

Going deep on our favourite film of the year

Moonlight director Barry Jenkins on the moments to look out for in his Oscar-nominated indie masterpiece

Water and the ocean are hugely symbolic in this film. It's adapted from a theatre performance by my friend Tarell McCraney called *Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue*. And as we watch main character Chiron's life, there are key moments that transpire around bodies of water, from his swimming lesson with his father figure, Juan (Mahershala Ali), to a more abstract notion in the film's final third. In the second act, Chiron and his friend Kevin spend time sitting by the ocean, bathed in moonlight, and there's a line I love where Kevin says, "That breeze feels good as hell" – the way he says breeze, everything comes to a head, the whole world stops for a flicker of a second. I grew up about a mile from the ocean, and even just thinking about it now, I can hear it, and smell it. It's a powerful, ephemeral sort of presence, and so it is in the movie, too.

The film's setting is crucial. It takes place during the war-on-drugs era, because that was a key part of my childhood – I was poor and black, and my mom was an addict. Naomie Harris plays Chiron's mom – she's the only actor to appear in all three acts, and her performance is incredible, she does

an amazing job, both as an anchor and constant, but also as someone whose life and circumstances change rapidly across the narrative.

Music is an important part of the film – we employ *Moonlight's* orchestral score during moments when Chiron is going through either a transitional moment or a moment of reflection. One of my favourite pieces in the film is called *The Middle Of The World*. It plays during the swimming lesson between Mahershala Ali and Alex Hibbert, who plays Chiron in the first act. When Nic (Britell) first composed this scene it was vibrant, upbeat and happy, and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Oh, it's a sweet moment. Little [Chiron] is learning to swim. This is beautiful." I said, "No, you don't understand; this is a baptism – it's so much darker than you think."

The result is a piece that reflects the musical theme of Chiron's journey. It's big, sweeping and foreboding. It's f*cking beautiful. It's probably the piece of music I'm most proud of.

We so rarely see black men with their bodies bared, and we rarely see black people in water. When you watch this scene and see [Mahershala]'s posture, he's teaching this little kid to swim, but he's literally cradling him in his arms. He's wet, muscular, and he's protecting him; ultimately the juxtaposition of this music and the context show us what Chiron is experiencing. It's complex, because it's a sexual moment, too – it shifts people's perceptions of what a black body can mean.

One moment I really want people to watch out for is in the second act. It involves the archetypal 'bully' that Chiron encounters at school. The actor, Patrick Decile, had never acted in anything before *Moonlight*, and he's fascinating. The key is to watch him when he's not speaking, he has a very simple reaction shot, there's this look on his face, and it speaks volumes. It communicates so much and you can miss it if you're not paying attention – it's a simple gesture. But it's one of my favourite moments in the film.

Moonlight is in cinemas nationwide 17 February

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