

## **'Judas and the Black Messiah' delivers a powerful portrait of a man who could've been the greatest Black leader of our time**

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It has been more than 50 years since Fred Hampton, chairman of the Black Panther Party's Illinois chapter, was killed by the U.S. government in his sleep at the age of 21. Over the past half-century, pop culture has more or less diluted the message and goals of the Black Panthers and Hampton to iconography and style – raised fists, afros, leather jackets and sunglasses – without delving into what the group stood for beyond being composed of radical Black people. *Judas and the Black Messiah* is the first big-budget, studio-backed film to offer a true look at not just the politics of Hampton and the group, but a glimpse into just how threatening Black liberation has been to those in power.

Forgoing the structure of a straight biopic, director, co-writer and producer Shaka King instead opts for a film that tells the story of how the FBI believed a Black leader was the biggest threat to America in the 1960s. Co-starring Daniel Kaluuya as Hampton and LaKeith Stanfield as William O'Neal, the informant who helped orchestrate Hampton's murder, the film focuses almost more on O'Neal's infiltration of the Black Panthers than Hampton himself, a choice that doesn't always work in its favour.

Beginning with O'Neal's arrest for impersonating a police officer in order to steal cars, the film quickly moves to his introduction to the FBI. Agent Roy Mitchell (Jesse Plemons) strikes a bargain with the thief; O'Neal can avoid jail time and receive payment if he infiltrates the Chicago chapter of the Panthers and cozies up to Hampton.

O'Neal begins attending Panther meetings, where he struggles to find any real dirt on the group, but instead hears messages of racial and class unity, Black liberation and health care for all. Mitchell is ordered directly by J. Edgar Hoover (Martin Sheen) to take down Hampton, and the pressure begins to mount. It becomes clear that authorities will do anything to thwart the leader's rise in popularity among the disenfranchised – regardless of race – with little regard for O'Neal's life or the law.

The film is directed masterfully by King, who takes what could be a straightforward biopic with many moving parts and infuses it with life, tension and even a swoon-worthy romance without ever feeling exploitative of Black pain and suffering. Instead, the film adequately represents how little the world has changed for Black people in North America and how much Black Americans have suffered as a direct result of institutional and state power.

Much of the film's power comes from its expert casting. Kaluuya, whose measured charisma is at an all-time peak, is matched easily by relative newcomer Dominique Fishback, who plays Deborah Johnson, Hampton's partner. While their relationship is fleshed out quickly, every moment between the two is tender and heartbreaking.

Despite the amazing performances, though, I was left wanting more about the true inner feelings of most characters, especially O'Neal, who sometimes comes across as flat. Little is known about the real-life man, so it makes sense not to create a narrative of inner conflict in his role as a rat. But instead, we're left with a performance by Stanfield that has too few moments of real tension or personal turmoil.

Watching the film, I almost couldn't believe it was backed by Warner Bros., a major studio. It's hard to come across a movie that is so unflinchingly honest in its portrayal of institutional white supremacy – a film where there are no good white people to balance out Black trauma and pain, something that is a given in any recent Black film, something that I believe is a tool to soften reality for white audiences. What we're left with is a historically accurate and mostly powerful portrayal of what could've been the greatest Black leader of our time.

*Judas and the Black Messiah is available on-demand, including Apple TV/iTunes and the Cineplex Store, starting Feb. 12.*