



Judas and the Black Messiah Movie Review

By: Katherine Brown

I finally watched the movie *Judas and the Black Messiah* in April. I had been wanting to watch it since it was released in February. When watching the movie, I couldn't help thinking that what I saw on the screen is exactly what's happening in society right now. When I see Black Lives Matter protests and rallies, and people fighting with police officers, it looks like something from the '60s.

Directed by Shaka King, the movie is based on the true story of William O'Neal's betrayal of Fred Hampton, the chairman of the Black Panthers in Illinois. The screenplay was co-written by Shaka King and Will Berson, complete with a score composed by Mark Isham and Craig Harris.

The movie starts when William O'Neal gets caught trying to hijack a car, while also acting as a federal officer. FBI agent Roy Mitchell convinces O'Neal to help him in exchange for his charges being dropped. He recruits O'Neal to get close to Fred Hampton, the chairman of the Black Panthers in Illinois. The rest of the movie portrays O'Neal attempting to play both sides of the field - pretending to be a dedicated Black Panther while feeding intel to Mitchell as an FBI informant.

LaKeith Stanfield plays William O'Neal, who is troubled and conflicted. Daniel Kaluuya plays Fred Hampton. Charismatic and outspoken, Hampton is a magnet to the masses. Jesse Plemons plays FBI agent Roy Mitchell, the manipulative FBI agent who works with O'Neal.

Throughout the movie, O'Neal goes to great lengths to try to convince the Black Panthers that he is committed to their cause - sometimes going overboard. When discussing a man that was labeled as an FBI informant, O'Neal comments that he would've beat, shot, and stabbed the man - which is obviously overkill to say out loud. At one point, he even goes so far as to blame someone else as being the snitch, when, in truth, the snitch is him.

Roy Mitchell shows himself to be a smooth talker throughout the ordeal. It's hard to tell if the FBI agent really cares about O'Neal, or if he is just using him. At times, it seems as though Mitchell is blackmailing O'Neal, all while acting like his friend. Given the predicament O'Neal is in, he is easy to manipulate and take advantage of - something that Mitchell surely recognizes. The agent behaves in a two-faced manner - acting like O'Neal's friend while also threatening to hunt him down if he runs away. O'Neal is, undoubtedly, stuck.

Hampton, meanwhile, is too busy navigating his own personal life to see what is going on underneath his nose. He begins a romantic relationship with another Black Panther. At the same time, he is sent to prison, leaving the Black Panthers to fend for themselves for a while.

It's a bit surprising that no one can see what O'Neal is doing. He's really not being *that* sneaky. After all, it's not as if him and Mitchell are meeting underground. Rather, they meet in public places, such as fancy restaurants. O'Neal even talks to Mitchell on a public telephone at one point. O'Neal could easily get caught if the Black Panthers were truly paying attention to him. But, given the current situation surrounding the organization, and the members' devotedness to Hampton, O'Neal slips under the radar - much to the detriment of Hampton.

The screenplay itself can get a bit confusing at times. There were times when I didn't understand what was happening in the movie or why. Also, sometimes the characters' language was not articulate. At times, I didn't understand what they were saying or talking about. I just waited until the next scene to figure out what was going on.

The movie does a great job embodying the styles of the times. The cars, the music, and the clothing all appear to replicate the '60s style. The movie also does a good job portraying the political climate and obvious racism at the time. At one point, cops make racist jokes publicly towards black women - something they wouldn't necessarily get away with today, which is indicative of the times. The women, having no other choice, walk on without a rebuttal.

Judas and the Black Messiah is a sad, but true story. It is a well-done movie, so be sure to check it out.

References

Rubin, Rebecca. (2020). 'Judas and the Black Messiah' Rescheduled for Early 2021 (Photo Courtesy of Warner Bros). Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/judas-and-the-black-messiah-release-date-1234873011/>