

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

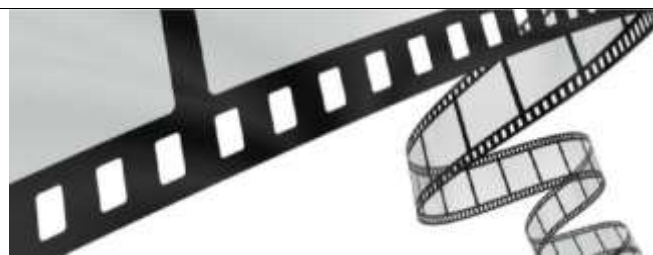
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IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

Dir. Barry Jenkins

2018 - 119 mins.

James Baldwin's fifth novel, of which this film is an adaptation, was first published in 1974. It is essentially a love story set in Harlem, New York in the early '70s. The title is a reference to the 1916 W.C.Handy composition 'Beale Street Blues', the street in Downtown Memphis, Tennessee. Members of CFC may recall Raoul Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, which we screened recently, and which featured interviews with Baldwin and dealt with the Civil Rights campaign in the U.S.A. in the 60s and early 70s.

This film had its world premier at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2018 and was immediately praised for the acting (particularly of Regina King), Jenkins's screenplay and direction, the cinematography (James Laxton) and the musical score (Nicholas Britell). Its subsequent accolades included Oscars for Best Supporting Actress and a Golden Globe (King) and several more nominations. Jenkins's earlier work, *Moonlight*, a 'coming of age' story, has been compared with Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973) and Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999): not a bad pedigree! Mark Kermode, the Observer's film critic, thought that Jenkins's new work was a "terrific film... a heart-stopping cinematic love story, told with a tough but tender truthfulness... as sinewy as it is sensuous, interweaving stark social-realist themes of prejudice, oppression and imprisonment with a poetic evocation of love, loss and, ultimately, transcendence", and which left him "weeping and swooning." In Britain, the nearest we get to 'social-realist' themes nowadays, arguably, is in the work of Ken Loach. But Loach, perhaps, leaves the viewer feeling rather more angry than 'weeping and swooning'?

"Every black Person born in America was born on Beale Street," states the opening quotation from Baldwin, citing "the impossibility and the possibility, the absolute necessity, to give expression to this legacy". We then see the seemingly shy young lovers walking together, the sound of sustained elegiac strings accompanying their footsteps. The scene trembles with promise and expectation, typical of cinema's dreamy ability to capture the elusive quintessence of love. But the lovers are in a dark place. Like so many young African American men, Fonny (aka Alonzo) has been arrested and jailed on a trumped-up charge following a run-in with a grudge-bearing white cop (Ed Skrein, oozing menace). Trish is pregnant, promising Fonny he'll be out and back in Harlem before their baby is born. But while Tish's family, led by protective matriarch Sharon (King) and down-to-earth Joseph (Colman Domingo) are accepting and proud, Fonny's God-bothering mother (a fearsome Aunjanue Ellis) responds with hostility and spite, blaming Tish for her son's supposed fall from grace. Can the warring clans put aside their differences for the sake of the next generation?

Jenkins cites the line "Love brought you here" as his favourite from Baldwin's novel, and those words resonate throughout what is seen by many as a rich and vibrantly melancholic film. The young lovers take centre stage but are superbly supported by a strong cast of essential characters.

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Our next screening is **BURNING** on Monday 4 November. PLEASE NOTE: in response to a request from members at the recent AGM, the Club will be holding a **Discussion Event** after the screening of **CUSTODY** on **Thursday 9 January**. It will be held in the Foyer of Cramphorn Studio and will be a chance for members to reflect on the season so far: all are welcome.

