

'Tuskegee Love Letters,' by Kim Russell



REVIEWS

by Kam Williams

“My father was a pilot with the all-Negro Tuskegee Airmen; my mother a stenotypist... Separated by war and duty, they shared the events of their lives through letters. They wrote about their joys, their dreams and their individual struggles.

Thankfully, each preserved their letters.... This collection is a glimpse of their lives between 1942 and 1956... These letters are my parents' legacy. They tell about a difficult but wondrous journey filled with obstacles and opportunities... [and] remind us that all young Americans begin their lives with dreams.”

— Excerpted from the Introduction (pg. 5)

If you saw the recent World War II film *Red Tails*, you were treated to a riveting reenactment of the heroic exploits of the Tuskegee Airmen over the skies of Europe. But a glaring omission from the movie was any mention of the African-American pilots' pining for their loved ones back in the States.

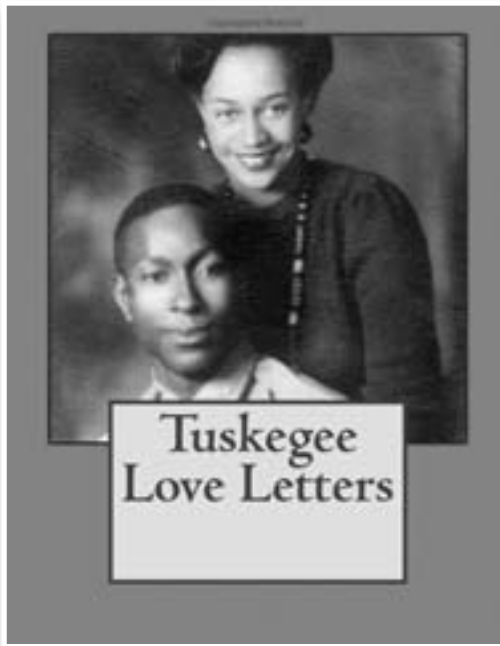
In fact, the only romance featured in the film revolved around an ill-fated, interracial liaison between an airman and a local girl he met while stationed in Italy. For that reason, a book like *Tuskegee Love Letters* couldn't have come along at a more timely moment.

This bittersweet memoir is essentially conceived as a play constructed from the notes which Bernard and Luana Knighten exchanged by mail while he was serving his country as a member of the Tuskegee Airmen. The passages

were culled by their daughter, Kim, from a collection of over 400 missives she found after her father passed away in 2000 at the age of 79.

The initial entries were written when the Knightens were still newlyweds in the full bloom of youth, and exhibiting an endearing combination of brava-do, exuberance and vulnerability. Though their subjects of conversation ranged from safety to racism to ambitious plans for making their mark on the world upon reuniting, every message invariably included a passionate reaffirmation of their love.

For instance, Luana signs one note with a heartfelt, “Please, please, please be careful and come back to me,” well aware that some members of her hubby's squadron had already perished in action. Bernard, in turn was just as ardent,



Meanwhile, equally-talented Luana started pursuing her acting career, only to die of a heart attack two days before she was set to make her Broadway debut co-starring in *Take a Giant Step* opposite a teenager named Lou Gossett, Jr. Because Kim was only a couple months-old at the time, she never

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not only naming his plane after his wife, but admitting that “I dream of you all night long.”

He also describes his reaction to Nazi POWs ‘enjoying better accommodations than black GIs. “It is really disgusting. It makes my blood boil to see how nice they treat the German prisoners... It really hurts.” But discrimination didn't discourage him after the war from publishing with the help of “a talented young writer named Alex Haley” the debut issue of *Essence Magazine*, a short-lived precursor of the popular periodical for black females.

really got to know her mother.

That makes her all the more grateful to her parents for having the inclination to save their intimate love letters and to her long-widowed dad for preserving them for posterity, knowing just how much they might mean to his darling daughter the day she discovered them in a dusty trunk in the attic after he was no longer around. A priceless slice of African-American history that can't be read without crying and which undoubtedly deserves to be on display in the Smithsonian.

Film: Black Elvis Impersonator Moonlights as Demon Hunter



Ordinarily, the term “Velvet Elvis” conjures up images of those cheesy paintings of Elvis Presley which were popular briefly back in the Seventies. But for the purposes of this hilarious horror comedy, the phrase refers not to a tacky eyesore on black velvet but to a black Elvis impersonator outfitted in The King's trademark pompadour, muttonchops and TCB sunglasses.

Nicknamed Velvis (Kirk Ponton), he's been doggedly pursuing his dream of superstardom in a Hollywood which looks suspiciously like Trenton to this former resident of New Jersey's capital city. At the point of departure, we find our hero doing his best Elvis impression until he's driven offstage by a merciless heckler (Kurt Tazelaar), a cruel reminder of why he still pays his bills by moonlighting as a pistol-packing demon hunter.

He is assisted in both endeavors by his trusty agent/manager Samael (Kevin Ridgeway), a sidekick who seems to have more luck locating monsters than landing gigs. Equipped only with a .357 magnum and the head of a vampire stashed away in a bowling bag, the dynamic duo is presently perambulating Tinseltown's ugly underbelly in search of Seth (Michael Markiewicz), a simpleminded serial killer doing the bidding of a sultry, but bloodthirsty, disembodied specter called Lamia (Jensen Bucher).

So unfolds *The Velvet Elvis*, a genre-defying splatterflick directed by Jeff Stewart. The movie marks the sophomore offering of the promising Temple Film School grad who also shot his first picture, *The Reunion*, on location in his hometown of Trenton.

Anybody lamenting the lack of diversity of roles for African-American thespians ought to credit this up-and-coming black director to be reckoned with for the colorblind casting of a brother as his title character. For the talented Mr. Ponton proves not only entertaining but oh so convincing in his capacity as a sepia-skinned Elvis.

The film also features praiseworthy support performances by Michael Markiewicz, Kevin Ridgeway, Jensen Bucher and Kacie Marie, as well as a couple of memorable cameos by Scott Miller as a deferential john with a masochism fetish and Lawrence Greenberg playing a proverbial dead guy.

Serving up as much mirth as mayhem per minute, better brace yourself for a rollicking, non-stop, roller coaster ride that won't end until Velvis has left the theater!

Excellent (4 stars); Unrated; Running time: 112 minutes; Studio A Different Path Films; Distributor Amazon Studios.

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