

Hidden Figures

USA | 2017 | 127 mins | Cert PG

Director: Theodore Melfi Screenplay: Allison Schroeder, Theodore Melfi

Cast: Taraji P Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae, Kevin Costner, Kirsten Dunst, Jim Parsons



SYNOPSIS

As the United States raced against Russia to put a man in space, NASA found untapped talent in a group of African-American female mathematicians that served as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in U.S. history. Based on the unbelievably true life stories of three of these women, known as "human computers", we follow these women as they quickly rose through the ranks of NASA alongside many of history's greatest minds specifically tasked with calculating the momentous launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit, and guaranteeing his safe return. Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson crossed all gender, race, and professional lines with their brilliance and desire to dream big.

REVIEW

Taraji P Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe are Katherine Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson, a trio of Nasa scientists who each played their part in sending astronaut John Glenn (the first American to orbit the Earth) into space in 1962. These three are fun, fast-talking and fabulously coiffed (thanks to costume designer Renee Ehrlich Kalfus). They're also African American women, which perhaps explains why this nugget of history has remained untold until now. Sure, some of it feels a little obvious, but with its "based on a true story" title card, cartoon palette and bouncy Pharrell (co)-penned soundtrack, this splashy, feel good period piece is every bit as enjoyable as a best picture Oscar-nominated blockbuster could hope to be.

The genius of Theodore Melfi's film is not in the originality of the script – as far as prestige pictures go, its dramatic and comedic beats are easy to anticipate – but in the novelty of the story and the liveliness of the performances. Each leading lady gets her own arc, though we mostly stick with Katherine, a brilliant mathematician and mother of three with excellent cat-eye glasses, who must brush off everyday office racism in order to prove herself to her stern but otherwise tolerant boss Al Harrison (Kevin Costner). This is Henson's film, though the supporting cast are uniformly excellent, in particular Moonlight's Mahershala Ali as Katherine's dashing love interest, a gentle, serious man impressed and only a little intimidated by her intelligence.

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DID YOU KNOW?

- While John Glenn did specifically request that Katherine Johnson review all of the numbers for the Friendship 7 mission before he would agree to go through with it, he did so weeks before the mission actually took place, not when the countdown to launch was nearing at Cape Canaveral.
- Before presenting the award for Best Documentary Feature at The 89th Annual Academy Awards (2017), the film's stars, Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe, introduced Henson's real life counterpart, 98 year old Katherine Johnson, to the stage, where she received a standing ovation from the audience.
- The actual working relationship between the engineers and women was not as hostile as it appears in the film. While there were clearly racial issues at play, the majority of the engineers were able to work with the computers with no issues.

Awards and Nominations

- Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture
- NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture – Taraji P Henson
- Costume Designers Guild Award for Best Costume Design – Renee Ehrlich Kalfus

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Cert 12, 89 mins

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