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'Monsters and Men' humanizes both police and shooting victims

Coming off good-cop role in 'BlacKkKlansman,' Washington's character is again caught in middle

Set in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, "Monsters and Men" provides backstory for the experience of the police and the poor, in a world tilted off its axis by gun violence.

The film is a hushed and somber triptych. Its visual texture and soundscape are reminiscent of the 2017 Best Picture-winner "Moonlight."

Written and directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green, "Monsters and Men" stars John David Washington ("BlacKkKlansman"), as Dennis, a committed yet conflicted African-American policeman who rails against the casual contempt of police expressed even by friends and family.

He needs them to understand the danger and risk police face every time they put on a vest. Yet when he is in plain clothes, he too is stopped for no reason. He's disgusted by the bad apples in his department but nevertheless protects them in an inquiry by internal affairs.

In his film career, Washington

seems to have cornered the market on the good-cop roles. He's young and earnest, but edgy enough for his characters to credibly buck the system and still remain wholesomely believable.

Anthony Ramos (the heart-throb who played John Laurens in the New York stage production of "Hamilton") is Manny, a young family man on the cusp of a new life. Manny records and posts video of a fatal police encounter that parallels Eric Garner's 2014 death at the hands of police on Staten Island and is falsely arrested in retaliation.

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The movie's third segment features Kevin Harrison Jr. as Zyric, a high school baseball player who is stopped by police as he walks home from the elite private school where his sports skills purchased



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his entrance. Zyric is conflicted between participating in the celebration of his own bright prospects and the need he feels to take part in community protests.

"Monsters and Men" is the East Coast answer to Daveed Diggs' and Rafael Casal's "Blindspotting," released earlier this summer, in which a witness to police violence is haunted by the experience. Jasmine Cephas Jones (another "Hamilton" veteran along with Diggs and Ramos) plays the put-upon wife-girlfriend in both movies.

She exists to warn her partner of the danger of the streets and protect a child, much-loved by both parents, against a world that seems intent on crushing the father.

Director Green passes dramatic responsibility from protagonist to protagonist in each act through extended eye contact. First between Manny and Dennis in the two-way mirror of an interrogation room, then between Dennis and Zyric as the policeman observes the young man being splayed and searched by other officers from his squad car.

The structure of the film gives it the feel of three distinct one-act shorts, fastened together by optical, almost telepathic hinges.

Green doesn't have time to fully develop any one of the three main characters. We see only a snapshot of their lives and their immense sacrifices. Ramos and Washington deliver everything we need to know through their characters' conviction and melancholy.

"Monsters and Men" is not exceptional in its cinematic beauty or deep in its storytelling. It is the soft-spoken timeliness of the subject matter that accounts for the film's weight. It humanizes both the police and the victims of police abuse while showing how such fatal disruptions shatter the lives of all who are touched by it.

On the way to the screening of "Monsters and Men," I listened sadly to the closing arguments of the Jason Van Dyke trial on the radio. Defense counsel appealed to the emotions of the jurors, imploring them to decide with their hearts, souls and minds (oddly, the law was not mentioned on this decision-maker's checklist).

"Monsters and Men" offers a glimpse into the hearts, minds and souls of the people whose lives are forever changed by such shootings.