

A Jazzman's Blues

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours, 7 min.

Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 4; Language 4; Sex/Nudity 5.

Psalm 73:5-8

Ecclesiastes 4:1

Review

Beginning with an old woman in Hopewell, Georgia, in 1987, the film chronicles the stunted lives of several African Americans in a series of flashbacks to the 1930s and 40s. It is a dark, serious tale, all the more remarkable because its creator is definitely not known for producing such solemn material. No, writer/director Tyler Perry has made his millions producing comedies such as the *Medea* series in which he dons a wig and a dress to play a sassy middle aged woman who does not suffer fools lightly. Years ago Spike Lee was so disappointed in Perry's output that in 2009 he referred to his films as "coonery and buffoonery."

The old Black woman (Daphne Reid) whom we see trudging along the railroad tracks and then a road eventually reaches the town of Hopewell. Earlier she had been listening to a white man campaigning for Congress, very much a white racist opposed to any programs helping the undeserving poor. Turns out that is the lawyer (Kario Marcel) whose office she barges into, despite his secretary's attempt to keep her out. Saying that she wants him to look into a murder that happened in 1947, she gives her name, Hattie May. He protests that it is the sheriff's job, but she takes out of her purse a bundle of letters, says that "he wrote down everything you need to know," turns and leaves. He starts to lay them aside, but notices the name "Leanne Harper" on the top envelope.

He takes out the letter and begins to read. Flashback to Summerville, Georgia in 1937, the letter writer recalling when he had first seen Leanne at a musical gathering led by his father. The writer is the shy African American teenager known as Bayou (Joshua Boone), who goes on to describe his deepening relationship with the girl that many referred to as "Bucket," much to her dismay. Bayou is bullied by his older half-brother Willie Earl (Austin Scott) and constantly dissed by his father Buster (E. Roger Mitchell), a musician whose ambition is greater than his talent. The old man favors Willie Earl because he has learned to play his trumpet, whereas Bayou's talent lies in his voice. The mother, Hattie Mae (played by Amirah Vann throughout the flashbacks), tries to protect Bayou, but with little success. Buster decides he might find work as a musician in Chicago, so he leaves the family, never corresponding with them. A while later Willie Earl will follow in the hope of catching up with his father in Chicago.

Bayou has fallen in love with the light skinned Leanne "Bucket" (Solea Pfeiffer), whose dictatorial grandfather guards her like she was the Mona Lisa. He had been given charge of the girl when her mother Ethel (Lana Young) had sought a better life in the North. The two manage for a while to sneak out at nights for long conversations. Each signals silently their availability by tossing a paper airplane through each other's bedroom window—no screens for poor Blacks. Leanne brings along a book to teach him how to read, which inspires him to read books at home, something his mother notices and approves. One night Bayou peeks through her window and witnesses the grandfather beating her, but feeling powerless, he does not intervene. The two continue to see each other and declare their love for each other. After much persuasion, Leanne agrees to run away and marry him. However, the old man has

summoned her mother to return and take her back to Boston. Bayou rushes over to intervene, but the girl tearfully goes away with her mother.

Bayou writes letter after letter to her, but they are all intercepted by the mother and returned, Hattie May retaining them. Now living in Hopewell, having been persuaded to move by best friend Citsy (Milauna Jackson), she opens a juke joint which soon becomes very popular with Black folks, though she continues with her daytime work as a laundress and midwife. Bayou helps her, often joining in when she sings a bouncing rhythm and blues number, such as "Let the Good Times Roll." One night Willie May swaggers in, accompanied by a white man named Ira. He explains to Hattie Mae that the man is an agent who has traveled the world and that he will manage his career if he can get well. Fearful what will happen to them if a white man dies in their house, Hattie Mae hesitates but then agrees to nurse him back to health.

When Bayou is sent with the laundry she has just completed to Sheriff Jackson's, where Citsy works as cook and maid, Bayou is in the official's kitchen, about to sit down when the white man enters, ordering him to get up and leave. Accompanying him is his brother John Clayton (Brent Antonello) with his new wife whom he had met up North when the two were in college. Her mother Ethel is also with her. Turning to leave, Bayou is shocked to hear Leanne's voice. Both women obviously have been passing as white since leaving Georgia. Leanne is almost in a state of shock because she has recognized Bayou. He still carries a torch for her, as she does for him, but now she is under the thumb of her mother who forces her to continue their pretense of being white. Her husband John has prospects of becoming Hopewell's next mayor. Their love is rekindled, even though Bayou realizes Citsy, who also recognizes her, says that she is "playing a dangerous game."

The lovers' series of night-time secret rendezvous result in her becoming pregnant. Her cold-hearted mother discovers their trysts and, to break them apart, tells the sheriff that Bayou whistled at her daughter—shades of Emmett Till! Before the mob can gather and lynch him, Bayou, his brother and Ira hasten out of town.

Up in Chicago Ira talks to the manager of the Capital Royale club about the two brothers. The man at first rebuffs him, so the easily discouraged Willie Earl stalks off. Reconsidering, the manager listens to Bayou and agrees to hire him, and reluctantly, the brother also. The two brothers perform together, but Bayou is such a better singer than Willie Earl is a trumpeter, that the younger brother eclipses the older one in popularity. Willie Earl grows erratic and depressed, sinking into drug addiction, and eventually is fired. He leaves, hating Bayou and blaming him for all of his troubles. Bayou's singing continues to draw larger and larger crowds to the Royale, but they are white only, Chicago being almost as segregated as Georgia. Bayou's fame grows so much that he is able to record a song he has written, inspired by his and Leanne's use of paper airplanes, named of course "Paper Airplanes." It receives airtime as well as wide distribution.

Bayou still loves Leanne and has heard that she had given birth to a son, *his* son. Fortunately for mother and child the baby also had light skin and was accepted by his racist father as his own. Bayou wants to rush back and rescue his beloved, but the drug-high Willie Earl tells him the mob would finish the lynching it had attempted years earlier. In Hopewell Hattie Mae's juke joint has run into hard times, so that when Bayou learns about it he determines to return. "Just for one night," he assures the anxious Ira who is opposed to the trip. The singer is interested in more than his mother, hoping to take Leanne as well with them. (Leanne meanwhile, after telling her husband how unhappy she is and so wants to go

back to Boston, is told by him that he will kill her rather than allow her to embarrass him and harm his political career.)

The results of the trip are harrowing, though we are shown only the sad aftermath of the mob. A part of the tragedy is that the vengeful Willie Earl, who also returns to Hopewell, triggers the events that overwhelm Bayou, their troubled relationship thus taking on the elements of the story of Cain and Able in Genesis.

The film returns to 1987 when the lawyer has finished reading all of the letters of Bayou telling the saga of the couple's doomed love. He visits his mother where she apparently has receded into herself. She is listening to "Paper Airplane." We learn her name when the nurse's aid tells her, "Leanne, it's Johnathan." He has brought the packet of letters and picks up one of the folded paper airplanes atop the record album cover and lays the letters in its place without saying a word. Her face comes alive, and then as she reaches for a letter she begins to weep. Jump to his face, still with no word spoken. Apparently unable to watch her read, he turns and leaves. Outside on the porch he sits down in a rocker, his face showing he is in deep, troubled thought. And now that we know who he is in relation to Bayou, well he must be! Perry makes this final scene doubly ironic when he backs the camera out to reveal something else, symbolic of the man's racist views that are opposed to everything he has just learned about his bloodline. The world he has inhabited, has prospered in, has come crashing down on him.

This is a story that Tyler Perry has been working on for 27 years, the filmmaker having said that it began after conversing with the acclaimed playwright August Wilson. But first he produced the series of popular films and TV series that raked in the money to bankroll his huge Atlanta studio complex. And now he launches a film that critics can take seriously—well some of them, many diehards still preferring to slam rather than praise him. Thanks to Netflix he is able to make a film that veers from the poverty and oppression of Georgia to the opulence of the Chicago theater. In the latter he is backed by elaborately choreographed dances and singers, with such songs as "I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)" and "Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor" arranged and produced by Grammy winning jazz composer Terence Blanchard. The soundtrack music is by Aaron Zigman, who has scored a host of films-- *The Notebook*, *The Company Men*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *John Q.*, *The Proposal*, *Flicka*, *For Colored Girls*, *Flash of Genius*, *Sex & the City*. Thus the film is as enjoyable to hear as it is to see.

Intriguing is the way in which Perry obliquely compares the horrors of the African Diaspora with those of the Jewish Holocaust by including the character of Ira. One of the film's dramatic highlights (overlooked) takes place when he and the two brothers are heading to Chicago and the half-sick bayou wants to turn back because they had left his mother to face the mob. Ira tells him of the horrors inflicted on him by the Nazis, how they shot his wife and daughter and forced him to work in one of their camps. He tells Bayou that he learned to survive, and that he and his mother will too.

This is the most powerful and relevant film that Tyler Perry has made, so do not let some of the negative criticisms keep you from watching it.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. List and describe the main characters:
 - a. Bayou

- b. Willie Earl
 - c. Hattie May
 - d. Leanne
 - e. Ethel
 - f. Ira
 - g. Citsy
 - h. Sheriff Jackson
 - i. John Clayton
 - j. Johnathan
2. Leanne and her mother are light skinned: what significance did this have among African Americans at that time? Why were ointments promising to lighten one's skin so popular in the Black community? What did "passing" mean? For a good dramatization of this and its cost see my review of the film [Passing](#).
 3. What does going North mean to the African Americans in Georgia? Is it that much better than the South? What are the rules of the fancy night club the brothers perform in?
 4. What do you think of Ethel as a mother? Of what is she most afraid?
 5. What do we learn about Leanne's husband John's values? How does he show that his racism is stronger than his love? How is he like so many politicians in his use of racism? How is his son Johnathan like him, as shown in the opening clip of the film?
 6. What has Iris gone through? What do you think of this implicit comparison of the Holocaust to the African American experience?
 7. How does the song [Paper Airplanes](#) (click on the title to see the lyrics) mirror the movie's plot? Did you wonder in the last scene why the old woman was said to be listening to it a lot? When you heard the aide call her by name, what did you realize about her?
 8. What must have Leanne's life been like after the death of Bayou? Do you think she ever tried to mitigate the racism of her husband and instill loftier values in her son Johnathan? How successful was she?
 9. What do you think Johnathan will do after what he has learned from the letters of his birth father? Why do you think Perry chose to pull his camera back and show the flag at the end?
 10. In what ways is this move, with that final image of the flag, Tyler Perry's challenge to his fellow Southerners?

Review/guide published in the October 2022 issue of Visual Parables. For over 2400 reviews of films, many of them social justice films, go to Visualparables.org. The site also hosts the author's monthly journal Visual Parables which includes the reviews plus sets of discussion questions.