

## Oscar-Winning Films that Address Racism

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Three very different films released in 2018 address racism from unique perspectives. Two are based on real events and the third is an adaptation of a James Baldwin novel. Each film also won at least one Oscar at February's Academy Awards.

Set in the early 1970s, "If Beale Street Could Talk" is a quintessential Baldwin story about poverty, race, family, and love. The film is directed by Barry Jenkins, director of the 2017 Best Picture Oscar winner, "Moonlight." Regina King received the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her strong portrayal of the mother of the story's young heroine, Tish.



*Kathy Winings*

Tish (KiKi Layne) and Fonny (Stephen James) are a young black couple living in Harlem who fall in love and find themselves expecting their first baby. But Baldwin's complex story doesn't end there. At a time when a young couple awaiting their first child should be excited and anxiously preparing for the birth, the realities of one's identity mars that anticipation.

As fate would have it, Fonny is wrongly arrested for the alleged rape of a young Puerto Rican woman. A white policeman known for his racist attitudes makes the arrest. While Fonny is lingering in jail awaiting trial, Tish, her mother and sister try to fight for Fonny's freedom but it is an uphill battle. For one, the Puerto Rican woman who was brutally raped is not to be found. Second, the one witness, a young African American who can verify that Fonny was nowhere near where the scene of the rape, is also arrested on questionable charges. As a result, Fonny remains in prison while hoping for a quick resolution of his case — a fairly standard experience for black men in Harlem of that time.

Baldwin was gifted in portraying the challenges of the American working class black family struggling to survive, economically and emotionally, recognizing how tenuous life could be when you were black and fighting a system bent on ensuring you did not succeed. It is clear that fighting racism and racist attitudes is an uphill battle for Tish and Fonny. Young black men knew if they were arrested for crimes they did not commit, they could linger in prison for years with some even dying there at worst or learning destructive lifestyles at best. The longer Fonny is incarcerated, the more he begins to accept the inevitable. Tish, though, is relentless.

However, Baldwin's stories are also about family dynamics, fitting in, and strong women. We see this in both Tish and her mother, Sharon. As the primary support for her daughter, Sharon, portrayed beautifully by King, represents the quintessential African American mother who realizes early in life that she needs to be the strong one, not only for her daughter but more importantly for her future grandchild and her family — for family is everything. She goes as far as tracking down the Puerto Rican woman, who fled to her home island. She further learns the woman was pressured by police to identify Fonny as the rapist, though he was not. However, the young woman refuses to return to New York and face the police,

dooming Sharon's future son-in-law to spending more time in prison.

Jenkins spent a great deal of time bringing Baldwin's story to the screen. It was certainly worth the wait. His timing, his cinematic skill in the camera lingering on people in key moments, and having a woman tell the story enables the movie to deftly navigate the sensitivity of the issues in a #MeToo and post-Charlottesville era.



*The official trailer for "If Beale Street Could Talk" (courtesy Annapurna Pictures).*

Though "If Beale Street Could Talk" does not have a happy ending, "Green Book" offers a hopeful view of what can happen when we are able to look past our prejudices. "Green Book," a biographical comedy-drama, approaches the challenge of racism from a completely different point of view. Based on the real life experiences of Dr. Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali), a noted pianist, and Tony Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen), a night club bouncer, "Green Book" highlights both the relationship between a highly educated and gifted black musician and a less cultivated, working class white New Yorker, and the challenges of being African American in the Jim Crow-era South.

The film focuses on the extensive tour conducted by Shirley, a classically-trained pianist who developed a unique style blending classical and jazz music, and his well-known Trio in 1962. This was not just any tour, however. It traveled through venues in the segregated South in which African Americans were not even allowed to set foot other than as service workers.

To accomplish this feat, Shirley hires Vallelonga, known as "Tony Lip," as his driver and assistant. Shirley and Vallelonga are as different as night and day. Where Shirley is highly educated, well-traveled and gay, Vallelonga is a rough-speaking, uneducated, street smart New Yorker who could be called bigoted in those days. Life becomes real for both men when Tony is given a copy of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, the essential guide for African Americans driving through the country in the early 1960s. The book listed hotels, restaurants and stores African American travelers could patronize, as well as warned of 10,000 "sundown towns" across America where non-whites had to leave by sunset.

The larger story highlighting the racial challenges of being a successful, talented black musician performing in the American South of that era is powerfully told in the film. Vallelonga asks Shirley on several occasions, when the racism experienced by the pianist is particularly horrendous, why he does not just walk out on some performances and make a point. Don responds it's not as simple as that. As a professional musician, he needs to honor his contract. And as a black man, what would walking out really accomplish? By performing, Don demonstrates who the better person is. As I watched Shirley face ugly experiences, I asked myself if I could have been as professional and strong as him. The film powerfully reconstructs the many forms of racism Shirley had to endure.

The other equally powerful story is that of the relationship between Shirley and Vallelonga. Both have their own perceptions of life, their own vices and limitations. As the film unfolds, it peels away the layers of their personalities, tastes and attitudes to lay bare their fears, values and what is important to them. In the end, these two men not only change their own perspectives on life, right and wrong, and race, but also experience a profound personal transformation and become lifelong friends.

Ali and Mortensen give amazing performances. The Shirley/Vallelonga story comes alive on screen because of their brilliant acting skills. Bringing them together in this film was a stroke of genius by director Peter Farrelly. Ali went on to win the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.



*The official trailer for "Green Book" (courtesy Universal Pictures).*

One aspect of the film I found particularly amazing was how well Ali gives the impression he is playing the piano himself. As a pianist, I can always tell when an actor is not really playing the instrument in a film. But as I watched Ali convincingly portray Shirley during a concert, there were moments when I wondered if he is actually playing himself. Overall, "Green Book" brilliantly tells the story of racism as experienced in the 1960s American South without hitting the audience over the head. It deservedly won the Oscar for Best Picture, and also for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor.

The third film of this trilogy of Oscar-winning 2018 films that took on racism is "BlacKkKlansmen." It traces the true experience in the early 1970s of Ron Stallworth, the first African American police officer in Colorado Springs, CO, who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan by posing on the phone as a white supremacist-leaning policeman. Stallworth (John David Washington) is able to convince not only local Klan leaders but also a young David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the Klan, that he is a white racist. One of the film's best lines is when Duke tells him he clearly knows Stallworth is white because of his voice and vocal intonations. The goal of the undercover work is for Stallworth to penetrate the local KKK chapter to uncover their bombing plans and efforts to disrupt and harm local citizens.

Initially, Stallworth is asked to attend a meeting of the Black Panthers chapter on campus to learn whether they are radicalizing. The officer determines that the students are not radicalizing but are more concerned about black rights. Meanwhile, ads encouraging citizens to join the local KKK chapter appear. This is when Stallworth calls and begins a conversation with the local leader. Over time, it's clear there is an opportunity for Stallworth to take this to the next level when he's invited to meet local chapter leaders.

Being black, Stallworth, of course, cannot attend the meeting. So he teams up with a white Jewish officer, Flip Zimmerman (Adam Driver), who becomes Stallworth's surrogate. He eventually begins a conversation with a young David Duke (Topher Grace) with plans to run for political office. Zimmerman eventually is so convincing as a white Aryan that he's invited to join the KKK and is formally inducted into the local chapter, where he is considered for its next leader.



*The official trailer for "BlacKkKlansman" (courtesy Focus Features).*

“BlacKkKlansmen,” directed by Spike Lee, who won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay (his first non-honorary Oscar), is very different from the other two films. Lee’s films are known for their witty dialogue and unique cinematic scenes. The basic concept of a black man posing as a white supremacist lends itself to exceptional moments and dialogue, and Lee does not disappoint.

A theme throughout the movie is the stereotype that white racists and supremacists had of African Americans and how they spoke, acted and thought. That a black man could actually convince the Grand Wizard of the KKK that he is white over the phone flew in the face of these common beliefs. But the film also portrays the inner struggle Stallworth experiences as a young black man just beginning his career at a time when black students were trying to define their essential identity and dignity as African Americans and fight for their constitutional rights as citizens.

I found the film to be unique and different, approaching the challenges of racism in a non-stereotypical way with dialogue that is, for lack of a better term, quirky. John David Washington also demonstrates what he learned from his acclaimed actor father, Denzel Washington. He captures and portrays the very emotional and personal feelings Stallworth must have experienced as he underwent all this.

Each of the three films is unique in its approach to the challenges of racism — both historically and in a contemporary sense. Each contributes to this dialogue and, though they are about past times, remain highly relevant today. Interestingly, “Black Panther,” which I previously reviewed on this site, was also nominated for Best Picture this year, but did win three other Oscars. Collectively, these four films made 2018 a most memorable and exciting year for the African American experience in Hollywood.

With these films, I was struck by the power by which one person who has love can affect change, the value of having a supportive familial and community structure, and that we can dare hope to change. Racism is a problem our society continues to face until we learn how to create and live in a beloved community. I know that with these lessons learned, we can dare to dream and hope that such a vision will become a reality.

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*“Green Book” is still playing in some theaters. All three films in this review may be streamed on iTunes, Amazon Prime Video, YouTube, and other on demand sources, and are also available on DVD and Blu-ray.*

**“If Beale Street Could Talk”** (rated R): Running time: 119 minutes. Directed by Barry Jenkins; written by Barry Jenkins (based on James Baldwin’s novel). Main cast: KiKi Layne, Stephan James, Regina King, Colman Domingo, and Teyonah Parris. See IMDB for full details.

**“Green Book”** (rated PG-13): Running time: 130 minutes. Directed by Peter Farrelly; written by Nick Vallelonga, Brian Hayes Currie and Peter Farrelly. Main cast: Linda Cardellini, Viggo Mortensen, Mahershala Ali, Don Stark, and Sebastian Maniscalco. See IMDB for full details.

**“BlacKkKlansman”** (rated R): Running time: 135 minutes. Directed by Spike Lee; written by Charlie Wachtel, David Rabinowitz, Kevin Willmott, and Spike Lee. Main cast: John David Washington, Adam Driver, Laura Harrier, Topher Grace, and Alec Baldwin. See IMDB for full details.

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Photo at top: Viggo Mortensen (l) and Mahershala Ali in a still from “Green Book” (courtesy Universal Pictures).