

'Just Mercy' does justice to its subject

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<< out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 136 minutes

Some true stories are so horrifying that it's actually shocking to believe that something like the events depicted could have occurred in the country so recently. The new drama *Just Mercy* details one such story involving criminal injustice, that of a man falsely accused and convicted of murder simply because of his race. While this courtroom drama won't offer viewers any surprises, it is still an effective and well-told story worth seeing.

The film follows a young Harvard graduate and lawyer named Bryan Stevenson (Michael B. Jordan). Determined to follow his passion and help the wrongfully convicted as a defense attorney, he heads south to Alabama. While reading through case files, he discovers convict Walter McMillian (Jamie Foxx). In 1987, the prisoner was sentenced to death for the murder of an 18-year-old girl, despite all evidence showing the inmate had absolutely nothing to do with the crime. Stevenson convinces McMillian to let him file an appeal and represent him in court. However, the protagonist quickly encounters roadblocks and learns that the state's criminal and legal system, as well as those running the institutions, are still very racist, making his job all the more difficult and dangerous.

The movie benefits from an exceptional group of actors giving their all. Jordan stoically handles

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all of the nasty comments and actions directed his way, while Foxx effectively delivers an initially standoffish quality that hides a sense of hopelessness about his character's situation. While the two stars are excellent, the supporting cast members are equally strong. Over the course of the running time, the stories and struggles of a few other prisoners (Rob Morgan and O'Shea Jackson Jr.) are also developed. Morgan's work as Herbert Richardson, a war veteran suffering from PTSD who is also serving a death sentence, may be the most interesting and layered subplot. He is remarkable in the part and makes a powerful impression.

Technical skills on display are very strong as well. Despite this tale being primarily set in a prison and courtroom, it is also a nicely shot feature that uses and emphasizes orange hues and warm colors when the main characters are together trying to plan their next legal move. It contrasts nicely with the less attractive and pale grays and whites used in the prison environments and less colorful tones used in courtroom scenes.

The film is at times earnest to a fault. The good characters are noble in every possible way and the bad characters are generally horrific beyond words. This may be an accurate representation of the people involved, but as a drama it comes across as stagey. And the story itself is told in a very straightforward and routine manner, hitting all of the expected beats. Even viewers unfamiliar with the events depicted, will know exactly what is coming and have a clear idea of how things will play out long before they occur, eliminating some of the tension.

Thankfully, the cast members are so strong that they make up for any of the more routine and predictable aspects of the screenplay with empathic performances. In the end, all involved have come together to make a very good film with an important message at its core. While *Just Mercy* do esn't offer up any shocks over the course of its running time, it capably delivers its inspirational and still relevant story to audiences.

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