



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 19 May 2017

MOONLIGHT (15)

2016 1hr 51mins

Director & Screenplay: Barry Jenkins

Cast:

Chiron, the film's protagonist

-Trevante Rhodes as Adult Chiron / "Black"

-Ashton Sanders as Teen Chiron / "Black"

-Alex Hibbert as Child Chiron / "Little"

Kevin, Chiron's closest friend

-André Holland as Adult Kevin

-Jharrel Jerome as Teen Kevin

-Jaden Piner as Child Kevin

Naomie Harris as Paula

Janelle Monáe as Teresa

Mahershala Ali as Juan

Patrick Decile as Terrel



A timeless story of human connection and self-discovery, this exquisite coming of age drama chronicles the life of a gay black man from childhood to adulthood as he struggles to find his place in the world while growing up in Miami. A 2017 Academy Award winner for Best Motion Picture and one of the most important films of the year, Moonlight is being hailed as a masterpiece that demands to be seen.

Three actors (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, André Holland), three ages, one soul: Barry Jenkins' beautiful, sensitive Moonlight tells its gripping story in three passages. It spans the youth, adolescence and adulthood of Chiron, growing up poor, gay and black in Florida, navigating the drug-plagued inner city, finding love in unexpected places, and discovering the possibility of change within himself.

Filled with unforgettable performances and awash in a gorgeous dreaminess, Moonlight is truly a thing of beauty that will shatter stereotype after stereotype. It is a fiercely intelligent, compassionate film that is, ultimately, about identity, about finding connections in a lonely world, and how we all try to prevent ourselves from getting hurt. This film is, as one reviewer put it, is "the reason we go to the movies: to understand, to come closer, to ache - hopefully with another"

This article by Andrew Pulver with Barry Jenkins originally appeared in the Guardian on 7 Feb 2017.

It is August 2013 and, in a packed auditorium at the Telluride film festival, the first screening of 12 Years a Slave has just taken place. It's one of the most important films about the African-American experience ever and the team are now taking questions from the emotional crowd. There's the director Steve McQueen and with him Brad Pitt, but who is that hosting the Q+A? A festival employee called Barry Jenkins, one of those peripheral film-industry types who's been working at Telluride for a decade, working his way up from toilet-cleaner to gofer to usher to compere.

This gentle rise has since taken an extraordinary turn. Last year, Jenkins was at Telluride for the world premiere of his own film, Moonlight. Its impact has been so profound that he has since been nominated for an Oscar, only the fourth black director – after John Singleton, Lee Daniels and McQueen himself – to get the nod. "It was an out-of-body experience," says Jenkins, an affable, unassuming 37-year-old who shakes his head as he thinks back to that premiere. "I didn't believe it until I was actually up on stage introducing my own film. I was standing in my dreams."

Being thrown together with Pitt and co at Telluride marked a turning point for Moonlight: Jenkins had for some time been working on the film, a reworking of an unproduced play by Tarell Alvin McCraney. Financing was not going well, but Jenkins' hosting duties resulted in "the sweetest ambush" – an invitation to dinner and an offer from Plan B, Brad Pitt's production company. "I was so damn naive I didn't realise a company like Plan B would be interested. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed."

Jenkins is not quite the man from nowhere, though. Moonlight is his second feature: his first, a two-hander called Medicine for Melancholy, was released in 2008. An African-American variant on the mumbly, lo-fi hipster romcom, it detailed the aftermath of a one-night stand between an articulate but slightly annoying man who supplies fancy fish tanks and a sleek, good-looking woman who lives with an art curator. It was well liked and won a few awards, but made nothing more than a modest impact. Jenkins then spent a long time not getting Portrait

of an Addict as a Young Man, an adaptation of Bill Clegg's junkie memoir, off the ground, and writing for the TV show *The Leftovers*.

Then he came across McCraney's text – sent to him by a Miami-based film collective called The Borscht Corporation. Originally titled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, it was part of McCraney's application to study playwriting at Yale. Jenkins describes it as “a visceral collection of memories” and “a fever dream”. The fact it had never been performed was fortunate, he says, since “there was enough space that I could create something else”. It helped that Jenkins had grown up in a now-demolished housing project in the same rough Miami neighbourhood as McCraney. Although the two had never met, they attended the same school and their lives had other parallels. Jenkins' mother was an addict, like McCraney's, and he was eventually taken in by a surrogate grandmother figure. “There were seven or eight of us in a two-bed apartment. There was usually food but sometimes not. The lights usually worked, but sometimes not.”

Moonlight is essentially a coming-of-age story. It describes the tentative sexual awakening of a kid from Miami in three parts: as a grade-schooler, a teenager, and finally as a goldgrill sporting adult. Although he isn't gay, Jenkins says he identified with the central character, Chiron – retreating into himself and managing not to get drawn into the area's pervasive crime problems. “There was no way to avoid it. But in keeping to myself, I stayed out of it. I was never interested in that stuff, I didn't care to be the alpha male.” Sport was his way through it all. “I thought, ‘If I excel at this, people will actually respect me.’” His path to film-making was nothing if not random. He won a scholarship reserved for disadvantaged kids to a Florida State University, a big football college. He initially planned to train as a teacher, but when the course folded in his first year he noticed a sign promoting a film course. “I thought, ‘I like movies. I think I should check this out.’ That's the only reason I am a film-maker.”

If Jenkins' story sounds like a scramble up the foothills of the American dream, well, that's because it is. If nothing else, it demonstrates what a cocktail ambition, affirmative action and luck can be. But his ascent had barely begun before he hit the buffers. On the film course, he found himself among “a bunch of super-talented kids”, including future *Maze Runner* director Wes Ball, *It Follows* director David Robert Mitchell, and actor-producer Amy Seimetz. He ended up with a massive crisis of confidence. “I had to ask questions of myself,” he says. “Am I not good at this because I am poor and black and my mom was a drug addict? Or am I not good at this because I am new to it and just don't know the machinations of making a film?”

His solution, he says, was to react against the enthusiasms of his classmates. “Everyone was influenced by the same things: Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, Wes Anderson.” Instead, he immersed himself in foreign arthouse cinema, writing an essay about Wong Kar-wai that scored him a place on Telluride's student symposium. *Medicine for Melancholy*, he says, was directly inspired by *Vendredi Soir*, directed by Claire Denis (“my favourite film-maker!”) while *Moonlight*'s triptych structure was modelled on *Three Times*, by Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien. Lynne Ramsay's debut feature *Ratcatcher* was another motivating influence. “I thought: ‘This is fucking heavy. I can do this. Not all film directors were born with silver spoons in their mouths.’”

Crisis resolved, he made his first film school short, *My Josephine*, a studied tale about a real-life Arab-American laundromat that cleaned American flags for free after 9/11. “I said, ‘I can place my feelings about being a black man in the south into this.’ And it worked. I thought, ‘This is what I am going to do for the rest of my life.’” After film school, he moved to LA to work for Oprah Winfrey's production company Harpo Films, serving as director's assistant on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. “It was a crash course in Hollywood film-making, but I got burned out. At school, film-making had been the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me. Then I get to LA and it's this whole other thing. I checked out.”

His rootless, disorganised childhood may have been behind this retreat from film-making, he says. He rode trains around the country for a year, winding up in San Francisco after falling in love. “I unloaded boxes for Banana Republic. Best job I ever had. I didn't need film then, I didn't think about it at all.” But the relationship didn't work out. “When she dumped me, I thought, ‘Sh*t, I got to do something.’” That something was *Medicine for Melancholy* – and it's not hard to see his fairly precarious existence in San Francisco threaded through it. “The movie was born out of an extreme desire to express myself, to prove to myself that film school wasn't a fluke.”

The eight-year slog it took to get a second film off the ground has been worth it. *Moonlight* has led a charmed life since that Telluride debut. Awards aren't everything, but the film has so far clocked up 98. Did he ever worry that he might not have been the right person to direct such a strongly gay story? He frowns. “I did have reservations. Can I, as a straight man, really tell this story fully – in the way it needs to be told? But I approached this as an ally. Tarell is very openly gay and I felt like if I preserved his voice it would at least pass the smell test. I saw myself in Chiron in every way – except for that one aspect of his identity. If I turned my back on him for that, it would be cowardly. I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd done that. So I felt I had to become a better man, a more secure man, to make this film.” He pauses. “Once I got past that, I wasn't a straight man or a gay man. I was the man telling the story.”