No Longer ‘Hidden Figures’

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THREE PROMINENT BLACK WOMEN AT NASA IS BROUGHT TO THE FOREFRONT IN A NEW HISTORICAL FILM

By MARISSA CHARLES
As much as we’ve heard about anything around NASA, we’ve heard about the *whos*. We’ve heard about the John Glenns, the Buzz Aldrins, but we didn’t know about the *hows*.

That’s what actress Octavia Spencer says about first hearing the story that is the focus of her new movie *Hidden Figures*. The biopic (which has a limited release on Christmas Day and a national opening on Jan. 6) tells the true story of the unseen African-American female mathematicians and NASA scientists who played pivotal roles in the 1950s and ‘60s space race.

Based on the book of the same name, *Hidden Figures* shines a light on three women in particular, Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Johnson (who was also a physicist) and engineer Mary Jackson, played by Spencer, Taraji P. Henson and Janelle Monáe, respectively.

“I had never heard of these women or their contributions to NASA,” says Spencer. “The fact that a movie like this had...
never been done, I decided to be a part of it immediately.”

She adds: “As much as we’ve heard about anything around NASA, we’ve heard about the whos. We’ve heard about the John Glenns, the Buzz Aldrins, but we didn’t know about the hows.”

Margot Lee Shetterly knew. She wrote the book *Hidden Figures*. The daughter of a NASA scientist at Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., Shetterly grew up knowing that women such as Jackson, Johnson and Vaughan existed. She would see them at social gatherings. The notion that a NASA scientist could be African-American and female was as normal as water being wet.

In the book, Shetterly reveals how World War II’s need for the best mathematical minds to calculate figures for aeronautical research led to the recruitment of Black female human “computers.” Facing the twin challenges of segregation and sexism as Langley began to focus on conquering space, the women conducted crucial work, often without being recognized, receiving timely promotions or the title of engineer.

“All of these women were polymaths,” Spencer says, noting that if Johnson didn’t come up with the calculations to get Glenn back to Earth, NASA “would never [have] been able to do it.”

“Dorothy, not only was she a polymath, but she was also mechanically inclined,” the actress says of her character who, at age 50, reinvented herself as a computer programmer working with a room-sized IBM machine.

One of the most poignant moments in the film for Spencer was watching Monáe portray Jackson’s determination to become an engineer even though she couldn’t attend the local segregated high school to take extra classes.

“[She] took it to court,” Spencer says, “and just knowing there was an actual woman who had to endure that breaks your heart a little.”

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Asked why she thinks the *Hidden Figures* story hadn’t previously been told, Shetterly says, “There is no question that part of the reason is the space program, and aeronautics as we think about it, is White guys in white shirts and pocket protectors.” She hopes *Hidden Figures* redresses that imbalance.

Aldis Hodge, who plays Mary Jackson’s husband, Levi, agrees. The actor describes the women as “warriors and soldiers” who did what was “necessary to triumph in the face of the most extreme adversity.”
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