



38th SEASON

ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2017/18

Chiasso, Cinema Excelsior

18.15

Friday, 20 October 2017

HIDDEN FIGURES **2016**

127 minutes

Directed by **Theodore Melfi**

Starring: Taraji Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monae and Kevin Kostner

Based on a true story, the film opens in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia in 1926. A young Katherine Coleman is waiting, naming the geometric shapes in a stained-glass window, while her parents talk to a school official. The official wants to send Katherine to a school for gifted students – she's an advanced student and a genius at maths. The only such school for "colored" students starts at the sixth grade and Katherine is only eight, so she will have to skip several grades. At the new school, a teacher asks Katherine to tackle an algebra problem on the blackboard; the camera zooms in on the teacher's hand as he passes Katherine the chalk. Katherine solves the problem without hesitation, then turns around and explains it to her teenaged classmates.

In Hampton, Virginia, in 1961, an adult Katherine, now Katherine Goble, is stuck on the side of the road with the two co-workers she carools with, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson. A racist police officer stops and asks for identification. When they explain that they work at NASA, he changes his tune; he's surprised they hire black women, but he's impressed. He seems very well-versed in NASA and asserts that the Americans have to beat the Russians in the Space Race. He asks if they've met the astronauts; Mary answers that they have but it's clear from the others' expressions that they're kept separate from them. Dorothy manages to get the car up and running and the police officer provides them an escort – lights and sirens blazing – to the NASA Langley Research Center, which they find ironic since it's not usually a group of black people speeding to follow a police car.

The Space Task Group watches a newsreel about Russia's launch of Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite. In the ensuing discussion, leaders worry that the Soviets' access to space could allow them to spy on America. The man in charge demands that Al Harrison gets them up there because they can't justify the cost of a space programme that doesn't put anyone in space. A man in the crowd, Paul Stafford, makes a snooty comment and is asked what his position is. He explains he is the head engineer.

The three women work at the West Area Computing division, segregated from the rest of Langley Research Center, along with many other black women who work as computers – meaning they do maths by hand. Dorothy gives out new assignments to the group. Mary wants to work as an engineer but she is told she is going to be assisting the male engineers. ...

Critics' comments:

- THE HIDDEN FIGURES EFFECT: INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN – Since its release, the film has inspired female engineers and students alike – and made a valuable impact in the campaign to get women into science and technology. (from *The Guardian*)

- These women are not in any way submissive or passive. On the contrary, each one speaks up and takes action at great personal risk. (For instance, Dorothy steals a book that the library won't let her borrow and then speaks sharply to the guard who hustles her and her sons out.) The movie's emphasis on individual action and achievement in the face of vast obstacles is both beautiful and salutary, but its near-effacement of collective organization and political activity at a time when they were at their historical apogee—for that matter, its elision of politics as such—narrows the drama and, all the more grievously, the characters at its center. (from *The New Yorker*)