

# “One Night in Miami,” Reviewed: Regina King’s First Dramatic Feature Is a Feast of Performance

By Richard Brody



The unity and the clash of public and private lives—as well as the dangers of exposing one’s personal talk and thought in the public arena—is one of the film’s recurring themes. Photograph courtesy Amazon Studios

It should be no surprise that Regina King knows how to direct actors; the ensemble that she orchestrates in “One Night in Miami” (streaming on Amazon following its U.S. première, last fall, at The New Yorker Festival) has the flair and the flow of chamber music. The movie—written by Kemp Powers, based on his play of the same name—presents a hypothetical vision of what took place, mostly behind closed doors, on the night of February 25th, 1964, after the boxer then known as Cassius Clay defeated Sonny Liston for the heavyweight championship and later gathered, in a hotel room in Miami, with Malcolm X, Sam Cooke, and Jim Brown. Little is known of the specifics of that meeting; Powers builds his fictionalized account on the long span of the four men’s careers and on the intricate framework of their immediate concerns. What could easily have devolved into a facile illustration of

encyclopedia facts becomes, instead, a crucible of private passion as it presses outward onto the public stage; performance is its subject, and King's tonal control of the performances maintains the story's critical tension between public pressures and private urgency.

The tension is conjured from the start in four backstory sequences that reveal how precarious the status of each of its four notables was at the time that they met. In 1963, Clay (Eli Goree), facing the British boxer Henry Cooper, taunts him in the ring and is knocked down by him (and saved only by the bell). Cooke (Leslie Odom, Jr.) endures humiliation before a white audience at the Copa. Brown (Aldis Hodge), a record-setting running back, the greatest of his time, is called the N-word by a wealthy white man from his home town (Beau Bridges). Malcolm (Kingsley Ben-Adir), at home with his wife, Betty Shabazz (Joaquina Kalukango), faces both the hostility of the white mainstream (as seen in a broadcast news report) and the dangers of his impending break with the Nation of Islam and its leader, Elijah Muhammad.

The center of the film is the boxer's friendship with and devotion to Malcolm, who was his teacher of Islam. Malcolm came to Miami as an advisor in anticipation of Clay's public acknowledgment that he had joined the Nation of Islam and would change his name; the risks to the boxer's career that such a declaration would pose is the movie's long, tensile drama. From the first time that they're seen together, briefly, just before the fight—when Clay visits Malcolm, in his room at the Hampton House Hotel, for a prayer session—the subject of their discussion is the crafting of a public image and its connection (and potential danger) to the business at hand. Malcolm advises Clay, whose theatrical bravado was already a crucial element of his persona, to “tone down the rhetoric” before the fight, in order not to make himself the target of the crowd. Clay's remarkable response is to speak of his “favorite wrestler,” Gorgeous George, the ring villain who was also the wrestler people paid to see; his objective, Clay suggests, isn't just to be a champion but to be a star.

Sure enough, Clay taunts Liston in the ring and boasts and gloats exuberantly after winning, too. He even does some gleeful, playful preening in the hotel room with Malcolm, Cooke, and Brown. But the gathering is, by design, an earnest one. Malcolm—the host, the intellectual, and the self-described militant—sets the serious, frank, and contentious tone. He makes sure that the conclave isn't the party that Cooke and Brown had hoped it would be. (Cooke, in town with his wife, Barbara, and staying at the Fontainebleau, wanted to revel with the beau monde around the fighter; Brown candidly declares that he'd hoped for "pussy.") Instead, Malcolm turns the meeting into a virtual symposium on the roles and responsibilities of Black artists, athletes, and celebrities in the struggle for civil rights and for more—for what, ultimately, is simply and clearly stated as the objective of Black power.

The night in Miami occurred at a critical moment, just three months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the inauguration of Lyndon B. Johnson, and in the midst of the heated Senate battle over the Civil Rights Act. The discussions at and around the hotel take the struggle for civil rights as their basis but also go far beyond legal equality and look toward a radical transformation of consciousness. Malcolm has a particular subject in mind, and he brings it out in the course of the night—the political role and power of Black celebrities in a mainstream culture dominated, not just numerically but, above all, economically and politically, by white people. By way of Malcolm's mentorship, Clay is on the verge of exchanging a high-comic role for a political one that would, of course, prove tragic, in the grandest sense of the word, turning Muhammad Ali into a Shakespearean hero of living history. Brown is in the midst of parlaying his illustrious football career into an acting career in Hollywood, at a time when movies are far more lucrative than professional sports. As for Cooke, he becomes the focus of the action for much of the film, precisely regarding the question of how his public profession expresses (or fails to express) his private convictions.

Cooke twits Malcolm over his political rhetoric, calling it “jive” and presuming it was meant only “to rile up white folks,” not something that he himself expected Malcolm to recruit Clay for, let alone serve up to him and Brown in private. Malcolm responds, at an opportune moment, by accusing Cooke of writing songs to please white audiences and neglecting the role that his music can play in the civil-rights movements; his prime example is Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” the kind of political song that’s also a popular hit and that Malcolm exalts as a model for what, in his view, Cooke should be doing—fulfilling his potential in the “struggle,” alongside Clay and Brown, to become “the loudest voice of us all.” Cooke doesn’t take the prodding lightly; in an angry and indignant response, he explains that he’s not just a singer and a songwriter but also a businessperson who has become wealthy and is making other Black artists in his company wealthy, and that this commercial success, too, is a core element of the struggle. Yet Malcolm persists: the wealth is private benefit with a slow path to effect, whereas the public, anthemic, and iconic display of political commitment à la Dylan is what only an artist such as Cooke can do.

The unity and the clash of public and private lives—as well as the dangers of exposing one’s personal talk and thought in the public arena—is one of the film’s recurring themes. When Malcolm launches into a political diatribe in the hotel room, Cooke chides him, saying, “The cameras are off,” and, later, again criticizes him: “Now you’re acting in private the way you are on camera.” Malcolm reproaches Cooke, in turn, for performing differently for Black audiences and white ones. Meanwhile, just as Clay is preparing to publicly declare his religious commitment, Malcolm is preparing to go public with his rejection of the Nation of Islam. He intends to launch his own movement, despite his keen awareness of the dangers that this break will entail, dangers that would be heightened by the surveillance that he, knowingly, constantly endures from the federal government. (His response to the anticipated dangers is the writing of his autobiography—the very epitome of rendering personal life public—and it figures expressly in the movie’s action).

Powers renders the group's encounter, and its often-confrontational groupings of two, three, and four, as a dialectical feast, and King films these discussions with vigor and clarity, parsing the talk with trenchant arrays of characters and converting it into action with keen attention to the crisscrossing of gazes. Yet, with its self-conscious reflections on history in the making, the movie's emotional power extends beyond the specific drama of its personal relationships. King's sense of these meetings' vital energy is balanced by a reverent reserve in the presence of historical heroes whose gathering, as she films it, bears a virtually scriptural authority.

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