'When They See Us': TV Review

Ava DuVernay restores names to the Central Park Five in a Netflix miniseries marked by powerful moments and the superb cinematography of Bradford Young.

Those are the five Harlem teens who were arrested, convicted and imprisoned in the 1989 rape of a jogger, only to have those convictions vacated in 2002. They're more commonly known as the Central Park Five, but that's a pejorative that creator Ava DuVernay excludes almost entirely from her [Netflix miniseries *When They See Us*](.)

Over four installments, none longer than 87 minutes, *When They See Us* is a rigorous attempt to chronicle an epic legal failure and to help restore a sense of the men as individuals, rather than faceless members of a wrongfully accused collective. DuVernay, director and co-writer of every episode, approaches their story in ways that avoid typical triumph-over-adversity narrative tropes. She sometimes prioritizes the intellectual over the emotional or intentionally leaves big gaps in time and perspective. But her choices never feel haphazard. The material mines profound outrage, and the note-perfect ensemble lends it heart.

The premiere thrusts viewers into the night of April 19, 1989, with only brief glimpses into the lives of young Korey (Jharrel Jerome, of *Moonlight*), Antron (Caleel Harris), Yusef (Ethan Herisse), Raymond (Marquis Rodriguez) and Kevin (Asante Blackk) before they join a crowd headed for Central Park. DuVernay could have provided extensive introductions to her characters and played for sentiment, but instead she goes for the abruptness of youth interrupted. The kids' reasons for going to the park in the first place become a blur, as do their actual actions there that night as part of a wave of juveniles, some there to wreak havoc and some just along for a spring night out.

It's the next day that we watch authorities, primarily embodied by Linda Fairstein (Felicity Huffman in a juicy turn as a heel that's made both distracting and oddly richer by her place in recent real-life headlines), learn of a brutal rape and begin their process of reframing the narrative. Deconstructing the Central Park Five story, DuVernay shows us its dehumanizing construction. We see the innocently dropped word "wilding" gain new and terrifying meaning, and listen as cops turn the boys from "witnesses" into "predators" and from "kids" into "animals." DuVernay is unsparing in depicting the rabble-rousing role played by Donald Trump, whose bloviating is ubiquitous in the background, easily mockable if he weren't calling for the return of the death penalty (and if he'd ever shown an iota of regret).

Injustice is at the heart of the rest of the series, with DuVernay frequently sacrificing the specificity of the case to illustrate some of the systemic inequities explored in her Oscar-nominated documentary *13th*. Huffman's Fairstein and Vera Farmiga, buried under a curly wig and modicum of regret as prosecutor Elizabeth Lederer, barely appear after the first hour. And the team of bumbling but well-intentioned attorneys — Blair Underwood, Christopher Jackson and Joshua Jackson, shining through questionable styling choices — recede from center stage after the second installment. As the five teens grow up, each heartbreaking in his own way, the young performers are replaced by another set of actors (Jovan Adepo, Chris Chalk, Freddy Miyares and Justin Cunningham), and the series' focus shifts to a general critique of the prison industrial complex and the challenges of recidivism and rehabilitation.

You'll notice only four, rather than five, names for the adult actors. That's because Jerome, who I initially thought might be too old and too recognizable (for fans of *Mr. Mercedes*, at least), plays Korey Wise in both time periods. Sixteen at the time of his conviction and subject to a particularly harrowing incarceration, Wise dominates the series' final hour, and Jerome delivers a breakout performance. The talented cast's bigger names are generally required to build their performances around only a scene or two. It's a useful compromise, because as much as you might want more material for the kids' family members, such familiar and seasoned pros as John Leguizamo, Niecy Nash, Aunjanue Ellis, Isis King, Kylie Bunbury and, especially, Michael K. Williams are able to create vivid, if not rich, characters.

The show's other key standout is ace cinematographer Bradford Young. There are shades of Gordon Parks in the way Young's camera treats New York City locations as sources of nostalgia and tempered reflection alike. Prestige cable shows are too frequently victim to a "dark = serious" oversimplification, but Young's work is a primer on how working in low light isn't the same as sacrificing visibility. Whether he's using yellow street lamps in the early Central Park scenes or reflecting the moral murk in a rigged courthouse, Young often treats illumination symbolically, like the truth trying to burst into every frame. The act of seeing, of recognition, is built right into the series' title.

As with DuVernay's structural choices, there are visual themes where Young's idea-driven cinematography becomes a minor distraction — you don't have to pay close attention to the interrogation scenes to see confinement literally closing in on the kids — but every frame is worthy of consideration.

I suspect some viewers will feel that the mechanics of both the railroading and the exoneration are a little shortchanged here, but I'd point them to *The Central Park Five*, the very fine and detailed 2012 documentary from Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon. DuVernay keeps her eye on these young men, the ordinary lives taken away from them, their identities and their names.

Creator-director: Ava DuVernay
Writers: Ava DuVernay, Robin Swicord, Attica Locke, Michael Starrbury
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