



BLACK NATIVITY is a December, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Following is Kino Ken's review of that dvd release.

**United States 2013 color 93 minutes live action feature musical drama
Fox Searchlight Pictures / Maven Pictures Producers: Celine Rattray,
T. D. Jakes / William Horberg / Galt Niederhoffer / Trudy Styler /
Bergen Swanson**

17 of a possible 20 points

******1/2 of a possible *******

Key: * indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Kasi Lemmons***
- 1 Editing: Terilyn Shropshire**
- 1 Cinematography: Anastas Michos**
- 1 Lighting: Robert Sciretta**
- 2 Written by: Kasi Lemmons* based on the play by Langston Hughes***
Script Supervisor: Renee Burke
Music Supervisor: Steven Baker*
Music Editors: John Davis*, Blake Leyh* Music Mixer: Brad Haehnel*
Music Recording: Peter Gary*
- 2 Music: Raphael Saadiq*, Laura Karpman*, and Camilla Uboldi***
Vocal Director: Contrella Patrick-Henry*
Choreographers: Otis Sallid*, Jason Samuels Smith* (Tap Choreography)
- 2 Production Designer: Kristi Zea Art Direction: Doug Huszti**
Set Decorator: Diana Lederman

Set Dressers: Jack Brandt, Michael Bruno, Jason Hylton, Shannon Mallan, Dan Melchiorri, Mike Nallon, Thomas Hudson Reeve, Sam Rosedietcher, Bryan Scanlon, Bonnie Thompson

Costume Designer: Gersha Phillips

Make-Up: Anita Gibson (Head), Daniel Green (Key), Kym Lee, Donyale McRae, David Presto (Key)

2 Sound: Lewis Goldstein* (Supervising Sound Editor), David Briggs* and Max Greene* (Dialogue Editors), Shaun Brennan, Sean Garnhart, Tom Ryan, and Wen Hsuan Tseng (Sound Effects), William Sarokin* (Sound Mixer)

2 Acting

2 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Forest Whitaker (Reverend Cornell Cobbs), Angela Bassett (Aretha Cobbs, Cornell's wife and grandmother of Langston), Tyrese Gibson (Tyson / Loot), Austin Purnell (Langston's Father double?), Jacob Latimore (j) (Langston, a teenager), Mary Blige (Lucy / Angel), Nasir Jones (Isaiah, street prophet), Jennifer Hudson* (Naima, Langston's mother, daughter of Cornell and Aretha), Vondie Curtis-Hall (Pawnbroker), Luke James (Jo-Jo, Maria's boyfriend / Joseph), Grace Gibson* (Maria / Mary), Rotimi (Officer Butch McDaniels), J. Mallory McCree (Kyle), Henry Hunter Hall (Snoopy), Michael Dale (Innkeeper), Doug Willen (Chic Man), Sorika Horng (Chic Man's Mistress), Jason Samuels Smith (Hotel Security Guard), C. Kelly Wright (Desperate Pawnshop Woman), Braille Diaz (j)* (Boy Thief), others

BLACK NATIVITY is an updated version of the popular Langston Hughes play. Originally a straightforward Afro-American version of the birth of Jesus, it has been reframed as a story of adolescent rebellion and socioeconomic deprivation. Principles of acceptance, faith, and forgiveness are paramount in this new version. While not adhering closely to Hughes' original text, the movie nonetheless potently reveals the contemporary significance of Christian love

and charity. Viewers may find themselves involuntarily acquiescing in its philosophy despite differing theologies, becoming absorbed in the film's heady mix of passionate drama and high voltage music.

The new storyline concerns a modern Baltimore teen and his mother. They face Christmas eviction from their home, with Mom bearing an additional burden of temporary unemployment. To remove one problem, she arranges to send son Langston to her parents in Harlem for the holidays. He resents being shunted aside like a useless extra boxcar. Since Langston has not encountered grandparents Cornell and Aretha Cobb before, his projected visit is by no means appealing. All he knows about these strange seniors is that they have not communicated with him for years. Why this has happened is a mystery to the boy.

While moving a street-haunting Baltimore youth to Harlem may not be the most appropriate transfer, it's an understandable option for a distressed, distraught single parent. Harder to comprehend is why Cornell and Aretha fail to meet Langston's bus at the terminal. Do they expect him to successfully navigate Manhattan solo?

As the teen attempts to contact relatives, a younger boy swipes his gear, left alluringly unsupervised on the sidewalk. Pursuit is short and hopeless, as the fleet thief vanishes in a crowd of pedestrians. Welcome to New York, indeed!

Still bent on calling missing grandparents, Langston enters a hotel and attempts to obtain permission to use their desk phone. Not being a paying guest, his request is curtly denied. When an occupant leaves a wallet on the registration counter in order to make a cell phone call, the boy is tempted to help himself to a bit of cash. He picks it up, then hesitates. At that moment, the owner sees a stranger holding his property and assumes criminal intent. Unable to explain himself, Langston is arrested and taken to precinct headquarters. There he's jailed with other temporaries and meets Loot, a belligerent black man who tries to intimidate him. Overhearing his cellmate's name, Loot encourages the hapless crime victim to look him up in Harlem if he needs anything. Judging from what has already occurred, Langston looks like he could use all available assistance.

Eventually, police notify Cornell and Aretha their grandson has been incarcerated pending settlement of an attempted robbery claim. Not the kind of Christmas news the couple anticipated. Grandfather opens conversation with an admonishment, something aggravated grandson resents. They immediately develop an adversarial relationship, one further strained when their misunderstood visitor beholds a lavishly furnished brownstone apartment serving as home to the Cobbs. To think they have so much and his own family virtually nothing. Why haven't they offered financial assistance to daughter Naima? Not that she would ask, being as prideful as forebears and equally adamant.

His mother's true son, Langston is also disinclined to seek direct charity. Instead, he plots to remove something of value from the Cobb residence and take it to a nearby pawn shop. Whatever cash he obtains from selling Grandpa's inscribed watch will be sent to Mom. No questions, entreaties, or authorizations required. It will be family helping family, discreetly.

However, the pawnshop owner is a friend of Cornell's. He recognizes the timepiece and rejects Langston's sale offer.

Dejected, novice thief turns an attentive ear to Loot, temporarily employed by this very pawnbroker, who claims to be a resourceful, street-savvy provider of whatever the lad might require. Why a veteran criminal would make such an assertion to some inexperienced newcomer is a question Langston doesn't bother to ask. Increasingly desperate, he will look no gift horse in the mouth.

Back at the Cobbs' place, he learns from Aretha some details about estrangement between parents and child in his family. Enough to tantalize. Yet insufficient to clarify the present situation. Regarding elders as either unduly cagy or dictatorial opponents determined to squelch him, the junior family member misjudges motives and repels friendly overtures. Only one thing matters: money for mama. The sooner she gets some, the faster he can leave this house of broken relationships and sundered dreams.

As Christmas Eve approaches, Aretha encourages her balky charge to attend an annual pageant staged in Cornell's church, where she sings in the choir and he preaches. From Langston's viewpoint, this is utter hypocrisy. Neither real familial affection nor basic charity is being displayed by these selfish, social-

climbing New Yorkers from whom he descends. Why should he care two snaps about anything they value?

Well, it is Christmas. Not that the holiday prevents contemplation of armed robbery to acquire funding for home rental and recovery of a displaced person. Langston has already told Loot to provide him a weapon. There's nothing more to undertake until late evening. Might as well allow himself to be dragged off to sit in a pew until time for real action. Beats having to pace floors alone, waiting restlessly for reunion with the man of many resources.

Meanwhile, a brief long-distance conversation between mother and son has persuaded Naima that something wrongheaded is about to occur. She must get quickly to New York to prevent disaster. Whatever mysterious plan Langston has concocted but chosen not to disclose is clearly incapable of winning approval from guardians beforehand. Knowing what his father is like, she fears the worst, a potential for violence and thuggery.

Can a contemplated act of crime be aborted before her son transforms into lawbreaker and social outcast? Watch the remainder of the film to find out.

Music is noteworthy throughout, a workable blend of traditional, Gospel, street rap, and Broadway extavaganza. Jennifer Hudson is easily the most eminent and overpowering singer here, but others handle their parts satisfyingly.

Top acting honors belong to Tyrese Gibson's Loot, whose depictions of street hustler and remorseful paternal guide hit their marks precisely. Though Jennifer Hudson was chosen primarily for vocal chops, she delivers a worthy dramatic performance as well, her Naima a conflicted medley of aspirations, pride, independence, love, and discouragement. Vondie Curtis-Hall's gruff, sermonizing pawnbroker makes a memorable impression, though perhaps it's a bit too forceful. As grandparents of Langston, Forest Whitaker is electric on the stage but uncomfortably stiff at home, while Angela Bassett convincingly shows dotingness, intercession, and spousal support.

There's a critical weak link among remaining performers: Jacob Lattimore's Langston. As a challenger, he's fully credible. Not so, as grandson in search of father figure. The boy's too ready to discount, dismiss, and ignore every male attempting to guide him. That's not normal from a child without paternal

authority. Why should he so completely reject exactly what he's most desired for the bulk of his youth? It doesn't matter whether this enigma results from script negligence or actor interpretation. The problem could have been corrected by the player. It wasn't.

Secondary cast members are fine singers and / or dancers. Their emoting is acceptable, though not inspired.

Songs and choreography are superior, each musical interlude advancing plot or enhancing characterization. A vital, energetic urban atmosphere is maintained from start to finish, rhythmic vitality being a key ingredient in its creation and reinforcement.

Despite a limited budget, set decorations are lavish and colorful for Harlem interiors, cramped and sparse in Baltimore counterparts.

Sound recording is precise across a full range of volumes. Lighting is not so adept, with interiors and dream sequences frequently underlit.

Though the screenplay doesn't preserve Hughes' original text in its totality, critical elements of faith, responsibility, separation, prejudice, and acceptance are retained. Kasi Lemmons has captured the spirit of this Christmas story splendidly. Here that is what counts.

The **BLACK NATIVITY** dvd includes numerous extras: 1. subtitles, 2. scene selections, 3. a theatrical trailer, 4. a First Look featurette lasting about five minutes, 5. mini-interviews with cast members totaling four minutes, 6. two minutes devoted to biographical information about Langston Hughes, 7. a two-minute **BE GRATEFUL** featurette, and 8. trailers for **BAGGAGE CLAIM**, **BELLE**, **THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY** color remake, and **12 YEARS A SLAVE**.

BLACK NATIVITY is highly recommended Christmas entertainment for family viewing. Parental previewing and discretion are urged due to violence and two profanities.