Magical Association for the Regression of Negroes

by Max Erin James

The American Society of Magical Negroes, which I believe is only titled to emphasize the social or racial implications strictly to the United States, is about a community of black people who are given the curse of magical abilities that are only obtainable through the continued efforts to support white supremacy and achieve white appeasement. This Kobi Libii debut, however, is and presented as a movie about a secret community of black people with magical powers who use them to ensure the safety of black people, but that is clearly for the sake of marketability. In reality, the society recruits young Aren to assist in their vision; however, Aren finds love in the woman his first client is also interested in and must decide between love and perpetuating white privilege. According to the story, the society has existed since Monticello, which would only imply black people have supported white people in America since the early 1800s. Based on this information, one would only assume the black people who were given these magical powers advocated or contributed to the continued enslavement of our people and other forms of oppression, likely for the betterment of their own livelihood. Shit, talk about crabs in a barrel. If you pay attention to the movie, the members are not ignorant to what is happening to black people in the country, and some are doing it to get away from a potentially dangerous life. With that said, they are complicit with the widening social and economic gap between white people and minorities. This is an opportunity presented to few black people who are not forced to take part and are allowed to leave the society without repercussion aside from a memory wipe. Sounds like a choice to me (Ye voice).

At no point in the film does it support the idea of keeping black people safe. Our main white client who our lead Aren is given lives around, hangs out with, and works around white people, and his dissatisfaction with work, and failure at no point hints at being a contributing factor to his concealed racism, at least not until a product his employer deploys is attacked for having a bias. The resolution presented to keep the client happy does not in way resolve any racist ideas this white man may have; instead, Aren must break the rules of the society for the white man to listen. Professional success does not eliminate prejudice, which feels like a very elementary statement as I would guess most of the audience and those involved in making the film would know. I would argue, considering this person’s narrow view of the world, and seemingly limited interaction with people who are not white or white-passing, the bias would only continue, especially as they move up in their field, where there are only more white people to talk to.

The issue with movies like these, where many of those providing funding are white liberals, is it tends to be void of genuine depth and purpose, with a paper-thin narrative layered with social undertones that keeps the white “ally” from looking any further. Maybe it is in fear of how they will be perceived, which is very much understandable because we often tend to move to that defense when discussing with someone who has not lived such a life. I would argue that this does not make anyone—of any gender, race, sex, orientation, age, or philosophy—unable to understand story and character development. Sundance, which is already losing much credibility as a steppingstone for aspiring filmmakers, clearly has a board of members and mentors who have a certain complexion and look to appeal to certain people by presenting content that checks a box, leading to outputs that provide representation, but offer nothing more. This places me in a difficult position, or so I thought. Advocating for more brown and black creators in higher budget and more marketed projects is what I go for, even if it is of low quality. You will always find me supporting work directed by, written by, or starring underrepresented communities. This movie fits into a category of movies that could have explored so much more and failed to even accomplish its tasks that many movies do regularly but are not given the same cast or budget, and that is what disappoints me considering the many eyes looking to Libii to provide a fresh story with people who look like us. The disappointment seems to be what frustrates me most, and what has led me to think more about the movie and its failed execution. More importantly, this movie fails to be entertaining, the thing most of us are looking for at the end of the day, which leaves one with having to look for themes and commentary that clearly was never fully thought out. What we end up having here is a movie representing one community, but meant for the viewership of another, not at all for anyone else. Those people will accept it and find joy in supporting or advocating because one of white people’s biggest fears is being called racist. Still, as time passes, more people with better understanding of what we want in a movie are rating the film, and its score continues to drop. Maybe we can all learn something from this moment.