully supportive of her and her fiancé, while Fonny's family is either indifferent to the young man or suspects he is guilty. Sharon helps find a lawyer to defend Fonny, hoping to find evidence to free him before the baby is born. Sharon persists in the case by tracking down the accuser in Puerto Rico but is unable to get her to recant. The couple's love remains ardent but their future uncertain.

As he did in "Moonlight," Jenkins has again composed an intricate, lyrical cinematic poem of African-American life, taking inspiration from the novel of Baldwin. To help achieve his effects, he has relied again on two crucial collaborators from his earlier triumph, cinematographer James Laxton and musical director Nicholas Britell. Both Laxton's glowing and vibrant camerawork and Britell's sinuous and period-proper score add considerable dimension to the film, which Jenkins directs with a graceful and honest touch.

The cast, a diverse ensemble, is stellar, led by the two leads. James as Fonny exudes innate intelligence (you believe he is an artist) and wounded pathos. Layne, who has more to do since she is the story's narrator, blossoms with earnest love and her total commitment towards her man. It is Regina King as Sharon, however, who commands the movie. King, while a busy actress, has not had enough roles where she has been able to shine, but she sparkles here, as a woman of powerful empathy and strength, a powerful model for her aspiring daughter.

(The film, released at Christmas, is rated "R" and runs 117 minutes.)

(December 2018)