

From a reader: A second comment on Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*

Thomas Douglass
12 December 2016

This review of Moonlight was submitted by a reader in response to an earlier review that appeared on the WSWS.

Moonlight, written and directed by Barry Jenkins, is a film about a young man, Chiron, growing up in Liberty City, a predominantly poor and black neighborhood in the northern part of Miami. Based on a script by playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, *Moonlight* is an intimate portrayal of coming of age and sexual discovery. Chiron and those around him seek friendship, mentorship, love and meaning in an often brutal society beset by an expanding drug epidemic.

The film falls into three parts showing Chiron's childhood, adolescence and adulthood. With strong directing by Jenkins, actors Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders and Trevante Rhodes portray Chiron movingly, and make his development through the film convincing despite the technical difficulties involved. Chiron's loneliness and abuse by peers are assuaged in part by a number of people, including his friend and later romantic interest, Kevin (played by Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jones and André Holland). A local drug dealer Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his partner Teresa (Janelle Monáe) bring Chiron into their lives as Chiron's mother Paula (Naomie Harris) falls prey to the drug crisis and abuses him.

The authentic and genuinely interesting character of the protagonists is one of the film's greatest appeals. Chiron's mother is a source of great unhappiness in his life, and yet we see her struggle to provide for and love her son when she can, in what become impossible circumstances. Juan, who effectively adopts Chiron, projects the strength and bravado required by his profession while appearing to inwardly deplore his state and actions. It is Chiron's sensitivity and isolation that seem to most attract him. Kevin, who unlike Chiron is

able to meld perfectly into the social expectations of a young man in Liberty City, is drawn to Chiron because Chiron cannot disguise his sensitivity or, later, sexuality.

Moonlight's success owes much to the careful artistry of its production. Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton use the harsh sunlight of southern Florida, the jumble of bright colors in dense urban housing, and the long vistas of the ocean to evoke natural beauty even in scenes of ordinary life. The ocean, which McCraney and Jenkins describe as ever-present for those who grow up in Miami, is a source of refuge to Chiron and almost palpable to viewers throughout the film. The music by Nicholas Britell ranges in style from funk to baroque, mimicking the mix of the film's emotional and social experiences, sometimes hauntingly.

Despite the film's sensitivity and beauty, it has its weaknesses. Most strikingly, *Moonlight* never quite reaches a conclusion, and one has the sense that Jenkins and McCraney did not know how the plot should resolve itself, nor the characters proceed. Chiron's personal transformations are brilliantly enacted by Hibbert, Sanders and Rhodes, but are not intuitive, nor wholly believable, in the film's last part. One of Chiron's principle tormentors in adolescence, Terrel (Patrick Decile), communicates to the audience the brutality of the social environment, and the cruelty of bullying, but his motives and circumstances are not explored.

In a way, *Moonlight* gives the impression of a series of sketches, or a novella, created with authenticity and great artistry, but incomplete. It must be noted however that these limitations are linked to the film's greatest strengths. *Moonlight* is based on a drama school project written by McCraney in his youth, and is partly autobiographical. This gives the scenes and characters

added realism, but perhaps explains the film's difficulty in finding an artistic resolution.

Moonlight has deservedly garnered much praise, with many critics speculating a possible best picture win at the Oscars. It is undeniably a far more serious and interesting work than most films emerging from Hollywood today, including quite a few recent best picture winners or nominees.

However, with a black director, all-black cast and gay protagonist, the film has also inevitably attracted the attention of a "left" milieu obsessed more with identity politics than with the film's artistic qualities. The assertion by the *Guardian's* deputy arts editor Benjamin Lee that the film is "proudly black and refreshingly queer" is emblematic of these responses. By contrast, actor André Holland told the *Washington Post* about *Moonlight*, "I think it's easy to put it in a box of, oh, it's a black film or a black, gay film about these poor kids, but really, at the center of it, it's a love story, and I love that people can see past all that stuff on the exterior."

With its authentic and complex depictions of childhood, loneliness, sexuality and poverty, and a number of especially moving scenes, Holland's description of *Moonlight* appears justified.

See also, a clip from Moonlight



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact