

King Richard: The monomaniac as likable eccentric

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Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green; written by Zach Baylin

Among the contenders for Best Picture at the upcoming 94th Academy Awards is *King Richard* (Reinaldo Marcus Green), which follows Richard Williams as he guides (or pushes) his daughters Venus and Serena toward tennis stardom.

The girls from Compton, California, ultimately come to be regarded as among the best players in the sport's history. Early in his daughters' professional careers, Williams became controversial for his unvarnished and freely expressed opinions about the tennis world. To many observers, he was a gadfly and self-promoter. A closer examination of the man who played such a role in his daughters' remarkable achievements seems an intriguing premise for a movie.

Unfortunately, *King Richard* seems less interested in examining Williams in all his complexity than it is in presenting him as likable, and even brilliant. Williams (Will Smith) often makes predictions about his daughters that we know will come true. We are expected to admire his vision and excuse his stubbornness and his more dubious judgments as amusing foibles. The movie is enjoyable but superficial and likely biased. The fact that Venus and Serena are executive producers of the film surely influenced this outcome.

From the beginning, Smith's performance is jarring. His attempt to capture the accent and speech patterns of Williams, from Shreveport, Louisiana, is caricatural and off-putting. His performance never becomes believable, and it doesn't help that no one else in the family (or indeed the whole movie) sounds like him. While the rest of the cast is natural, Smith is mannered, right down to his attempts to imitate the way Williams walks. Yet, remarkably, Smith has been nominated for

Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role.

Williams often refers to his grand plan for Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and Serena (Demi Singleton), which he drafted before they were even born. Williams follows this document to the letter, relentlessly filling every moment of his five daughters' time with practice, study, moral lessons and impromptu quizzes. He even takes the girls to the court to practice in the rain. It is easy to understand why a neighbor (Erika Ringor) thinks that he is working them too hard. Yet the kids never appear to chafe under Williams' discipline or to rebel against it. Instead, they repeatedly respond in unison, "Yes, Daddy!" Is this plausible, or admirable?

Early in the film, Williams asserts that the world has never respected him, but that he will make sure that it respects his daughters. Once or twice, he mentions the racism he faced and the beatings he received as a child in Louisiana. Yet his experiences are described in passing, as though they are a mere plot device. *King Richard* does not probe their historical context or their deeper effects on Williams.

Even as an adult, Williams is bullied. Young men loitering at the Compton tennis court habitually taunt him and beat him. During a particularly vicious attack, one of the young men brandishes a gun and strikes Williams in the head with it. Laughing, the gang leaves him crumpled on the ground. When Williams collects himself, he resolves to pursue them after retrieving the gun that was issued to him as a security guard. The import and ramifications of the remarkable incident that follows are never examined, a glaring flaw in the movie.

The question of racism arises many times, but *King Richard* never seeks to understand it. There is no suggestion that racism is used to further class interests. Although we notice class differences between the

Williams family and the world of tennis professionals and hopefults, these differences are never analyzed. This is a missed opportunity, particularly since tennis was long associated with the leisured classes.

The cursory treatment of racism and other social questions is particularly noticeable in the film's fleeting reference to the savage police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, the video of which Williams and his wife Oracene (Aunjanue Ellis) see on television. This crime, which took place in March 1991, shocked the country, and the acquittal of the officers responsible sparked riots in Los Angeles. Yet the consequences of this event for society and for the characters go completely unexamined. If this assault has no significance, why does the film mention it at all?

Through sheer persistence, Williams persuades professional coaches to train his daughters, even though he can't pay them. But rather than expressing gratitude, Williams argues with the coaches about playing technique and about how his daughters can establish careers for themselves. He insists that Venus and Serena receive a traditional education and play tournaments only when they are ready to turn professional. Tennis veterans often tell Williams (apparently with good reason) that he doesn't know what he is doing. Indeed, Williams sometimes seems about to sabotage his daughters' chances. Yet the film "proves" that Williams was always right. The truth is almost certainly more complicated.

Rick Macci (Jon Bernthal), the coach of rising star Jennifer Capriati, asks Venus whether she wants a tennis career as much as her father wants it for her. She replies that she does. But would she and her sister have wanted it as much if their father had not insisted on it so single-mindedly? By the end of the film, Venus is on the path to greatness, and Serena's future glory is intimated as well. Yet, given their father's lapses in judgment and lack of expertise, one suspects that the athletes succeeded despite his efforts as much as because of them.

A good film, let alone a nominee for Best Picture, should tell us something true. It should help us see something anew or understand it more deeply and keenly. *King Richard* instead downplays the less flattering aspects of its subject in an apparent attempt to "correct" the public record. The scenes that show the conflicts between Williams and his family are

perfunctory or contrived, as though they were included out of a sense of duty. Nor is Williams examined as a member of a given society during a given period. Such treatment falls well short of providing a rounded picture. It leaves us with a skillfully made movie that may provide mild entertainment, but not insight.



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