

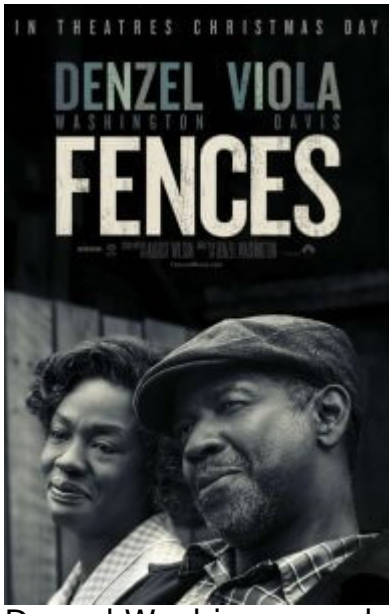
The Working Class at the Oscars

Posted on April 15, 2017 by Jack Metzgar

A scene in Denzel Washington's movie of *Fences* is not in August Wilson's original play, and it illustrates how a spate of Oscar-nominated films this year uncharacteristically reveal basic insights into working-class ways of living a life.

Troy Maxson is a Pittsburgh garbage collector in the 1950s, and most of the movie takes place in his back yard and house, with brief context-setting scenes of him at work and walking through his neighborhood. Maxson is a take-charge kind of guy, one who has thought through his philosophy of life and who is not hesitant to (eloquently) share it with anyone who will listen. An uncompromising patriarch at home, he is a proud and commanding presence just walking through the neighborhood and even on his garbage truck. That's why it's a bit of a shock, though quietly played, to see him waiting hat in hand to see his boss to find out if he's going to get a promotion to driving the truck instead of slinging the garbage. In this brief scene, Maxson's body language and halting speech are deferential to a degree that makes him appear a broken man. In the next scene, his characteristic strut has an added lilt as he tells his family and friends about getting the promotion.

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.



Denzel Washingon and Viola Davis in the 2016 film, *Fences*

It's a small moment with large consequences. Maxson will be the first black man to be a driver. But, as presented, that is almost incidental to what it means for a middle-aged blue-collar worker to get a much less physically taxing job. Why add that brief scene to Wilson's classic play? To me it is a brilliant stroke, because it brings out a contrast between Maxson's backyard braggadocio about standing up to the boss and the humiliating deference he has to display to suit the circumstance. Who is the real Troy Maxson – the at-home philosopher king or the shuffling Negro hiding his intelligence and strength of will to please the boss?

My answer is *not* both. A man in charge of his own life, Maxson can do a little deferential shuffling without the slightest internal humiliation so long as it serves his larger purpose of maintaining and enhancing his control of what he does every day. Showing deference to bosses is a standard part of being a wage worker, and people handle it in a variety of ways, from crafty defiance to soul-crushing genuine subjection. But Maxson's exaggerated play-acting is a very common tactic that works well even when the boss knows you're playing the fool. Its very exaggeration says something like: "I'll give you the appearance you need, but it has nothing to do with who and what I am – which you really do not want to see."

That's my reading of Maxson in this film, but plenty of us are one person at work and a very different one at home, and it sometimes seems a wonder that we put our

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

two pieces together at all. What astounds me, however, is that a Hollywood movie went out of its way to pose that kind of subtle question about a garbage man.

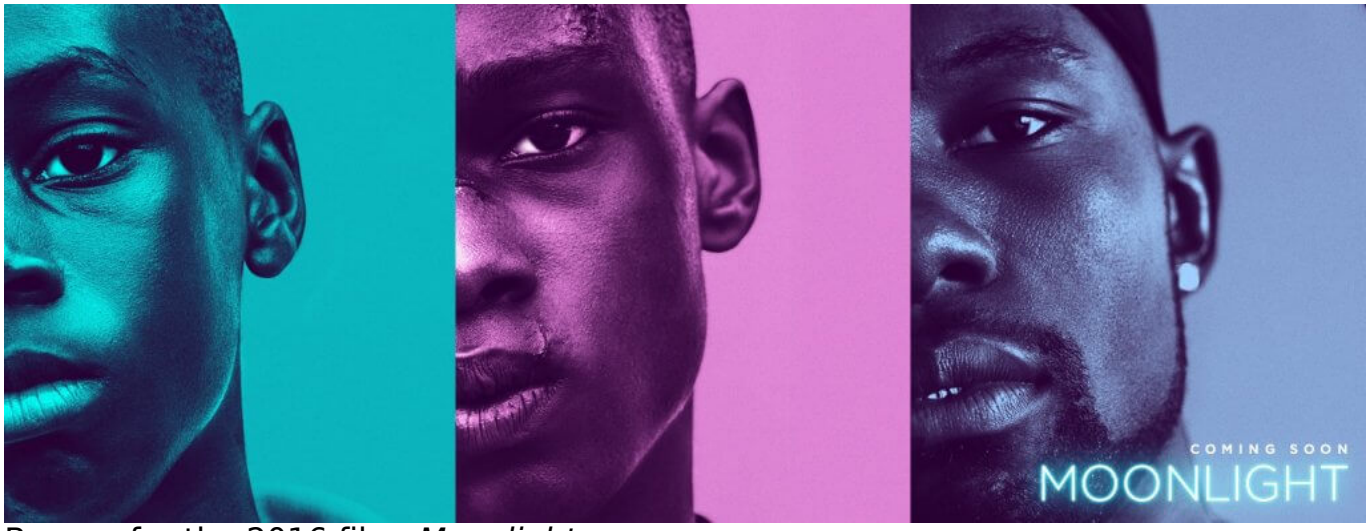
And *Fences* was not alone among Oscar nominees this year in representing working-class life in uncharacteristically sympathetic and insightful ways. *Manchester by the Sea*, *Moonlight*, and even *Hell or High Water* all have extraordinary moments of insightful observation like this. Though each falls under more common rubrics – the African-American experience or the coming-of-age of gay men, for example – each is alive to the complexities and bravery of living life within insuperable limits.



Manchester by the Sea, 2016

Lee Chandler in *Manchester* tests those limits, and sadly concludes to his disappointed but instinctively understanding nephew, “I can’t beat it.” But that doesn’t mean “Uncle Lee” can’t meet his obligation to his dead brother by ingeniously arranging a good-enough situation for his nephew while keeping the fragile emotional hold on himself he struggles to maintain at every moment of every day. While many of my friends found *Manchester* unrelievedly depressing, some wryly complaining about their unmet need for a happy ending, my wife, who comes from a hard-living working-class family, and I, from a settled-living one, both found the ending satisfying. Lee’s situation was depressing, even frightful, but we both marveled at the courage, persistence, and ingenuity he found within himself to come to adequate terms with that situation. Even more satisfying is the way his friends and relatives (and the film itself) fully appreciate his limited, limiting, and amazing accomplishment.

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.



Banner for the 2016 film, *Moonlight*

Similarly, *Moonlight* vividly portrays heartbreakingly terrible childhoods that we know often destroy people, and yet Chiron and Kevin somehow find their ways to manageable lives with complicated but solid personal integrity – even before they find each other at the end of the film. And again, the film encourages multiple readings of what are so often assumed to be deadly simple lives. Darryl Pinckney, for example, thinks Kevin has "a terrible job" as a combination cook-and-waiter at a neighborhood diner, but the film goes out of its way to show how ingeniously competent and cockily proud Kevin is at doing that job. People who actually have "terrible" jobs might notice that Kevin is working with no supervision in a job that allows him the space, given his gift for multitasking, to carry on a conversation with a very taciturn old friend.

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.



Hell or High Water, 2016

Hell or High Water is a much more conventionally scripted film — with bank-robbers, gun battles, car chases, and a more predictable Hollywood-style semi-happy ending. More explicitly political because two brothers rob a chain of banks that was trying to rob them of their scrubby piece of West Texas land, it, too, marvels at the resourcefulness and persistence of people living within severely limiting circumstances, both external and internal.

All four films are highly male-centric, with a few great but decidedly "supporting" roles for women. But none of the central male characters are the kinds of cardboard heroes we're used to. Each is flawed in various ways that working-class men so often are – ranging from irresponsible boy-men to dominating patriarchs to nearly mute emotional cauldrons. What's unique is the complex and poignant dramas the filmmakers observe in these men's struggles to just get by and make do while living up to the stern demands of what Arlie Hochschild calls "a local culture of endurance and adaptation."

Does this temporary outburst of really good movies about working-class life indicate some kind of burgeoning shift in our national *zeitgeist*? I think it might. Each movie was conceived and executed before the Trump Shock engendered a spate of liberal middle-class soul-searching about how little we understand working-class white people. So were a series of books like Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, which explicitly climbs an "empathy wall" in self-reflectively bringing her Berkeley-liberal self to anthropologically studying (and befriending) Louisiana Tea Partiers.

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

As Hochschild points out, a culture that emphasizes “a person’s *moral strength to endure*” may undermine the will to change circumstances that make endurance harder and harder to achieve. As such, it fosters political passivity and confusion. But middle-class progressives cannot simply inveigh against that culture without understanding its deep-seated strengths, its practical usefulness in living lives within severe limitations, both external and internal, and the bravery, ingenuity, and nobility of those who succeed in carrying on day by day. I have to believe, as Hochschild wants to, that there is a politically progressive angel in that culture if we but look closely enough. These four films about working-class people of many colors look pretty closely.

Author



- Jack Metzgar

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.