

# Rustin (film)

***Rustin*** is a 2023 American biographical drama film directed by George C. Wolfe, from a screenplay by Julian Breece and Dustin Lance Black, and a story by Breece about the life of civil rights activist Bayard Rustin.<sup>[2]</sup> Produced by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company Higher Ground, the film stars Colman Domingo in the title role, alongside Chris Rock, Glynn Turman, Aml Ameen, Gus Halper, CCH Pounder, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Johnny Ramey, Michael Potts, Jeffrey Wright, and Audra McDonald. It is based on the true story of Rustin, who helped Martin Luther King Jr. and others organize the 1963 March on Washington.

*Rustin* premiered at the Telluride Film Festival on August 31, 2023, and was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 13, 2023. The film received a limited theatrical release on November 3, 2023, before being released on Netflix on November 17. The film received generally positive reviews, with Domingo's performance garnering numerous accolades including nominations for the Academy Award, BAFTA Award, Golden Globe Award, and SAG Award for Best Actor.

## Plot

The film tells the story of the gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. Despite incredible odds, he managed to organize the March on Washington in 1963. This event is considered one of the high points of the civil rights movement in the United States. Over 200,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and called for an end to racial discrimination in the USA. Martin Luther King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the event.

## Cast

- Colman Domingo as Bayard Rustin
- Aml Ameen as Martin Luther King Jr.
- Glynn Turman as A. Philip Randolph
- Chris Rock as Roy Wilkins
- Gus Halper as Tom Kahn
- Johnny Ramey as Elias Taylor
- CCH Pounder as Dr. Anna Hedgeman

<i>Rustin</i>	
<span></span> <div>Theatrical release poster</div>	
Directed by	<span><span>George C. Wolfe</span></span>
Screenplay by	<span><span>Julian Breece</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Dustin Lance Black</span></span>
Story by	<span><span>Julian Breece</span></span>
Produced by	<span><span>Bruce Cohen</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Tonia Davis</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>George C. Wolfe</span></span>
Starring	<span><span>Colman Domingo</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Chris Rock</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Jeffrey Wright</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Audra McDonald</span></span>
Cinematography	<span><span>Tobias A. Schliessler</span></span>
Edited by	<span><span>Andrew Mondshein</span></span>
Music by	<span><span>Branford Marsalis</span></span>
Production companies	<span><span>Higher Ground</span></span> <div></div> <span><span>Bold Choices</span></span>

- [Michael Potts](#) as [Cleve Robinson](#)
- [Audra McDonald](#) as [Ella Baker](#)
- [Jeffrey Wright](#) as [Adam Clayton Powell Jr.](#)
- [Lilli Kay](#) as [Rachelle](#)
- [Jordan-Amanda Hall](#) as [Charlene](#)
- [Jakeem Powell](#) as [Norm Hill](#)
- [Ayana Workman](#) as [Eleanor Holmes](#)
- [Grantham Coleman](#) as [Blyden](#)
- [Jamilah Rosemond](#) as [Dorie Ladner](#)
- [Jules Latimer](#) as [Joyce Ladner](#)
- [Maxwell Whittington-Cooper](#) as [John Lewis](#)
- [Frank Harts](#) as [Jim Farmer](#)
- [Kevin Mambo](#) as [Whitney Young](#)
- [Carra Patterson](#) as [Coretta Scott King](#)
- [Da'Vine Joy Randolph](#) as [Mahalia Jackson](#)
- [Adrienne Warren](#) as [Claudia Taylor](#)
- [Bill Irwin](#) as [A. J. Muste](#)
- [Jamar Williams](#) as [Tyrone](#)
- [Hope Clarke](#) as [Lucille Randolph](#)
- [Rashad Demond Edwards](#) as [Medgar Evers](#)
- [Cotter Smith](#) as [Chief Wells](#)
- [Drayton Walker](#) as [Little Stevie Wonder](#)
- [Robert M. Pflegardt](#) as [Joachim Prinz](#)
- [Christopher Anglim](#) as [Eugene Carson Blake](#)
- [Devin Doolan](#) as [Walter Reuther](#)
- [Marlon Bradley Ray](#) as [Floyd McKissick](#)

Distributed by	<a href="#">Netflix</a>
Release dates	August 31, 2023 (Telluride) November 3, 2023 (United States)
Running time	106 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
Country	United States
Language	English

## Production

In February 2021, it was reported that [George C. Wolfe](#) would direct a film based on the life of [Bayard Rustin](#) from a script by [Julian Breece](#) and [Dustin Lance Black](#).<sup>[3]</sup> In October 2021, [Colman Domingo](#) was cast as Rustin. [Chris Rock](#), [Glynn Turman](#), and [Audra McDonald](#) also joined the cast.<sup>[4]</sup> Later that month, [Aml Ameen](#), [CCH Pounder](#), [Michael Potts](#), [Bill Irwin](#), [Da'Vine Joy Randolph](#), [Gus Halper](#), [Johnny Ramey](#), [Carra Patterson](#), and [Adrienne Warren](#) joined the cast.<sup>[5]</sup> Production began in November 2021 in [Pittsburgh](#).<sup>[6][7]</sup> In December 2021, [Jeffrey Wright](#), [Grantham Coleman](#), [Lilli Kay](#), [Jordan-Amanda Hall](#), [Jakeem Dante Powell](#), [Ayana Workman](#), [Jamilah Nadege Rosemond](#), [Jules Latimer](#), [Maxwell Whittington-Cooper](#), [Frank Harts](#) and [Kevin Mambo](#) joined the cast.<sup>[8]</sup> Principal photography ended in [Washington, D.C.](#) in August, 2022. <sup>[9]</sup>

Lenny Kravitz wrote and performed an original song, "Road to Freedom," for the film. On approaching Kravitz for writing a song for the film, Wolfe said, "The one note I gave him was the song needed to help deliver us as an audience, from feeling to action. And trombones. I begged for trombones." Wolfe became fascinated with trombones after filming *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020), and Trombone Shorty was brought on board to contribute to the song.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Music

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## Release

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*Rustin* premiered at the Telluride Film Festival on August 31, 2023.<sup>[11]</sup> It also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 13, 2023.<sup>[12][13]</sup> Michelle and Barack Obama introduced the film at the opening night of the HBCU First Look Film Festival at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>[14][15]</sup> The film was released in select theaters on November 3, 2023 and premiered worldwide on Netflix on November 17.<sup>[16][17]</sup>

## Reception

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### Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 84% of 165 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 7/10. The website's consensus reads: "Colman Domingo is sensational in *Rustin*, a stirring biopic that shines an overdue light on a remarkable legacy of public service."<sup>[18]</sup> Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 68 out of 100, based on 39 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews.<sup>[19]</sup>

Domingo garnered much critical acclaim for his performance in the title role.<sup>[20]</sup> John Anderson of *The Wall Street Journal* commended Domingo as a "force of nature in this film, delivering a complex, highly sympathetic portrayal" that "determines what the movie actually is, while preventing it from going awry."<sup>[21]</sup> Maureen Lee Lenker elaborated, in her review for *Entertainment Weekly*, that "Domingo infuses *Rustin* with a warmth and vibrancy that creates a performance of immense empathy" and followed this by stating "his portrait of a man fighting for both his race and his sexuality feels incredibly personal and helps hammer home *Rustin*'s commitment to true 'justice for all.'"<sup>[22]</sup> *The Guardian*'s Benjamin Lee appreciated the film's intersectional coverage of *Rustin*'s struggles and concluded that Domingo "nails the charming persuasiveness that would explain how *Rustin* achieved so much in such a short amount of time and as he slowly starts to experience a level of acceptance for his whole self, rather than handpicked parts, there's a genuine poignancy to watching him crumble in front of us, a weight we can feel being lifted away."<sup>[23]</sup>



Domingo received near-unanimous praise for his performance and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor.

Other critics were more lukewarm towards the film, in particular for its screenplay and direction. Bilge Ebiri from Vulture observed that the script was laden with "ham-handed stage-setting with lines" that equated to "classroom-exercise level writing", leading to a film that was "filled with all the clichés of the genre." He also elaborates that the film's "predictable plot points" and the "pro forma" nature of Rustin's "personal affairs" in conjunction with Wolfe's "methodical direction" led to "visual inertia".<sup>[24]</sup> RogerEbert.com's Robert Daniels similarly agreed that the film suffocated Domingo and suppressed his potential, noting that he "ultimately clings to these emotional crescendos, gripping for dear life to a film that rarely, if ever, rises to his level."<sup>[25]</sup> In his review, Michael O'Sullivan of The Washington Post found the film's "perfunctory plot" to be "as montage-y and as superficial as the film's opening reenactments" and criticized the lack of character development across the supporting cast, noting "none of them stands out as a three-dimensional character".<sup>[26]</sup>

Specific criticism was further directed towards the film's approach of Rustin's sexuality as a narrative. Dustin Guastela of Jacobin criticized the film for caricaturing Rustin's political views: "*Rustin* claims the civil rights hero has been forgotten because of his sexuality. But it was his fiery and provocative class politics that makes him both controversial and prophetic today." He argues that the film's lack of development in the relationship between Rustin and Tom Kahn "weaponized" Rustin's sexuality as a means to obscure that Rustin's "historical neglect" was also due, in part, to his political views, which were "no less a reason for his official erasure from canonical civil rights history."<sup>[27]</sup> In his review for IndieWire, David Ehrlich also lamented the film's handling of Rustin's sexuality and stated that "*Rustin* is diminished by the

forced momentum of its plotting, by how inelegantly the script incorporates the social dynamics of Rustin’s homosexuality (the love triangle that develops between Rustin, fellow activist Tom Kahn, and a composite character played by Johnny Ramey stops the movie dead in its tracks every time it comes up)."<sup>[28]</sup>

## Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<a href="#">The Queerties</a>	February 28, 2023	Next Big Thing	<i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	<a href="#">[29]</a>
<a href="#">Hamptons International Film Festival</a>	October 12, 2023	The Sherzum Award		Won	<a href="#">[30]</a>
<a href="#">Heartland International Film Festival</a>	October 15, 2023	Audience Choice Award – Narrative Special Presentation		Won	<a href="#">[31]</a>
<a href="#">Mill Valley Film Festival</a>	October 16, 2023	Directing	<a href="#">George C. Wolfe</a>	Won	<a href="#">[32]</a>
		Audience Award – U.S. Cinema		Won	
<a href="#">Chicago International Film Festival</a>	October 22, 2023	Gold Q-Hugo	<i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	<a href="#">[33]</a>
<a href="#">Philadelphia Film Festival</a>	October 29, 2023	Audience Award – Narrative Feature		Won	<a href="#">[34]</a>
<a href="#">Hollywood Music in Media Awards</a>	November 15, 2023	<a href="#">Original Score — Feature Film</a>	<a href="#">Branford Marsalis</a>	Nominated	<a href="#">[35]</a>
		<a href="#">Original Song — Feature Film</a>	<a href="#">Lenny Kravitz</a> ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	<a href="#">[36]</a>
<a href="#">Gotham Independent Film Awards</a>	November 27, 2023	Icon & Creator Tribute for Social Justice	<i>Rustin</i>	Won	<a href="#">[37]</a>
<a href="#">Celebration of Cinema &amp; Television</a>	December 4, 2023	Actor Award (Film)	<a href="#">Colman Domingo</a>	Won	<a href="#">[38]</a>
<a href="#">Washington D.C. Area Film Critics Association Awards</a>	<a href="#">December 10, 2023</a>	<a href="#">Best Actor</a>		Nominated	<a href="#">[39]</a>
<a href="#">Las Vegas Film Critics Society</a>	December 13, 2023	Best Actor		Nominated	<a href="#">[40]</a>
		Best Song	"Road to Freedom"	Nominated	
<a href="#">Indiana Film Journalists Association</a>	December 17, 2023	Best Lead Performance	<a href="#">Colman Domingo</a>	Nominated	<a href="#">[41]</a> <a href="#">[42]</a>
<a href="#">Women Film Critics Circle Awards</a>	December 18, 2023	Best Actor		Nominated	<a href="#">[43]</a>
<a href="#">Dallas–Fort Worth Film Critics Association</a>	<a href="#">December 18, 2023</a>	<a href="#">Best Actor</a>		5th place <sup>[a]</sup>	<a href="#">[44]</a>
<a href="#">San Diego Film Critics Society</a>	<a href="#">December 19, 2023</a>	<a href="#">Best Actor</a>		Nominated	<a href="#">[45]</a>

<u>Capri Hollywood International Film Festival</u>	January 2, 2024	Best Actor		Won	[46] [47]
<u>Palm Springs International Film Festival</u>	January 4, 2024	Spotlight Award - Actor		Won	[48]
<u>Georgia Film Critics Association Awards</u>	January 5, 2024	Best Actor		Nominated	[49] [50]
<u>Astra Film and Creative Arts Awards</u>	January 6, 2024	Best Actor		Nominated	[51]
<u>Golden Globe Awards</u>	January 7, 2024	Best Actor – Motion Picture Drama		Nominated	[52]
		Best Original Song		Nominated	
<u>Denver Film Critics Society</u>	January 12, 2024	Best Original Song	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	[53]
<u>Critics' Choice Movie Awards</u>	January 14, 2024	Best Actor	Colman Domingo	Nominated	[54]
		Best Song	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	
<u>African-American Film Critics Association Awards</u>	January 15, 2024	Best Actor	Colman Domingo	Won	[55]
<u>Black Reel Awards</u>	January 16, 2024	<u>Outstanding Film</u>	Bruce Cohen, Tonia Davis & <u>George C. Wolfe</u>	Nominated	[56]
		Outstanding Lead Performance	Colman Domingo	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Screenplay</u>	Julian Breece & <u>Dustin Lance Black</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Ensemble</u>	Cherelle Cargill & Avy Kaufman	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Score</u>	Brandford Marsalias	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Soundtrack</u>	<i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Original Song</u>	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Costume Design</u>	Toni-Leslie James	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Production Design</u>	Mark Ricker	Nominated	
		Outstanding Hairstyle and Make-up	Melissa Forney & Beverly Jo Pryor	Nominated	
<u>AARP Movies for Grownups Awards</u>	January 17, 2024	<u>Best Actor</u>	Colman Domingo	Won	[57]
		<u>Best Ensemble</u>	The cast of <i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	
		<u>Best Time Capsule</u>	<i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	
<u>Iowa Film Critics Association</u>	January 17, 2024	Best Original Song	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Runner-up	[58]

<u>Society of Composers &amp; Lyricists</u>	February 13, 2024	Outstanding Original Song for a Dramatic or Documentary Visual Media Production	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	[59]
<u>BAFTA Film Awards</u>	February 18, 2024	Best Actor in a Leading Role	Colman Domingo	Nominated	[60]
<u>Satellite Awards</u>	February 18, 2024	Best Actor in a Motion Picture, Drama		Nominated	[61]
		Best Original Song	Lenny Kravitz ("Road to Freedom")	Nominated	
<u>Screen Actors Guild Awards</u>	February 24, 2024	Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Leading Role	Colman Domingo	Nominated	[62]
<u>Artios Awards</u>	March 7, 2024	Outstanding Achievement in Casting – Feature Studio or Independent (Drama)	Avy Kaufman, Donna Belajac, Missy Finnell, Scotty Anderson	Nominated	[63]
<u>Academy Awards</u>	March 10, 2024	Best Actor in a Leading Role	Colman Domingo	Nominated	[64]
<u>GLAAD Media Awards</u>	March 11 - May 14, 2024	Outstanding Film – Streaming or TV	<i>Rustin</i>	Won	[65] [66]
<u>NAACP Image Awards</u>	March 16, 2024	Outstanding Motion Picture		Nominated	[67]
		Outstanding Directing in a Motion Picture	George C. Wolfe	Nominated	
		Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture	Colman Domingo	Won	
		Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture	Glynn Turman	Nominated	
		Outstanding Ensemble Cast in a Motion Picture	<i>Rustin</i>	Nominated	
		Outstanding Costume Design	Toni–Leslie James, Josh Quinn	Nominated	
		Outstanding Make-up	Beverly Jo Pryor, Eric Pagdin, Quintessence Patterson	Nominated	
		Outstanding Original Score for TV/Film	Branford Marsalis	Nominated	

## See also

- Civil rights movement in popular culture

## Notes

- Tied with Leonardo DiCaprio for *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

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## External links

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- *Rustin* (<https://www.netflix.com/title/81111528>) on Netflix
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