

'Respect' is an enjoyable ode to Aretha Franklin, biopic cliches and all

By Justin Chang

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There are moments when "Respect," an uneven, prosaic but affecting new movie starring Jennifer Hudson as a young Aretha Franklin, comes close to pinpointing something true and revealing about its subject's art.

That may sound like faint praise, but it's closer than many musician biopics get. Watch enough and their cliches start to sound like greatest hits: the troubled childhood marked by flashes of genius; the record deals and album cover montages; the marriages torn asunder by addiction, abuse and the ravages of fame. The music becomes a soundtrack at best and an afterthought at worst, something to paper over the gaps between traumas and milestones.

"Respect," glossily produced, skillfully performed and notably



Quantrell D. Colbert/MGM
Jennifer Hudson (left) stars as Aretha Franklin, with Mary J. Blige as Dinah Washington in "Respect."

developed by Franklin herself before her death in 2018, doesn't entirely avoid these traps. But as directed by Liesl Tommy ("Queen Sugar," "The Walking Dead"), making a solid feature debut, it rarely stumbles right into them. The script, by playwright and TV writer Tracey Scott Wilson, may be a thinner, more flattering account than this year's unauthorized miniseries "Genius: Aretha,"

but it also makes a virtue of some of its conventions, investing well-worn notes with fresh reserves of emotion. That's fitting, insofar as part of Franklin's brilliance lay in her ability to riff on well-loved standards; her 1972 gospel album, "Amazing Grace," the production of which draws the story to a close, is a transcendent example. The song that gives the movie its title is another.

"That's Otis Redding's song," someone protests in the early stages of Aretha's soon-to-be-definitive reworking. ("Otis who?" comes the eventual rejoinder.) The unveiling of that 1967 all-timer provides a rousing mid-movie payoff that Hudson, whom Franklin personally selected for the role, tears into with unsurprising aplomb. But in some ways, the songwriting scene that precedes it is even more enjoyable: Aretha is up late with her sisters, Carolyn (Hailey Kilgore) and Erma (Saycon Sengbloh), teasing out the beats and flourishes that will make this version so memorable, including the infectious chorus of "Ree, Ree, Ree, Ree" — a Ree-petition derived from Aretha's childhood nickname.

"Respect" is less than persuasive as an addiction drama and vague in its sense of Franklin as a political figure, some nods to her performance at Dr. King's funeral and her support for Angela Davis aside. But there's an admirable discretion in the way Tommy and Wilson handle certain other aspects of their heroine's trauma: Rather than rubbing the camera in her experiences of physical and sexual abuse, they reveal those experiences in increments, using staccato flashbacks that suggest the return of repressed memories — or, as they're referred to here, her "demons."

"Respect" is fine, fitfully rousing, even respectable. And sometimes, it's something more.

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