

ENTERTAINMENT

‘Most Beautiful Thing’ movie is about the lives of Chicagoans who formed the first all-Black high school rowing team

By RICK KOGAN

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Returning to a movie theater will a treat. For many, it won't matter what is on the screen.

But the going-back-to-movie-theater experience will be greatly enhanced if the film you are watching is "A Most Beautiful Thing." It is a beautifully made 95 minutes that will give you not only an entertainingly heartening story but might also provide some hope in what often seems these days a hopeless world.

The film tells a Chicago story rooted in the late 1990s on the harsh West Side. It focuses on a group of young men whose lives were transformed by participating in the unlikely sport of rowing. They all were students at Manley High School and came from similar backgrounds; many were members of gangs.

They are mentored by a 32-year-old white options and futures trader named Ken Alpart, a former University of Pennsylvania rowing team member and the founder of an organization called Urban Options, which was in the business of helping the lives of West Side kids, and coached by his former college teammate, the no-nonsense Michael O’Gorman.

The boys bond and, for a time, are able escape from and even triumph over their circumstances.



Arshay Cooper and teammates in Oakland, Calif., from the movie "A Most Beautiful Thing" about a rowing team from Chicago's West Side. (Richard Schultz / 50 Eggs Films/HANDOUT)

Last month I wrote about that, as captured in a book that would inspire this film. I called “A Most Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America’s First All-Black High School Rowing Team” (Flatiron Books) by Arshay Cooper “a coming-of-age story told with the benefit of adult insights and mature hindsight. Cooper is an introspective young man and a fine writer now but when we meet him in these pages, he is struggling to form a personality and a life.” I wrote that it is “ultimately uplifting and always enlightening.”

That it is. But it ends when high school ends.

There is more, plenty more, as filmmaker Mary Mazzio, herself once a competitive rower (and former Olympian), would discover after reading Cooper’s book when it was first published in 2015 as “Suga Water: A Memoir.” In a word she was, she says, “mesmerized.”

She got in touch with Cooper, who had been the team's captain, and together they hatched this movie, their notion to reunite the now adult and, it must be said, out-of-shape participants of that high school rowing team for one last competition.



A Chicago moment from the movie "A Most Beautiful Thing" about an all-Black rowing team from Chicago's West Side. (Clayton Hauck / 50 Eggs)

It was not easy, as you watch some express reluctance to revisit their youth. But all come together in a life-is-too-short fashion in the wake of the death of coach O’Gorman. And so, a new coach comes their way, Mike Teti, a three-time Olympian, head men’s Olympic Team coach and a big personality.

The members of the team make an interesting and lively adult bunch, compelled to participate for a variety of reasons: to atone for past mistakes, enlighten their own children, inspire others. Given the current heightened tensions between police and citizens, it is wonderful to watch the mutual respect that forms between these Black adult rowers and a team of Chicago Police Department rowers during some training sessions together. Hope springs from these encounters.

It would be unfair to give you too many details of what is, simply put, a great movie.

Some big names understandably attached themselves to the film. It is narrated by Chicago’s own music star, Common, and among the executive producers are former NBA stars Grant Hill and Dwyane Wade, and music producer 9th Wonder, who oversees the film’s energetic soundtrack. Chicago’s Chaz Ebert, the widow of the late movie critic Roger, is also among the many producers and, indeed, on the rogerebert.com site critic Brian Tallerico calls the film “joyful and powerful. ... I adored the storytelling and compassion in Mazzio’s approach.”



Former Manley high school teammates, now adults, train on an ergometer in the movie "A Most Beautiful Thing." (50 Eggs Films)

Mazzio, who is the film’s writer-producer-director, is an artful filmmaker, adept at the use of archival footage, aware of the need to provide a chillingly honest look at the dangers and death that shadow one of the city’s neighborhoods, surefooted with the time-traveling narrative and persuasive in getting her subjects to open up.

This is not a “message film” in the conventional dry, hit-you-over-the-head sense of that phrase. Still, you are likely to come away with a greater understanding of what life can be like in one on the city’s challenged neighborhoods. As Cooper says, “When we were on the water, we were in a place where we could not hear the sound of sirens or bullets. And that allowed us to shape a different vision for ourselves, of who and what we could become. And that was a beautiful thing.”

Long ago, the 1980 Winter Olympic hockey game in which the United States defeated the four-time defending gold medalists from the Soviet Union, was dubbed “Miracle on Ice.”

Though not as internationally flashy, here we have “Miracle on Water.”

Enjoy the movie.