

Hidden Figures

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hours 7 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 0; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.

And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Psalm 9:9-19

Review

A long time ago (1983) we were treated to the story of a group of white men who, according to author Tom Wolfe, had *The Right Stuff*, the seven hot shot Airforce jet pilots chosen for the Mercury 7 Program. What we did not know then was that behind those astronauts was a group of mathematics geniuses making sure that they returned to earth safely at the place where they could be picked up by our forces—and that many of these were female African Americans, who also had the right stuff. Their story, which includes their struggle for liberation in a racist, patriarchal world, is wonderfully told in this film based on Margot Lee Shetterly's book and directed by Theodore Melfi.

The film, centering on Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), begins years before the 1960s when Katherine was recognized as a child prodigy in math and rewarded with a full college scholarship, enrolling at an age when other children her age were just beginning high school. Jump ahead in time, when we see three friends in a car stalled along a Virginia highway leading to Hampton Virginia's Langley Research Center. One of them, Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer), is underneath the front of the car tinkering with something in order to get the car started again. The other two, Katherine and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) see a state police car, with its red-light flashing, approaching from behind.

After a tense interchange featuring the usual white arrogance toward "coloreds" on display, the cop's demeanor abruptly changes when their credentials prove that their claim to be NASA employees is true. Given that the USA is engaged in a frantic race to catch up to the Soviet Union in space, his patriotism wins out over his racism, and, because they are late for work, he offers a police escort right up to NASA's gate. The feistier of the three, Mary, declares, "Three negro women are chasing a white police officer down the highway in Hampton, Virginia, 1961! Ladies, that there is a God-ordained miracle!"

I don't know if this incident in this "based on a true story" actually happened, but it is an excellent way to illustrate that what the nation, and NASA in particular, needed then was a vision wider than the narrow inherited racist one. If only more of the whites with whom the three worked at the sprawling Langley facility had been more like that cop. When the three women were hired for their proficiency in mathematics, they were placed in a separate room marked "Colored Computers" because Virginia's Jim Crow laws mandated separate work rooms, bathrooms, and dining areas wherever people worked. Today, long after IBM's revolutionary computer breakthrough, we think of a computer as a thing. In the early 1960's so were the three female mathematicians. They had two strikes against themselves—they were women, and worse, they were Black. It becomes obvious that their white superior Vivian (Kirsten Dunst) regards Dorothy as a thing, rather than a person of worth.

When Katherine is promoted and moved to the Space Task Group, every eye of the white-shirted, dark tie-wearing men in the room are fixed on her as she warily finds her desk. The harassed chief Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) is the only one who ignores both her sex and race. When she has the audacity to pour a cup of coffee from the common urn, she finds the next day that someone has placed beside it a smaller pot (and presumably “equal” grade coffee) marked “Colored.” Worse, whenever she relieves herself, she must run to the only “Colored Restroom” available, located in a different building a half mile away. Her long bathroom breaks are noticed by everyone, as well as criticized, even though she takes her work with her. Her dashes to the restroom are shown so often, that it looks like the sequences could have been borrowed from *Ground Hog Day*.

The scene in which Harrison calls her on the carpet for her behavior is one of the film’s high points. The dam of pent up anger and frustration with the stupidity of the Jim Crow custom breaks, Katherine passionately lashing out with sharp words, leaving Harrison and her co-workers stunned. No doubt her colleagues surmise that this is the end of her career. Instead, there is the triumphant scene in which most of the black women stand by in a hallway and watch Harrison, a sledge hammer in hand, knocking down the large “Colored Bathroom” sign. Also, close by him is a security guard, who normally would gladly have enforced the Jim Crow rule, but now is helpless before the chief.

Katherine must also deal with her immediate boss Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons), also a racist male chauvinist, who resents Harrison’s dictum that Katherine check his figures before submitting them to him. Stafford piles on the work and blacks out large portions of the reports he gives her. When she protests that she needs all the information to do her job verifying the figures, he smugly tells her that she does not have security clearance. Later, when he accompanies Harrison to meetings with the military in which details of launchings and landings are discussed, he refuses to include her, even though the decisions at the meetings change the numbers, thus rendering obsolete the many hours of work she has put into a report. Also, though she has done most of the work on a report, he refuses to allow her to add her name to his on the cover sheet.

Again, the scenes in which she is vindicated are sweet moments of triumph, topped probably by the scene in which astronaut John Glenn stops the countdown for his history making *Friendship 7* orbit by insisting that one of “the girls” check the IBM machine’s numbers. When Harrison speaks with him on the phone, he asks “Which one,” to which Glenn replies, “The smart one.”

To the warm eulogies given John Glenn after his recent death I want to add how positively he is depicted in another scene as well. As played by Glen Powell, he is a dedicated astronaut with an unprejudiced eye. In the scene in which the Mercury astronauts visit the Langley Research Center, all the staff stand in straight-rowed groups on the field. True to Jim Crow dictates, the “colored” staff stands apart. The group of astronauts go down the line shaking hands, and, guided by their host, start to turn away before they reach the African Americans. However, Glenn leaves his comrades and strides over to the black women, exchanging pleasantries with Katherine and the others. If anyone in that period ever had “the right stuff” in its broadest sense, it was he.

The stories of Katherine’s two math whiz friends are also inspiring. Dorothy, who has been acting as the supervisor for the others in the “Colored Computers’ section, is treated with scarcely concealed condescension when she, several times, asks Vivian about the position vacated weeks before by the former supervisor. She also takes note of the large room into which the huge IBM machine is to be installed. (The planning was so poor that the wall around the small doorway must be smashed to get the

computer moved in.) Once installed, the IBM staff is unable to get the main frame to work. Meanwhile, telling her friends that soon they will be made obsolete by the machine, the forward-looking Dorothy goes to Hampton's white's only Public Library to obtain a book on the computer language to be used with the machine. Of course, being black, she is hustled out by a security guard, but not before she has been able to hide on her person the sought-after manual.

Another of the delightful sequences of triumph comes when, after many days of studying the book and sneaking into the room to try to communicate with the computer, Dorothy is caught and chastised by the IBM staff. But when they read the print-out of her figures, their demeanor changes. Eventually not only Dorothy, as head of the division, but her black colleagues as well are staffing the room. As she leads the line of her colleagues to their new work quarters, the film not only gives a nod to *The Right Stuff's* scene of the astronauts walking down a corridor, but also to the Civil Rights marches taking place in the South at that time. In my mind, as she led the women through the street and into the building housing the computer I could hear strains of "We Shall Overcome."

The third story of quick-tongued Mary Jackson involves her seeking to become an engineer after a chief NASA engineer Karl Zielinski (Olek Krupa), a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, encourages her to look beyond her present situation. Also, supported by a husband who becomes chief caretaker of their children because of the incredibly long hours imposed by Al Harrison due to one more Soviet victory, she decides to seek an engineering degree. Her barrier, of course, is Virginia's Jim Crow law closing public universities to blacks. Her solution is like the one in the scene with the racist cop. Eventually arguing her case before a judge all too willing to go along with Jim Crow, she lays aside her tartness and demurely appeals to the man's patriotism. Once more love of country trumps racism.

Although it is their work on which the filmmakers focus the most, there are numerous scenes of their families and personal lives—even a romance. At her church worship service Dorothy's pastor acknowledges her important NASA work, and also welcomes newcomer Col. Jim Johnson (Mahershala Ali), a National Guard officer. The latter is drawn to Dorothy at the church picnic, but gets off on the wrong foot when he expresses his surprise that a woman could do such important work. Later, when he apologizes for his ignorance and arrogance, she accepts and warms up to him, the two beginning to spend together what little personal time she has. Although not shown, their time together has obviously included her three daughters. In perhaps the most charming proposal scene I know of, they are included when, at the family dinner table to which she has returned home a bit late, Jim brings in not only a dish of food, but also a small case with the engagement ring once worn by his mother.

The ring-offering scene, plus so many others, make this such an inspiring film that I would gladly award it more than five stars my web site allows. The scenes in which former detractors come around to admire and acknowledge the women as equals remind me of the ending of the two films about the black [Tuskegee Airmen](#) during WW 2, the first, a TV film with that name, and the other, [Red Tails](#)—in each of them their once racist foes express their gratitude and admiration for how skillfully the black airmen had protected them during their bombing missions over enemy territory.

I have read that some of the white characters were made up by the filmmakers so as to visualize the racist culture surrounding the women. Indeed, Al Harrison is a composite of three different directors. So, we must regard this film as a representation of the historic period and not a historical record. But the three women are real, and they made great contributions to our space program, so much so that Katherine Johnson, the surviving one*, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President

Barack Obama on November 24, 2015. And her marriage is real, she and Col. Johnson having been married for 52 years. These and other facts about the three we are told as pictures of the actors and the women they portrayed are shown during the end credits.

The cast is as good as the script, revealing a slice of our history that justifies the “hidden” in the title. Why weren’t any of them at least mentioned in *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13*? I suppose for the same reason that we never saw black cowboys in Westerns until after their heyday in the Fifties. *Hidden Figures* will rank high on VP’s Top Ten list, the women clearly depicted as persons of faith. This is a film we should be encouraging our adolescent daughters and granddaughters to see, if they still are listening to us.

*Mary Jackson died on February 11, 2005, and Dorothy Vaughan on November 10, 2008.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What is the state of the relationship between blacks and whites at the time of this story? How do we see that the status quo, as exemplified by the traffic cop, was intent on denying respect or dignity to Blacks?
2. How does patriotism trump racism in the traffic stop incident? How does this show the need for a broader allegiance, rather than one to race or class? How does Mary Jackson appeal in this way later when she takes her case for admission to the university to a white Virginia judge?
3. Which of the three women do you especially like or identify with, and why? What other higher powers might lift a person out of racism. Religion might, but how has it also re-enforced racism? Compare George Wallace with Martin Luther King, Jr., both of whom prayed to the same God.
4. What was the widely-accepted view of “the place” of a woman at the time of the film? Note Mary Jackson’s comment, “We go from being our father's daughters, to our husband's wives to our babies' mothers...”
5. How does the example of the failure of either *The Right Stuff* or *Apollo 13* to recognize the contribution of the black women to the space program reveal about the persistence of sexism and racism in our culture, including Hollywood?
6. What do you think of the space agency labeling the women as “Computers”? How does this “thingify” both the black and the white women?
7. At what points do we see the importance of sisterhood?
8. How does the film subtly show the importance of the women’s faith in their lives?
9. What do you see significant in the fact that Vivian Mitchel responds to Dorothy, “You're quite welcome, Mrs. Vaughan”? What was the usual way in which a white Southerner addressed a black woman or man back then?
10. How can we see both Al Harrison and John Glenn as agents of grace in the film? Also the Jewish engineer who had escaped from the Nazis? How did you feel at the end of the scene in which John Glenn halts his take-off until “the smart girl” checks the figures?

This review/guide was published in the February 2017 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.

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