



MEMBER PICKS

Moonlight

You stand, wrapped in that strange communal spell during the thunderous ovation, as the memory of cinema floods back. Not the explosive, momentarily gratifying, empty-bellied franchise juggernaut that has run roughshod across the plains of American cinema in recent decades. No, the memory of a medium that lovingly takes a small life and makes the experience of that life epic. In *Moonlight* we watch as a vulnerable young boy nicknamed Little (Alex Hibbert) becomes an adolescent (Ashton Sanders) and then finally a man, now known as Black (Trevante Rhodes), against the wilds of a poor black community in Miami.

Chiron – his given name – is an outcast, abandoned by a drug-addled mother (Naomie Harris) and a father whose presence isn't even to be expected. He is terrorised by a culture of cruel and aggressive hyper-masculinity embodied by nemesis Terrel (Patrick Decile). So far, so ubiquitous, you might think, and yet this is a story about love – or the dream of love that can be found even in the midst of a nightmare. First, there is local drug kingpin Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his wife Teresa (Janelle Monáe), whose warm, ordered home is a shelter from the horrors of Chiron's own. Then there is Kevin, his only friend. Chiron grows to love him deeply but the thwarted desire he feels leads to a startling shift in identity.

At some point, you are surprised that this is the first time you have seen a cinematic portrayal of the lonely path many black gay men have walked. You realise with greater surprise that you have rarely seen young black men weep on screen as you do so often in this film. Perhaps the closest cinema has come to creating a vulnerable young black male hero is the Pepto-Bismol-swilling Strike in Spike Lee's *Clockers* (1995).

On first viewing, *Moonlight* hypnotises. Set in Miami, to the visual and sonic echoes of the ocean, this coming-of-age odyssey plays out within a landscape of deeply protected emotions. On second viewing, you have to fight the seduction to study the craft. From the first prowling single take, reminiscent of the opening of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), to the isolating wide-angle shots butting up against extreme close-ups, colour-saturated tableaux and an immersive soundscape, this is a film designed to speak to your subconscious.

Moonlight's director Barry Jenkins first broke through in 2008 with the smart, stylish *Medicine for Melancholy*. The film picked up an Independent Spirit Award, but Jenkins then vanished. In certain circles, especially those hungering for complex cinematic depictions of black life, Jenkins's name would be whispered reverently: 'Whatever happened to Barry Jenkins?' So

his reappearance with *Moonlight*, partnering with the playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney on an adaptation of the latter's semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, drew immediate attention. It was a meeting of souls, Jenkins says, especially when he discovered that both he and McCraney had grown up in the same part of Miami, where the film is set. Little did Jenkins know how personal this project was to become or how acclaimed it would be – the film went on to pick up a Best Picture Golden Globe, as well as eight Oscar nominations (including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor for Ali and Best Supporting Actress for Harris) and four BAFTA nominations.

Gaylene Gould, *Sight & Sound*, March 2017

The process by which a small movie like *Moonlight* comes to loom large over global film culture is a complicated one. The most admirable thing about Barry Jenkins's adaptation of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* is its commitment to intimacy; this strength is manifested in the skilful proximity of James Laxton's cinematography and the small-scale parameters of the storyline, which follows a single character as he ages from a child to a young adult. But *Moonlight* has come to symbolise something bigger: perhaps more than any other release of the past year, Jenkins's film has been anointed a Movie of the Moment. Whether or not that designation refers triumphally to its status as an artwork describing contemporary African-American life through the eyes of one of its own or, more tenderly, as a final, valedictory exercise in Obama-era identity politics before America Makes Itself Great Again, it's a lot of significance for one film to bear.

Moonlight betrays this weightiness at the top of its third section, which begins with a piece of onscreen text reading 'iii. Black'. The word is being used as a proper name, or rather a street moniker, for the film's Miami-born protagonist, who has previously been encountered in chapters entitled 'Little' (his childhood nickname) and 'Chiron' (the name that's on his birth certificate). Introducing the character by different names at different points in his life is a clever, economical way of suggesting that he contains multitudes, and yet Jenkins is also reaching a bit with that conspicuous, calculated use of 'Black', which could be seen as an attempt to universalise Chiron's story, or to turn him into a stand-in of sorts for the intersecting racial and sexual demographic he inhabits. In this final, twentysomething incarnation, played by Trevante Rhodes, Chiron is hulked-up and physically armoured to the point that he looks almost indistinguishable from the alpha-male cowards who bullied him when he was a kid: a suggestive bit of dramaturgy barbed spikily with sociology.

Moonlight's uniqueness as a film about a queer black youth cannot be overstated, and it skilfully filters rhetoric through realism, as when Little (Alex Hibbert) is chased aggressively into an abandoned crack house by his playmates. It's a stark bit of staging that reflects a bigger, sadly credible

ghetto trajectory. Little's saviour in this tight spot is a dealer named Juan (Mahershala Ali) who literally breaks through the barrier separating the terrified boy from the outside world and quickly becomes a dedicated father figure: the majority of the film's first vignette describes the tightening of their bond. Driving Little back to his house, Juan palms his car's steering wheel with a family man's easy grace. It's the same relaxed mastery that Black will demonstrate driving his own vehicle later on, after relocating to Atlanta, where he's taken up dealing as well – a revelation that's given extra sting by our knowledge at this point in the story that Juan didn't make it out of his own professional trap alive.

Moonlight is awash with these kinds of visual and dramatic rhymes. Jenkins builds each section around a close encounter on or near a beach, and there's an exhilarating symmetry between the early scene where Juan teaches Little how to swim by holding him steady in the surf and teenage Chiron (Ashton Sanders) kissing his friend Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) in the dark on the sand: paternal intimacy and adolescent experimentation each rendered with fleshy, tactile eroticism. Jenkins has cited Wong Kar Wai and Claire Denis as inspirations, and both are duly evoked, although an even more apropos reference point might be the Hou Hsiao-Hsien of *Three Times* (2005), another triptych designed as a series of interlacing motifs (and similarly pivoting on the theme of repressed desire).

In addition to his agile formalism, Jenkins has a real sensitivity for actors, and *Moonlight* boasts a superb ensemble. Not only the three Chirons, who have been carefully guided along a continuum of shared cadences and gestures, but also Ali, whose handsomely hard-lined face is alternately a tough-guy mask and an open book; and André Holland, perfectly cast as the wary, regretful older version of high-school peacock Kevin, a character whose gradual movement to the story's very heart is beautifully engineered. In the closing encounter between Black and Kevin, the actors' gently shape-shifting rapport in a dimly lit diner has the uncanny feel of a surreptitiously overheard conversation. Even as the two old friends talk cautiously around their shared history, the emotions between them cut loud and clear through the background clatter, proving that *Moonlight* is at its most eloquent when its subtext is soft-spoken.

Adam Nayman, *Sight & Sound*, March 2017

MOONLIGHT

Directed by: Barry Jenkins
©: Dos Hermanas LLC
Production Company: Plan B, Pastel
Presented by: A24, Plan B Entertainment
Executive Producers: Brad Pitt, Sarah Esberg, Tarell Alvin McCraney
Produced by: Adele Romanski, Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner
Co-producers: Andrew Hevia, Veronica Nickel
Line Producer: Veronica Nickel
Unit Production Manager: Jennifer Radzikowski
Location Manager: Faren Humes
Script Supervisor: Melinda Taksen
Casting by: Yesi Ramirez
Screenplay by: Barry Jenkins
Story by: Tarell Alvin McCraney
Cinematography by: James Laxton
Steadicam Operators: James Baldanza, Osvaldo Silvera
Visual Effects Provided by: Significant Others
Edited by: Nat Sanders, Joi McMillon
Production Designer: Hannah Beachler
Costume Designer: Caroline Eselin-Schaefer
Head Make-up: Doniella Davy
Head Hair: Gianna Sparacino
Title Design: Sebastian Pardo, MEMORY
Music by: Nicholas Britell
Violin Soloist: Tim Fain

Pianist: Nicholas Britell
Score Orchestrated by: Nicholas Britell
Score Produced by: Nicholas Britell
Production Sound Mixer: Christopher Giles
Re-recording Mixer: Chris David
Supervising Sound Editor: Joshua Adeniji
Stunt Co-ordinators: Alexander Edlin, Artie Malesci

Cast

Trevante Rhodes (*Chiron, 'Black'*)
André Holland (*Kevin*)
Janelle Monáe (*Teresa*)
Ashton Sanders (*Chiron aged 16*)
Jharrel Jerome (*Kevin aged 16*)
Naomie Harris (*Paula*)
Mahershala Ali (*Juan*)
Shariff Earp (*Terrence*)
Duan 'Sandy' Sanderson (*Azu*)
Alex Hibbert (*Chiron aged 10, 'Little'*)
Jaden Piner (*Kevin aged 10*)
Patrick Decile (*Terrel*)

USA 2016©
111 mins

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Doctor Who: Galaxy 4 (animated)

Sun 7 Nov 12:00

Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 8 Nov 18:10

Preview: Drive My Car (Doraibu mai kâ)

Mon 15 Nov 19:40

Preview: The Hand of God (È stata la mano di Dio)

Thu 18 Nov 18:30

Preview: Pirates + Q&A with writer-director Reggie Yates and actors Elliot Edusah, Jordan Peters and Reda Elazouar

Sat 20 Nov 20:40

Preview: Encanto + Q&A with director Jared Bush, co-director Charise Castro Smith, producer Clark Spencer and Yvett Marino

Sun 21 Nov 11:30

TV Preview: The Amazing Mr Blunden + Q&A with writer-director-actor Mark Gatiss and actor Tamsin Greig

Mon 29 Nov 18:15

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Member Picks: Moonlight

Fri 5 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law

Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30

African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe's Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting

Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00

African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe

Tue 9 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine

Sun 14 Nov 15:30

Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood

Thu 25 Nov 20:40

Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show

Sat 27 Nov 13:00

Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing 'The Precious Things': Holiday Startime

Sat 27 Nov 15:50

Seniors' Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro

Mon 29 Nov 14:00

Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman

Tue 30 Nov 18:15

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