

Film Notes

by Ann Siswell

USA | 2021 | 99m | 15

Director: Channing Godfrey Peoples

Starring: Nicole Beharie, Alexis Chikaeze, Kendrick Sampson



Excellent

Fair

Poor

Miss Juneteenth

This Triple F-Rated film is the debut feature from director Channing Godfrey Peoples, who also wrote the screenplay. It is set in Fort Worth, Texas, where Peoples grew up, and revolves around the lives of 15- going on 16-year-old Kai Jones (newcomer Alexis Chikaeze) and her single mother, Turquoise (Nicole Beharie), a former winner of the Miss Juneteenth pageant — Juneteenth referring to 19 June 1865, when the news of freedom from slavery was announced in Texas, two-and-a-half years after it had actually been enacted.

Miss Juneteenth premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. Subsequently, it was named Best Narrative Feature at the BlackStar Film Festival in Philadelphia, and awarded the Louis Black 'Lone Star' Award at SXSW.

Peoples has had a long-term interest in the arts, beginning with a small community theatre where she saw many Black plays, and initially wanted to become an actor. She studied theatre at Baylor University in Waco, before attending the School for Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

There she began working on the script for *Miss Juneteenth* with Neil Creque Williams, a producer and fellow USC graduate, who is now her husband. She entered it in various competitions, gaining feedback and grants along the way. She further developed her skills as an Austin screenwriting fellow, where she was mentored by acclaimed Black director Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep* (1978)). It was seven more years before *Miss Juneteenth* went into production.

The film itself is underscored by Peoples's own experiences of growing up in Fort Worth and watching the annual Miss Juneteenth pageants. The bar and funeral home where Turquoise works her two jobs are both real locations. Talking to Rogan Graham of *Little White Lies*, Peoples commented that 'the script was always built to focus on Turquoise's journey, she's in almost every scene ... She's reconciling her own dreams and ideas about herself with the hopes and dreams that she has for her child.'

Beharie's depiction of Turquoise is one of 'quiet, steely resilience,' writes



What did you think of the film? Please mark or tear the number.

Please add any further comments here:

Miss Juneteenth

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Cheyenne Bunsie in *Little White Lies*, 'imbuing her with a vulnerability that doesn't announce itself loudly'. She wants for her daughter what she herself did not achieve when she won the pageant 16 years before. Now, winning comes with the guarantee of a scholarship at a 'historically Black' college and, therefore, an opportunity to escape deprivation and regret. As a teenager, Kai is more interested in her competitive dance squad, and this sets the scene for the problematic mother-daughter relationship. Chikaeze, in her film debut, plays well against Beharie to establish a dynamic that reflects both the conflict and tenderness that characterises their bond. This is further emphasised by Turquoise's relationship with her mother, Charlotte (Lori Hayes), a God-fearing churchgoer by day and an alcoholic by night.

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One other aspect of *Miss Juneteenth* to note is the repeated reference to Maya Angelou's 1995 poem *Phenomenal Woman*. It reflects both Turquoise and Kai's characters and, as Mark Kermode commented, 'the differing ways in which each interprets it says much about the ever-evolving world in which they live.' That is a world where the legacy of slavery still looms, but, at the same time, Peoples has fashioned a story about the reality of life in a small-town Black community which is 'celebrating especially the strength and hope of Black women in a world where the odds are stacked against them' — Melanie Hoyes, *Sight & Sound*. It comes back to Angelou's words: 'Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed ... 'Cause I'm a woman / Phenomenally.'

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