

Movieguide: 'Black Nativity' Is an Unsung Masterpiece

The Christmas season is the best season for a lot of really great movies. This season, Disney's wonderful animated work, *Frozen*, is seeing some well-deserved accolades from both critics and moviegoers.

However, there is another movie this season that has not received the acclaim that it so richly deserves—*Black Nativity*, starring the super-talented Forest Whitaker, Angela Bassett, Jennifer Hudson, Tyrese Gibson and relative newcomer Jacob Latimore.

Black Nativity is a musical drama inspired by Langston Hughes' play of the same name. It's a brilliant, uplifting piece of filmmaking that highlights God's grace. It is entertaining, heartrending, uplifting, amusing and faith-filled.

The story follows Langston, a teenager living with his single mother Naima (Jennifer Hudson) in Baltimore. With Christmas right around the corner, Langston finds out he and his mother are being evicted from their house. With nowhere to go, his mother decides to send Langston over to his grandparents. For some reason, she stopped speaking to them right before Langston's birth. Langston protests his mom's decision because he doesn't even know his grandparents, but she decides it's the best thing to do.

Naima places Langston on a bus headed to Harlem, where her parents live. Upon arriving in downtown New York City, Langston is introduced to a harsher, more chaotic environment than he understands. After his backpack gets stolen, he wanders into a fancy hotel looking for a phone, where a wealthy guest confuses him for a thief, and Langston's arrested. A tough-looking black guy in the cell taunts and

teases him.

Langston is released from jail into the custody of his grandfather, the Rev. Cobbs (Forest Whitaker). Already disappointed with how quickly his grandson got into trouble, the reverend takes Langston home to the warm welcome of his grandmother, Aretha (Angela Bassett). Even though the reverend is strict and a little rough around the edges, he and Aretha clearly love and miss their daughter, Naima, who still refuses to speak to them because of a past event. Langston tries to figure out a way to get the money Naima and he need to pay the rent or find a new home in Baltimore. He's willing to do almost anything to get it.

As the reverend begins his annual *Black Nativity* musical program on Christmas Eve, Langston prepares his plan to get back home. Then the reasons for his family's separation starts to come to light, and Langston's motives begin to change.

Black Nativity is a moving, beautiful story that emphasizes Christian faith, family and forgiveness. The cast does a wonderful job bringing life to their characters and does really well with all the musical numbers, which reveal their individual character's emotions. The whole thing is brilliantly written and directed by Kasi Lemmons, an actress who previously directed *Eve's Bayou* (1997) and *Talk to Me* (2007).

The emotional high points come at the movie's ending, which includes a musical dream sequence, where Langston dreams of the birth of Jesus taking place in Harlem as the church performers sing about God, Jesus and the nativity. The musical dream sequence is beautifully integrated with the theatricality of the church performance. It also makes a great transition for the movie's climax, which resolves all the story's conflicts in a beautiful, inspiring and dramatically powerful way.

Best of all, however, *Black Nativity* has a really strong, uplifting message of Christian faith. Filled with Scripture, gospel songs and prayer, the movie calls for reconciliation among estranged family members. In the final moments, Langston sums up everything as he says, "It's time to forgive, it's time to be redeemed, and it's time to come home."

This heartwarming important message about faith and family is at the heart of what Movieguide is all about. It makes the ending of *Black Nativity* stand out among other Christmas movies in a good way. There is a threat of violence in one scene and a couple "d" obscenities, however, so Movieguide advises a light caution for *Black Nativity*.

Otherwise, *Black Nativity* is not only one of the best movies of the year, but it's also one of the best, most heartfelt Christmas movies ever made, certainly in the last few years at the very least.