

Moonlight

Films about the American “inner city,” typically featuring the stresses of urban black life, have waxed and waned in US cinema, with the occasional striking effort (e.g. “Precious” and “Fruitvale Station”) among facile comedies and action flicks. A new drama in this sphere proves as absorbing as any in recent memory. At its heart, “Moonlight” is a moving meditation on the “inner life” of its protagonist Chiron as much as it is a depiction of an inner city.

“Moonlight” is a triad covering Chiron’s life: his profound loneliness as a taciturn nine-year-old, his continuing marginalization as a bullied 16-year-old but with a first taste of love, and his re-creation as a buff yet solitary drug dealer in his twenties. His world is circumscribed by the streets of Liberty City, a black neighborhood in North Miami, a world well known to the filmmakers.

Act One finds Chiron (Alex Hibbert) in a barren apartment with single mom Paula (Naomie Harris) who is sliding into drug dependence while her child (derogatorily called “Little” by his classmates) suffers ostracism for lack of any gumption. Only one classmate, chatty Kevin (Jaden Piner), encourages him to stand up for himself. He is then somewhat surprisingly taken in by a local hustler, Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monae) who show him respect and ease him out of his shell.

Act Two finds Chiron (Ashton Sanders) still with Paula, now lost to crack, while he is pilloried at school for his latent homosexuality. He remains solitary, though the teenage Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) remains a fitful friend who, on a warm beach night, introduces him to sex. Yet even Kevin turns against him in a put-up fight, wherein Chiron takes a beating that pushes him to a frightful revenge against a classmate.

The third segment finds him in Atlanta ten years on—now with the street name “Black” (Trevante Rhodes) -- having served time but now running drugs as Juan had done years before, still stoic and still alone. A surprise phone call from Kevin (André Holland), now working as a cook back home, triggers a desire to see his old friend, whom he encounters at the latter’s restaurant where dormant memories surface and lead to a catharsis.

Let me now praise Barry Jenkins, the writer/director of “Moonlight” for his wholly rounded portrayal of a soul at key points in his life. In adapting playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney’s drama “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue,” Jenkins has elicited three wondrous and controlled performances from his three distinct Chirons. Young Hibbert faces his raw world with the sad mask of the defeated, aching to belong. You want to adopt him. Teen-aged Sanders, willowy and wary and tormented by the first stirrings of his sexuality, stares blankly at the world until he finally explodes with rage. Finally, big Black, as played by the imposing Rhodes, appears as a quiescent giant with a life going nowhere. The actor’s very different physical presence may seem to contradict the waifish nature of the younger Chirons, but Rhodes and Jenkins overcomes this apparent anomaly by maintaining a beautifully consistent tone of *personality* for his three different actors. They share the same inner humanity.

Naomie Harris, a British beauty best known for adorning Bond movies, is superb here as a wanton woman capable of explosive cruelty and aching neediness. Only a

touching late scene where Chiron visits her in rehab mitigates the throes of her addiction. Ali (best known for his role as Remi in “House of Cards”) comes on as the classic dealer/badass who then surprises as a tender mentor to the cowed young boy, an unlikely father figure who introduces him to a calm, domestic life, a swim in the ocean, and a rigorous honesty about himself. His street-tough demeanor makes his affectionate attentions all the more striking.

Besides the splendid guidance of his actors, Jenkins excels in his imaginative use of the medium. His film (cinematography by James Laxton) shows distinctive phases: the first captures Miami’s sun-washed brightness with a bouncing hand-held camera and tight close-ups, while the second makes much of several claustrophobic interiors (at home and at school) ending with a dramatic headlong finish. His last act turns elegiac, with a languorous camera and a soft night ambiance, all carefully composed. All of these moods are enhanced by a nervous, chittering string music track (by Nicholas Britell) beautifully responsive to the action. Never is that music more effective than when Britell underscores a kid’s lively playground tussle with an ethereal Mozart soprano solo.

“Moonlight” gives weight and substance to one of society’s forgotten souls and does it with sincerity and panache: a wonder.
(*“Moonlight is rated “R” and runs 111 minutes.*)

(October 2016)