

If Beale Street Could Talk

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Jensen and his cinematographer James Laxton to impart that reverence on screen. They know how to linger on the beauty of black skin and Afro-textured hair and black bodies--indeed, Jenkins has spoken about the adaptation required to do this justice given that film was originally created to

represent white skin, which leaves black skin underexposed. (I think there's a metaphor here somewhere.) Here, black is beautiful, and bright colors and long close-ups help us to see what is most deeply and genuinely true rather than literal. It's the truth we haven't learned to see.

It's only in that context of love and genuine beauty that we can be

expected to grapple as we should with the violence that is perpetrated on Tish and Fonny, and on black people in general. In keeping with Baldwin's intention, the film feels like a series of overheard conversations, what black people would (and indeed, sometimes do) say outside the hearing of white people if they could articulate their innermost thoughts. We see how white men feel entitled to Tish's body, how Fonny endangers himself by standing up for her, how his wounded dignity reacts when she stands up for him, how she is so often the only person in a position to receive his understandable rage and pain. We watch Fonny learn to dream and find a way to express his heart, only to watch (as Tish does) as the light and hope drain out of him in jail. We see Tish struggle with the weight of each burden she must bear alone--telling Fonny through glass that she is carrying his child, breaking each bit of bad news about his prospects, absorbing the senselessness of a case in which her own testimony is useless against that of a white police officer with an axe to grind. In a pivotal scene, Fonny and an old friend (an amazing Brian Tyree Henry), recently released from prison for a crime he did not commit, speak of the indignities that each finds impossible to escape; they wear the costs on their souls and on their faces for a few moments of nearly unbearable

honesty, before returning to laughter and gratitude for Tish's simple and good cooking.

We also overhear the courage and raw power it takes for Tish and Fonny and those who love them to keep fighting. "Unbow your head, sister," Tish's elder sister firmly chides her in an early scene--and before long, of necessity, Tish acquires the power to insist that Fonny's lawyer refer to him by his nickname rather than by Alonzo, the legal name that is always used in official proceedings, and also the power to pull Fonny back from the brink of despair by reminding him that "I understand what you're going through, because I'm with you." Even as he is dwindling away behind bars, we watch Fonny dredge his depths for hope; "I want to hold you in my arms, and I got to hold our baby in my arms." Tish's father Joseph reminds Fonny's father Frank, also at the brink of despair, that, even without resources, they have already managed the impossible in their lives, so they will find ways to get the money to fund Fonny's defense; I sadly expect that few white people will know how to process the truth of Joseph's recognition that the wealth of white people is almost entirely stolen. And Regina King as Tish's steely mother knows suffering and offers only and entirely what she knows she has to give, advising Tish in a moment of anguish, "Remember,

love is what brought you here. And if you've trusted love this far, don't panic now. Trust it all the way."

Yet even that much love and that much power can't save Fonny from the fate reserved for him. Another of the film's agonies is how marginalized people are pitted against each other; an affectionate rapport with a Mexican restaurant owner is contrasted with the anguish of the rape victim, a Puerto Rican woman who was instructed by police to identify Fonny in the line-up and then is left to her trauma. The entrenched patterns of senseless brutality feel and are intractable.

In this story, love manages to survive, but it can hardly be said to thrive. It does not cushion Fonny and Tish and those who love them, and their love should not lull us into believing that their losses are uniquely unjust. In this wrenching and beautiful depiction, we are meant to listen, to grieve as we ought, and to aspire to the determination that has been modeled for us, the quality of determination that will be needed to end such suffering.

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