Hidden Figures — Review

Hidden Figures is the story of a team of female African-American mathematicians who served a vital role in NASA during the early years of the U.S. space program.

The three brilliant women NASA - Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) - serve as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in history: the launch of astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell) into orbit, a stunning achievement that restored the nation's confidence, turned around the Space Race and galvanized the world.

The film takes us back to 1961, when racial segregation and workplace sexism were widely accepted facts of life and the word “computer” referred to a person, not a machine. Though a gigantic IBM mainframe computer does appear in the movie — big enough to fill a room and probably less powerful than the phone in your pocket — the most important computers are three African-American women who work at NASA headquarters. Assigned to data entry jobs and denied recognition or promotion, they would go on to play crucial roles in the American space program.

Henson, Spencer, and Monáe's stellar performances propel this feel-good biographical drama that teaches audiences about a little-known aspect of NASA's history.

Hidden Figures makes a fascinating and timely companion to Loving, Jeff Nichols's film about the Virginia couple who challenged their state's law against interracial marriage, which was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1967. The two movies take place in the same state in the same era, and focus on the quiet dramas that move history forward. They can fill you with outrage at the persistence of injustice and gratitude toward those who had the grit to stand up against it.

The film inspires as it entertains and is the rare true story-based historical drama that succeeds at being as inspirational and feel-good as it aspires to be.