

MOVIE REVIEW

Moonlight

A film by Barry Jenkins

A24 (2016)

Reviewed by Sejal H. Patel

In the film *Moonlight*, we follow the life of Chiron, a little boy who is black, gay, and poor. “Who is you, Chiron?” is a question put to this child and to us, a question that transcends race, sexuality, and class. Chiron lives in the projects in Liberty City (Miami) with his crack-addict mom. He has to guard against bullies. He knows his sexual identity but is unsure of how to treat it. He aches for love from someone, anyone. As a mother and a lawyer, I wanted to hold this child in my arms. *Moonlight* is just that — an embrace set to piano and strings.

Directed by Barry Jenkins and based on the play “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue” by Tarell Alvin McCraney, *Moonlight* invites us into the life of a boy with three names — “Little” when he is young (Alex R. Hibbert), “Chiron” when he is an adolescent (Ashton Sanders), and “Black” when he is an adult (Trevante Rhodes). All the child actors are from Liberty City, a casting decision important to the director and the playwright because they both grew up there. The authenticity of the film lies in how the director braids fiction with memoir.

It is the 1980s. Just miles from Biscayne Bay and the Miami Shores Country Club, Liberty City is poor and beaten down by drug use. The film opens with a scene between drug dealer Juan (Mahershala Ali) and a kid, with the kid thanking Juan for the opportunity to sell drugs. The story cuts to Chiron fleeing from bullies and hiding in a crack house. Chiron hides throughout the film, physically and emotionally. Juan coaxes him out, only to find that Chiron will not talk. Juan takes Chiron to his home, where Juan and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monáe) feed Chiron and let him stay overnight.

Juan and Teresa’s home becomes the only safe place Chiron knows, but even then, Chiron articulates the complexity of their relationship.

“My mama does drugs?” he asks Juan at the dinner table when he finally speaks. “And you sell drugs?”

Later, Juan sees Chiron’s mother Paula (Naomie Harris) on the street doing drugs. Juan asks why Paula is there instead of with Chiron. Her eyes wild with anger, she says to Juan, “You going to raise my son? You keep sellin’ me rocks.”

Jenkins depicts relationships throughout the film in glimpses like this. “You don’t love me no more,” Chiron’s mother says to him when she accuses him of becoming too close to Juan and Teresa. “You my only. I’m your only,” she whispers to him. This is as much a threat as it is a promise, a bleak statement about what love will mean to Chiron as he grows up. In the one sexual moment in the film, Chiron sits with Kevin (played also by three actors — Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, and André Holland) at the beach. How Chiron processes his sexuality after an intimate moment with Kevin remains unresolved. Jenkins constructs one beautiful moment after another, in vivid hues of color and set to music that ranges from opera to classical to rap, without telling us what to think.

Structurally, the film is a triptych in 40-minute segments, and we learn as much about Chiron in what Jenkins leaves out of the story as what we see onscreen. We do not see Juan’s death but see Paula mention his funeral. We see Chiron break a chair over a bully’s head but do not see Chiron go to jail for it. We do not see how Chiron’s mother ends up in rehab but see her apologize for not being a good mother. We see Chiron, named Black as an adult, crumple his muscular body into Kevin’s arms but do not see where that relationship goes. Jenkins allows us to



view moments and then process the gaps as participants in the art. We accept the artistic premise that no life story has tidy beginnings and endings.

This principle stays with us in a scene in which Juan teaches Chiron how to swim. Juan cradles Chiron’s head and begins by teaching him to float. Jenkins said that he wanted the scene to evoke spiritual transference from Juan to Chiron. “At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you wanna be. Can’t let nobody make that decision for you,” Juan tells Chiron.

Spiritual transference is exactly what Jenkins achieved in *Moonlight*, only it wasn’t just between the characters. ■

About the Reviewer

Sejal H. Patel is a San Francisco-based attorney and writer. She is a graduate of Northwestern Law School and Harvard Divinity School, and writes about law and ethics.

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