

‘King Richard’ shows how growing up Williams can be fun, intense

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

out of <<<<<

Running Time: 138 minutes

This film will be playing at movie theaters on Nov. 19, with a month-long simultaneous release on HBO Max.

Virtually everyone is familiar with phenoms Venus and Serena Williams, who have become two of the all-time greatest tennis players. Besides winning more titles and records than can be listed here, they're still competing at extraordinary levels. That hasn't prevented the pair, their family, and filmmakers from producing a biopic about their lives. "King Richard" focuses primarily on their dad Richard and his efforts to make his daughters the best athletes in the world.

The story is interesting and the film is slickly mounted, with strong performances from the cast. Yet, while it is a good feature, one can't help but feel that the family's close involvement in the production may have ultimately softened some of the edge and tension from the story.

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Richard Williams (Will Smith) is a father determined to help his children rise to the top. In particular, his attention is focused on teaching tennis to daughters Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and Serena (Demi Singleton). Seeing their talent, he videotapes them and contacts professionals and special schools in their hometown of Los Angeles. Richard pressures everyone he meets to teach them, despite most being less-than-interested in providing free help and lessons.

Eventually, he convinces tennis coach Paul Cohen (Tony Goldwyn) to volunteer time with Venus and re-teaches lessons with wife Oracene (Aunjanue Ellis) to Serena. Both join the amateur circuit and draw attention. Richard then begins negotiating with other coaches like Rick Macci (Jon Bernthal), as he continues to forge ahead and make his children rich and famous.

Smith is giving his all, portraying Richard Williams as a family man and doing his best to make the dad's wild eccentricities understandable. Performers Sidney and Singleton are charismatic and fun to watch as the Williams sisters, joking around jovially while working through intense conditions and scrutiny. And Ellis also has a couple of dramatic scenes as she attempts to help her driven husband listen to his girls and take their opinions into consideration. The performers are all compelling and likable, as are the various supporting cast members who find themselves both impressed with the young tennis talent and frustrated by their father and his hard negotiating tactics.

When the Williams sisters are shown playing the game, the editing and camera work is also impressive. Obviously, the end results of many of the matches depicted are already known, so making the various showdowns reasonably tense and exciting is an accomplishment in and of itself. Smith also adds some extra drama to the proceedings, behaving in both a confident, but edgy manner during the matches.

In general, the film is handsome, but there is a certain Hollywood glossiness to the proceedings. The movie makes a few minor allusions to Richard being stubborn in making everyone adhere to his vision. However, it doesn't result in much conflict within the family, beyond one or two discussions with his wife. Family as a focal point and carrying a humble attitude while helping the community, is explained as being essential to Richard, yet the movie only mentions his charity work in passing, and is instead centered on his business deal negotiations and efforts to make big money.

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These are some interesting contradictions that could provide drama, but the movie doesn't address them. It paints Richard as almost saintly and sets out to spurn any questions about his tough methods to ensure success.

Obviously, Richard Williams was in many ways instrumental in helping his daughters achieve success. But to some degree the focus on dad minimizes the tremendous talent and accomplishments of Venus and Serena. Given the real family's involvement in the proceedings, it does seem as if the upbeat family dynamic presented should be taken with a grain of salt. "King Richard" is an effective and inspirational tale of how two tennis phenoms came to be, but it doesn't quite deliver an ace serve.

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For the Sun***