

Hidden Figures: Film Review

Written by Kam Williams
Monday, 03 April 2017 23:12



NASA Docudrama Belatedly Credits Contributions of Unsung African-American Mathematicians

All of the astronauts picked by NASA to participate in its maiden manned space programs, Mercury and Gemini, were White males. However, behind the scenes, there was a dedicated team of African-American, female mathematicians who played a pivotal role in ensuring that they launched and returned safely, whether from orbiting the Earth or a mission to the moon.

[Hidden Figures](#) equipped only with pencils and slide rules, these so-called “human computers” were among the best and the brightest minds recruited by NASA to do the critical calculations needed to win the space race with Russia. Author [Margot Lee Shetterly](#) gave these unsung heroines their due in [Hidden Figures](#), a best seller belatedly crediting their quantitative contributions to the cause.

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Besides chronicling their considerable accomplishments, the book also recounted the indignities these brilliant Black women simultaneously suffered, simply because they had the misfortune to be living in Virginia during the dark days of Jim Crow. Back then, African-American brainiacs employed by NASA were automatically assigned to work in its segregated West Computing Group.

Directed by Theodore Melfi (St. Vincent), the overlooked icons' story has now been adapted to the big screen as an uplifting, overcoming-the-odds docudrama. The picture recounts the trials and tribulations of three members of the unit [Katherine G. Johnson](#) (Taraji P. Henson), [Dorothy Vaughan](#) ([Octavia Spencer](#)) and [Mary Jackson](#) ([Janelle Monae](#)).

We are flies on the wall when, without complaining, Katherine G. Johnson routinely has to run to a distant "Colored" ladies room despite the presence of one for Whites right nearby. On another occasion, we witness Mary Jackson's frustration in furthering her education on account of the fact that Blacks aren't allowed to matriculate at the local college offering the courses she needs.

By film's end, both the bathroom and school are indeed integrated, albeit after an emotional intervention by NASA administrator Al Harrison ([Kevin Costner](#)). A worthwhile, teachable moment correcting a shameful chapter in American history.

Excellent (4 stars)
Rated PG for mature themes and mild epithets
Running time: 127 minutes
Distributor: 20th Century Fox

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The movie will be on DVD as of April 11th 2017

About the author of this review: Kam Williams is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean. He is a member of the *New York Film Critics Online*, the *NAACP Image Awards Nominating Committee*, and *Rotten Tomatoes*. He is a contributor to *TheLoop21.com*, *eurweb.com* and so on. He is also a columnist for our webmag www.megadiversities.com. One of his interviews made the cover of *Heart and Soul* magazine last fall. One of Kam Williams' interviews with Spike Lee is included in the 2002 book entitled *Spike Lee: Interviews (Conversations with filmmakers)*. This book collects the best interviews of Lee. Some of Kam Williams' articles are translated into Chinese and Spanish. In 2008, he was Voted Most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the *Disilgold Soul Literary Review*. In addition, he has been honored at the U.N. (for BMORENEWS GLOBAL FORUM ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT) on June 15th 2012 by the Foundation for the Support of the United Nations (FSUN). Williams is an erudite Attorney who holds a BA in Black Studies from Cornell University, an MA in English from Brown University, an M.B.A. from The Wharton School, and a J.D. from Boston University. Recently, he was featured on this website: <http://www.caribbeanlifeneews.com/stories/2015>. Kam Williams is a member of the Bar in NJ, NY, CT, PA, MA & US Supreme Court bars. He lives in Princeton, (New Jersey) with his wife and son. Kam Williams can be reached at kwilliams@megadiversities.com.