



## BY FILM PEOPLE OF FILM PEOPLE FOR FILM PEOPLE

Movie Title:  
Hidden Figures  
6 stars out of 10

Starring:  
Taraji P. Henson  
Octavia Spencer  
Janelle Monáe  
Kevin Costner  
Kirsten Dunst  
Jim Parsons

Writer:  
Allison Schroeder  
Theodore Melfi  
Margot Lee Shetterly

Director:  
Theodore Melfi



### **Hidden Figures: Schmaltz as Social Commentary**

“The first way to lie artistically is to tell the truth — but not all of it...”  
-- Robert Heinlein from Time Enough for Love.

In the warm and fuzzy flick Hidden Figures, Hollywood does Heinlein proud, lying artistically in the ‘first way’ fashion that Tinseltown has elevated to high art. Yeah, hoi polloi loves Hidden Figures. What’s not to like about a story of triumph over injustice?

The movie is based on the book of that title by Margot Lee Shetterly, and expertly adapted by screenwriters Allison Schroeder and Theodore Melfi. A little known fact is that the script is actually based on a fifty-five page book proposal rather than the book itself. Hidden Figures was well into production when the book was published in September 2016. Nonetheless, the movie is the intriguing story of three African-American women employed at the West Area Computers division of the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia.

It is a very well-produced, convincing period piece painting a plausible picture of the supposedly pent-up “pre-liberation” old America of the early 1960s. You know, the America of rampant racism, suppressed sexuality, devoid of diversity. The most powerful country on earth certainly couldn’t send a man to the moon under those conditions!

The storyline thrives on political correctness: white folks (in the South) purposefully yet passively perpetuating a cruel system of racial segregation, this time at NASA. Early on the writers cut to the chase: the first cracks in the segregationist construct emerge early on in the soundbite between aspiring engineer Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) and NASA scientist Karl Zielinski (Aleksander Krupa):

Mary Jackson: Mr. Zielinski, I'm a Negro woman. I'm not going to entertain the impossible.

Karl Zielinski: And I'm a Polish Jew whose parents died in a Nazi prison camp. Now I'm standing beneath a space ship that's going to carry an astronaut to the stars. Let me ask you - if you were a white male, would you wish to be an engineer?

Mary Jackson: I wouldn't have to. I'd already be one.

While Zielinski is a minor character, that soundbite sets the narrative.

Don’t get me wrong: it is a very good movie and richly deserves praise. It is enjoyable, entertaining and engaging. The main characters are Katherine Goble (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughn (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe). They give stellar performances. Richly cultivated theatrical talent is on display here, forcefully directed by Theodore Melfi. We are rooting for the underdog trio from the start, and their convivial characters strike an ideal balance between likeness (race, gender and profession) and difference (administrator, mathematician and engineer with distinct personalities) – so far so good.

But this potentially great flick is only a good one because it is suffused with schmaltz: the ladies are too perfect. None of them are haunted with any of the human imperfections brought to the fore in historical films. Rather they are portrayed as paragons of virtue, exemplars of morality, and trailblazers for racial justice and gender equality. These ladies are just too good to be true. Some personal challenges apart from race and gender discrimination would have added depth and a much needed reality dimension to a feel-good story. Let’s face it: we all have inner demons. But Hollywood conforms to the norms: media ordained heroes are the peak of perfection -- period.

Now back to Mr. Heinlein: At the beginning it is written: Based on True Events. This stealthily frames our expectations, leading us to believe what follows. From there historical truth is left in the dust as fictional circumstances conform to fit the politically correct narrative. The Paul Stafford character (Jim Parsons) who portrays a condescending male chauvinist/bigot who makes life rough for mathematician Katherine Goble (Taraji P. Henson) never existed in real life. The Kirsten Dunst character (Vivian Mitchell) who stands in the way of Dorothy Vaughn (Octavia Spencer) being promoted to supervisor also did not exist. Those characters are supposedly composites created to show us racial discrimination up close and personal. But politics permeates all, and Hidden Figures will be helpful to Hollywood as they contend with the widely ballyhooed [#OscarsSoWhite](#) controversy

Also, the storyline of Hidden Figures way exaggerates the importance of these nice ladies to NASA. While they have been recognized for their contribution to the American space program, others who played far more important roles have not. Foremost among them is Dr. Jack Crenshaw, a mathematical trailblazer who led the team that designed the free-return trajectory critical to future Apollo missions. In scientific circles giving the credit for that to the ladies is considered taking artistic license into the realm of fake history. In the entertainment business it is business as usual. And apparently only Mel Gibson and possibly Clint Eastwood can produce a not boring story about a wholesome straight white male American.

But hoi polloi loves Hidden Figures. They also love Wheel of Fortune. Great art it is not. But if you want to pay ten bucks or so for an entertaining two hours of politically correct “history,” by all means, go. You will get it anyway somewhere else, so at least you can enjoy the show amid the ambiance of the cinema and help make sure the movie moguls don’t miss a meal.

By Levi Gordon