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Arts & ENTERTAINMENT



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Stephan James and Kiki Lane star as a young couple relying on their love to sustain them through unspeakable hardships in "If Beale Street Could Talk."

If Beale Street Could Talk

Love survives hardships in top film from 2018

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

Based on the novel by James Baldwin, the prophet of modern African American thought and literature, "If Beale Street Could Talk" (number 2 on my list of the best films of 2018) opens with this quote from Baldwin:

"Beale Street is a street in New Orleans, where my father, where Louis Armstrong and the jazz were born. Every black person born in America was born on Beale Street, born in the back neighborhood of some American city, whether in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York. Beale Street is our legacy. This novel deals with the impossibility and the possibility, the absolute necessity, to give expression to this legacy."

The great writer-director Barry Jenkins (whom Hollywood appallingly recognized with only an Oscar nomination for screenwrit-

ing, but not for best director and not for the picture itself) adapted Baldwin's novel before receiving permission from Baldwin's estate to film it. And though there is no record of a Beale Street in New Orleans, what Baldwin created and Jenkins has brought to the screen pulses with the urgency of imparting what is true about the lived experience of American blacks. Beale Street is the back street--"Backatown," as they would say in New Orleans--where blacks are born and are generally forced to live, save for those few who become useful to white supremacy in some way. Baldwin sought to express what would be heard about black experience if anyone would listen, and Jenkins' film evokes that intention with sound, images and care that will break your heart if you let it.

And a broken heart is the only appropriate response to this story

of two young people, Fonny and Tish, who have only love to sustain them through unspeakable hardships that are thrust upon them, as they are upon black people in America to this day. Their love is what grounds the story because it is so clearly what enables the young lovers to withstand, without entirely breaking, the blows that would and do break many others--the daily indignities, the violations of their bodies, the constant messages that, as Tish explains, black people receive from childhood--"that they weren't worth shit--and everything around them proved it."

The love story of Fonny and Tish (a luminous Stephan James and Kiki Layne) works in another important way: it helps us to grieve as we should for their stolen potential. From the very beginning, the film cuts back and forth between achingly beautiful scenes of a love built on friendship forged as children, and Tish's visits to the jail where Fonny is awaiting trial for a brutal rape that he did not commit. It lingers over their early and sweet longing, the tenderness of recognition that they belong to each other, the grasping for hope and for dreams of a future beyond what the culture has imagined for them. The ways they reach for one another are imbued with an appropriate sense of reverence; somehow these two have discovered and reflect back to each other what so many black young people have been deprived of seeing: their inherent beauty and worth.

There is nobody better than

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