

Sundance Film Review: ‘Southside With You’



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COURTESY OF SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

Tika Sumpter and Parker Sawyers are terrifically cast as younger versions of Michelle and Barack Obama in Richard Tanne's disarmingly romantic walkabout.

“We have to let go of judgment,” a young Barack [Obama](#) tells a group of frustrated community activists, encouraging them to place themselves in the shoes of those they’re up against. While most of the intended viewers for “[Southside With You](#)” are probably already inclined to listen to their president, it’s nice to think at least a few non-supporters in the audience might be moved by the spirit of empathy that suffuses this soulful and disarmingly romantic snapshot of Obama’s fateful first date with Michelle Robinson on a summer day in 1989 Chicago, long before either guessed they’d someday be president and First Lady of the United States. On the surface a mellow and agreeably meandering “Before Sunrise”-style walkabout, [Richard Tanne](#)’s writing-directing debut deepens into a pointed, flowing conversation about the many challenges (and varieties) of African-American identity, the need for both idealism and compromise, and the importance of making peace with past disappointments in order to effect meaningful change in the future.

Tanne’s version of a well-known anecdote will likely generate and conceivably benefit from op-ed coverage of every possible slant, and conservative critics inclined to take an interest will surely accuse the movie of being a glorified campaign promo (albeit one arriving rather late for the campaign). Certainly it raises the question of whether a comparable date movie could be made about, say, the 1977 backyard barbecue where George W. Bush met Laura, or Mitt and Ann Romney’s 1965 prom night, and be executed with enough warmth and sensitivity to cut across partisan lines, or receive a fair hearing from left-leaning film critics. In any case, despite its unassuming modesty of scale, budget and commercial potential, “Southside With You” stands as something unique, even audacious in

American independent movies: a fact-based presidential “prequel” that seeks to present two iconic world figures as convincing and relatable romantic leads.

And on that particular score, Tanne’s movie — toplined by the very well-cast Tika Sumpter and Parker Sawyers — is pretty much an unqualified success, building steadily over its 80-minute running time to the sort of cornball climax that, politics be damned, is all but assured to make you melt (whatever the picture’s post-Sundance fortunes, “the ice cream scene” is likely to become a cherished highlight). Mere hours before that moment, of course, Michelle (Sumpter) has already informed Barack (Sawyers) in no uncertain terms that “this is *not* a date.” A lawyer at the firm of Sidley Austin, she’s serving as his adviser while he’s a summer associate, and she’s merely agreed to accompany him to a Southside church where locals are gathering to discuss a stalled plan for a community center. Under the circumstances, Michelle insists, any implied romantic attachment would be inappropriate and send the wrong message at a firm where it’s hard enough to be taken seriously as a woman, let alone a black woman.

Barack, for his part, makes little secret of his personal interest, and after picking Michelle up in a beat-up car with a hole in the floor, he conveniently reveals they have a few hours to kill before the meeting and takes her to the Art Institute (which is presenting an African exhibition), followed by a picnic lunch of which she insists on paying her share. In its broadest strokes, then, “Southside With You” is a classic hard-to-get romance, in which his flirty charisma and her stubborn resistance supply some modest narrative tension as well as a telling glimpse into their respective histories. There are a few winks to things we already know: Michelle’s not-yet-famous sense of style is already blossoming, on the evidence of her light orange blouse and ivory skirt (the work of costume designer Megan Spatz), while Barack, who’s seen smoking and hiding cigarettes throughout, makes playful reference to “the cloudy haze” of his Hawaii years.

But the push-pull of their personalities turns out to run deeper, and in multiple directions. They swap polite thoughts on religion. Michelle describes how intently her dad pushed her and her older brother, Craig, to put their studies first, leading Barack to voice his anger with the absentee father who died in a car crash in Kenya some seven years earlier. He chastises her for sidelining her passion for pro bono work to make her name on higher-profile cases, while she calls out his own hypocrisy for giving up community organizing for Harvard Law. At any given moment, the concerns of racial progress and the struggle of representing black America in the best possible light are never far from their minds, whether they’re driving past black kids walking around the neighborhood or strolling past the Altgeld Gardens public-housing development (where Obama did his early organizing).

Later the two will go to see Spike Lee’s just-released “Do the Right Thing,” followed by a sidewalk conversation that lays bare some of the profound differences in how whites and blacks perceive issues of race and justice in America. But it’s the earlier community meeting that becomes the movie’s extended centerpiece, striking very amusing notes early on as various women introduce an increasingly annoyed Michelle as “Barack’s woman” (“Finally, a sister!”). But when Barack takes the pulpit and alternately calms and rouses those assembled with his plea for consideration and empathy, the sequence deepens into an earnest but riveting demonstration of how effortlessly the young Obama commanded his audience, already displaying the natural eloquence and political savvy that would serve him well in the presidency.

Sawyers, who bears a strong if not uncanny physical resemblance to Obama (the actor has a notably higher-pitched voice), pulls out all the stops here, nailing the characteristic pauses and cadences of the president’s diction in an impressive display of oratorical mimicry. Sumpter, making an even more persuasive physical match for her real-life subject, gradually emerges as the film’s emotional center, giving the sort of breakthrough turn that, in a just world, would ensure that she never has to appear in another “Ride Along” or “Think Like a Man” sequel again. Facing less pressure than her co-star to deliver a pitch-perfect imitation, Sumpter digs deep into the role of an initially guarded but unfailingly quick-witted woman in whom we immediately catch a glimpse of the formidable figure she will eventually become. Both actors are subtly caressed by the lighting of d.p. Patrick Scola, shooting in moodily muted tones ideally calibrated to capture the heat of a Chicago summer.

That “Southside With You” has meticulously reverse-engineered our knowledge of the Obamas into a sweet, sexy, highly flattering youth portrait is less a criticism than a simple statement of fact. Whether taken as storytelling, propaganda or an artful hybrid of both, it’s a movie that unabashedly wraps its real-life subjects in a humanizing embrace. And to the degree that one can separate aesthetics from politics, it’s hard not to come away from the film without an essential respect for the restraint and quiet daring of Tanne’s approach. Sustaining a low-key vibe (courtesy of Evan Schiff’s graceful editing) and steering clear of trumped-up dramatic conflict throughout, the

director seems to instinctively grasp the specific magnetism his subjects have long exuded as figureheads, as culturally engaged leaders, and as real people. You may well be able to resist the sight of a young Obama driving around with Janet Jackson blaring on the radio, but it doesn't take a Democrat to recognize it as the kind of moment the movies were made for.

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Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 24, 2016. Running time: **80 MIN.**

Production

An IM Global presentation, in association with Fermion Films and Get Lifted Films. (International sales: IM Global, Los Angeles.) Produced by Robert Teitel, Tika Sumpter, Richard Tanne. Executive producers, Stuart Ford, Matt Jackson, Glendon Palmer, John Legend, Mike Jackson, Carrie Holt De Lama, Tracey Bing.

Crew

Directed, written by Richard Tanne. Camera (color, Panavision widescreen), Patrick Scola; editor, Evan Schiff; music, Stephen James Taylor; production designer, Lucio Seixas; art director, Adri Siriwatt; costume designer, Megan Spatz; sound, Mario Coletta; supervising sound editor, Trevor Gates; associate producer, J.R. Smith; assistant director, Andy Spellman; casting, Tracy "Twinkie" Byrd.

With

Tika Sumpter, Parker Sawyers, Vanessa Bell Calloway.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/southside-with-you-review-sundance-barack-obama-michelle-1201687578/>