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# Singing Herself into History

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Director Liesl Tommy and the film's producers made a smart decision when they had the entire cast sing live. It's a strategy that worked wonders for *Les Misérables*, and that directive gives the performances and recreated recording sessions an authenticity that enhances the artistry.

Whitaker, Hudson, Turner and Audra MacDonald as the mother belt out songs. Titus Burgess as Reverend Dr. James Cleveland, Franklin's musical mentor, Saycon Sengbloh as the adult sister Erma, Hailey Kilgore as sister Carolyn and Brenda Nicole Moorer as Brenda harmonize well. Their voices are heavenly, making the songs feel richer. Classics like "Dr. Feelgood," "Think," "Ain't No Way," "Chain of Fools" and "Sweet Sweet Baby (Since You've Been Gone)" resonate so much

the music carries the film over any rough spots.

The script by playwright-turned-screenwriter Tracey Scott Wilson, doesn't miss much in the star's formative years: Franklin's often strained relationship with her domineering dad, tween and teenage pregnancies, White's notorious spousal abuse and the singer's bouts with alcoholism. The latter two plot points provide some of the film's highest drama, moments when Aretha was scarred for her life, humiliated in public and facing inner demons that put her on a path of self-destruction.

That human frailty is balanced by the exhilarating moments (recording her first hit), shows of courage (civil rights activism with MLK and supporting Angela Davis) and creative breakthroughs (watching the scenes where she arranges songs with the band is magic).

Most of the ensemble performances are strong, with Hudson as the anchor and her singing as her strongest asset.

What's on view is so fascinating and the storyline so involving and consequential that when the film ends at Franklin's famous church concert, you wish there was more. This is where a traditional theatrical film format is lacking. The Queen of Soul had a life so rich and long it could fill a miniseries and still not touch all the breakthroughs, influential moments and endearing times that made her such an icon.

Still, her legacy has been captured in her records, a bio book *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin* and now in a film that captures her essence.

*Dwight Brown is the film critic for the National Newspaper Publishers Association, also called the Black PressUSA.*

## A Worthy Production for Live Shows Return

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(Check [osf.org](https://osf.org) for the latest safety protocols.)

All of this quickly fades once

the play delves into Hamer's telling of a life that require more resiliency than most of us can conceive of. Hamer was a powerful speaker and used music to move

audiences to the sort of courageous action that characterized voting rights protests in the 1960s and 70s—and she does so here too, speaking simply but clearly about her choices and her assessment of the stakes. The play sent me to YouTube to find videos of Hamer and, as I suspected, the play invites its lead to channel Hamer's way of moving through the world. She is a prophet, a person with a deceptively simple but also exceedingly clear read on what must be done and why extreme sacrifice is called for.

As Hamer apparently did in life, Hamer in the play frequently invites audiences to sing along with her through spirituals that, in life, were meant to rouse people to the clarity that she already had about needed action. Sitting in the outdoor theater at OSF in a predominantly white audience, I was struck by the differences in time and context for a Fannie Lou Hamer to be rousing us to action; I also wondered if people notice that the play can be taken as a vehicle for that very thing.

This production, birthed during a time of struggle, is best received and internalized as a call to action. I hope audiences will come prepared listen, to embody through singing, and to experience Hamer as a teacher and guide with real wisdom for this current moment.

*Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie and theater review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. Find her review blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](https://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).*

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