



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Moonlight

You stand, wrapped in that strange communal spell during the thunderous ovation, as the memory of cinema floods back. Not the explosive, momentarily gratifying, empty-bellied franchise juggernaut that has run roughshod across the plains of American cinema in recent decades. No, the memory of a medium that lovingly takes a small life and makes the experience of that life epic. In *Moonlight* we watch as a vulnerable young boy nicknamed Little (Alex Hibbert) becomes an adolescent (Ashton Sanders) and then finally a man, now known as Black (Trevante Rhodes), against the wilds of a poor black community in Miami.

Chiron – his given name – is an outcast, abandoned by a drug-addled mother (Naomie Harris) and a father whose presence isn't even to be expected. He is terrorised by a culture of cruel and aggressive hyper-masculinity embodied by nemesis Terrel (Patrick Decile). So far, so ubiquitous, you might think, and yet this is a story about love – or the dream of love that can be found even in the midst of a nightmare. First, there is local drug kingpin Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his wife Teresa (Janelle Monáe), whose warm, ordered home is a shelter from the horrors of Chiron's own. Then there is Kevin, his only friend. Chiron grows to love him deeply but the thwarted desire he feels leads to a startling shift in identity.

At some point, you are surprised that this is the first time you have seen a cinematic portrayal of the lonely path many black gay men have walked. You realise with greater surprise that you have rarely seen young black men weep on screen as you do so often in this film. Perhaps the closest cinema has come to creating a vulnerable young black male hero is the Pepto-Bismol-swilling Strike in Spike Lee's *Clockers* (1995).

On first viewing, *Moonlight* hypnotises. Set in Miami, to the visual and sonic echoes of the ocean, this coming-of-age odyssey plays out within a landscape of deeply protected emotions. On second viewing, you have to fight the seduction to study the craft. From the first prowling single take, reminiscent of the opening of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), to the isolating wide-angle shots butting up against extreme close-ups, colour-saturated tableaux and an immersive soundscape, this is a film designed to speak to your subconscious.

*Moonlight*'s director Barry Jenkins first broke through in 2008 with the smart, stylish *Medicine for Melancholy*. The film picked up an Independent Spirit Award, but Jenkins then vanished. In certain circles, especially those hungering for complex cinematic depictions of black life, Jenkins's name would be whispered reverently: 'Whatever happened to Barry Jenkins?' So his reappearance with *Moonlight*, partnering with the playwright Tarell Alvin

McCraney on an adaptation of the latter's semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, drew immediate attention. It was a meeting of souls, Jenkins says, especially when he discovered that both he and McCraney had grown up in the same part of Miami, where the film is set. Little did Jenkins know how personal this project was to become or how acclaimed it would be – the film went on to pick up a Best Picture Golden Globe, as well as eight Oscar nominations (including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor for Ali and Best Supporting Actress for Harris) and four BAFTA nominations.

**Gaylene Gould, *Sight & Sound*, March 2017**

The process by which a small movie like *Moonlight* comes to loom large over global film culture is a complicated one. The most admirable thing about Barry Jenkins's adaptation of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* is its commitment to intimacy; this strength is manifested in the skilful proximity of James Laxton's cinematography and the small-scale parameters of the storyline, which follows a single character as he ages from a child to a young adult. But *Moonlight* has come to symbolise something bigger: perhaps more than any other release of the past year, Jenkins's film has been anointed a Movie of the Moment. Whether or not that designation refers triumphally to its status as an artwork describing contemporary African-American life through the eyes of one of its own or, more tenderly, as a final, valedictory exercise in Obama-era identity politics before America Makes Itself Great Again, it's a lot of significance for one film to bear.

*Moonlight* betrays this weightiness at the top of its third section, which begins with a piece of onscreen text reading 'iii. Black'. The word is being used as a proper name, or rather a street moniker, for the film's Miami-born protagonist, who has previously been encountered in chapters entitled 'Little' (his childhood nickname) and 'Chiron' (the name that's on his birth certificate). Introducing the character by different names at different points in his life is a clever, economical way of suggesting that he contains multitudes, and yet Jenkins is also reaching a bit with that conspicuous, calculated use of 'Black', which could be seen as an attempt to universalise Chiron's story, or to turn him into a stand-in of sorts for the intersecting racial and sexual demographic he inhabits. In this final, twentysomething incarnation, played by Trevante Rhodes, Chiron is hulking-up and physically armoured to the point that he looks almost indistinguishable from the alpha-male cowards who bullied him when he was a kid: a suggestive bit of dramaturgy barbed spikily with sociology.

*Moonlight*'s uniqueness as a film about a queer black youth cannot be overstated, and it skilfully filters rhetoric through realism, as when Little (Alex Hibbert) is chased aggressively into an abandoned crack house by his playmates. It's a stark bit of staging that reflects a bigger, sadly credible ghetto trajectory. Little's saviour in this tight spot is a dealer named Juan

(Mahershala Ali) who literally breaks through the barrier separating the terrified boy from the outside world and quickly becomes a dedicated father figure: the majority of the film's first vignette describes the tightening of their bond. Driving Little back to his house, Juan palms his car's steering wheel with a family man's easy grace. It's the same relaxed mastery that Black will demonstrate driving his own vehicle later on, after relocating to Atlanta, where he's taken up dealing as well – a revelation that's given extra sting by our knowledge at this point in the story that Juan didn't make it out of his own professional trap alive.

*Moonlight* is awash with these kinds of visual and dramatic rhymes. Jenkins builds each section around a close encounter on or near a beach, and there's an exhilarating symmetry between the early scene where Juan teaches Little how to swim by holding him steady in the surf and teenage Chiron (Ashton Sanders) kissing his friend Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) in the dark on the sand: paternal intimacy and adolescent experimentation each rendered with fleshy, tactile eroticism. Jenkins has cited Wong Kar Wai and Claire Denis as inspirations, and both are duly evoked, although an even more apropos reference point might be the Hou Hsiao-Hsien of *Three Times* (2005), another triptych designed as a series of interlacing motifs (and similarly pivoting on the theme of repressed desire).

In addition to his agile formalism, Jenkins has a real sensitivity for actors, and *Moonlight* boasts a superb ensemble. Not only the three Chirons, who have been carefully guided along a continuum of shared cadences and gestures, but also Ali, whose handsomely hard-lined face is alternately a tough-guy mask and an open book; and André Holland, perfectly cast as the wary, regretful older version of high-school peacock Kevin, a character whose gradual movement to the story's very heart is beautifully engineered. In the closing encounter between Black and Kevin, the actors' gently shape-shifting rapport in a dimly lit diner has the uncanny feel of a surreptitiously overheard conversation. Even as the two old friends talk cautiously around their shared history, the emotions between them cut loud and clear through the background clatter, proving that *Moonlight* is at its most eloquent when its subtext is soft-spoken.

**Adam Nayman, *Sight & Sound*, March 2017**

MOONLIGHT

Directed by: Barry Jenkins  
©: Dos Hermanas LLC  
Production Company: Plan B, Pastel  
Presented by: A24, Plan B Entertainment  
Executive Producers: Brad Pitt, Sarah Esberg, Tarell Alvin McCraney  
Produced by: Adele Romanski, Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner  
Co-producers: Andrew Hevia, Veronica Nickel  
Line Producer: Veronica Nickel  
Unit Production Manager: Jennifer Radzikowski  
Location Manager: Faren Humes  
Script Supervisor: Melinda Taksen  
Casting by: Yesi Ramirez  
Screenplay by: Barry Jenkins  
Story by: Tarell Alvin McCraney  
Cinematography by: James Laxton  
Steadicam Operators: James Baldanza, Osvaldo Silvera  
Visual Effects Provided by: Significant Others  
Edited by: Nat Sanders, Joi McMillon  
Production Designer: Hannah Beachler  
Costume Designer: Caroline Eselin-Schaefer  
Head Make-up: Doniella Davy  
Head Hair: Gianna Sparacino  
Title Design: Sebastian Pardo, MEMORY  
Music by: Nicholas Britell  
Violin Soloist: Tim Fain

Pianist: Nicholas Britell  
Score Orchestrated by: Nicholas Britell  
Score Produced by: Nicholas Britell  
Production Sound Mixer: Christopher Giles  
Re-recording Mixer: Chris David  
Supervising Sound Editor: Joshua Adeniji  
Stunt Co-ordinators: Alexander Edlin, Artie Malesci

Cast  
Trevante Rhodes (Chiron, ‘Black’)  
André Holland (Kevin)  
Janelle Monáe (Teresa)  
Ashton Sanders (Chiron aged 16)  
Jharrel Jerome (Kevin aged 16)  
Naomie Harris (Paula)  
Mahershala Ali (Juan)  
Shariff Earp (Terrence)  
Duan ‘Sandy’ Sanderson (Azu)  
Alex Hibbert (Chiron aged 10, ‘Little’)  
Jaden Piner (Kevin aged 10)  
Patrick Decile (Terrel)

USA 2016©  
111 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Moonlight**  
Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45  
**To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar**  
Fri 25 Feb 20:45  
**Mädchen in Uniform**  
Sat 26 Feb 16:00  
**Go Fish**  
Sat 26 Feb 18:20  
**The Watermelon Woman**  
Sat 26 Feb 20:30  
**The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)**  
Sun 27 Feb 17:50  
**Le Mépris (Contempt)**  
Tue 1 Mar 18:15; Tue 8 Mar 20:50; Sat 12 Mar 20:50  
**42nd Street**  
Wed 2 Mar 18:00 (+ intro by Miles Eady, BFI Cinema and Events); Fri 4 Mar 20:40; Mon 14 Mar 20:45

**Cabaret**  
Thu 3 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:15  
**8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)** Fri 4 Mar 18:00; Mon 7 Mar 20:15; Wed 16 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)  
**F for Fake**  
Fri 4 Mar 20:50; Wed 9 Mar 18:10 (+ Intro by Programmer-At-Large, Geoff Andrew); Wed 16 Mar 21:10  
**Nashville**  
Sat 5 Mar 19:45; Wed 9 Mar 14:15; Sun 13 Mar 18:00  
**Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)**  
Sun 6 Mar 13:15; Fri 11 Mar 18:05; Tue 15 Mar 18:10  
**Baadasssss!**  
Thu 10 Mar 20:40; SAT 12 MAR 18:10

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