

Eddie Murphy returns to the spotlight as Rudy Ray Moore

“Dolemite is My Name” highlights an influential icon and era

By ETHAN RICE



Rudy Ray Moore (Eddie Murphy) struggles to find his place in the white-dominated movie industry in “Dolemite is My Name”

On the streets of 1970's Los Angeles, one comedy legend steps into the shoes of another as Eddie Murphy takes on the true story of struggling-artist-turned-unlikely-superstar Rudy Ray Moore.

A little known but hugely influential artistic figure, Moore was a struggling comic and musician who crafted stories from street poets and African heritage into a character act telling profane tales of outrageous exploits. Moore would go on to produce and star in multiple movies based on his characters, most famously a martial arts-wielding pimp named Dolemite.

Directed by Craig Brewer, the 2019 Netflix-original biopic “Dolemite is My Name” (R) follows Moore’s journey from the invention of the Dolemite character to the 1975 release of the original movie. Murphy plays Moore as an earnest man deeply immersed in the culture of African American art and caught up in the thrall of Hollywood.

Moore just can’t seem to catch a break, however. Already existing on the outskirts of industries dominated by powerful white men, he’s too broke, too fat and too out of date, stuck working a day job at the famous Dolphin’s of Hollywood record store to get by. He spends his days trying to get the store’s resident DJ, Roj (Snoop Dogg), to play his records and his nights delivering lame jokes as a club’s M.C., opening for his friend Ben (Craig Robinson) and his band.

This is an electric role for Murphy, the best he has had in years, perhaps stretching all the way back to his critically acclaimed 2006 turn in “Dreamgirls.” “Dolemite” chronicles the story of a larger-than-life-man and therefore, while boasting a star-studded ensemble, fully showcases the leading man’s talents. It lives and dies on Murphy’s delivery, and without a shadow of a doubt, it lives.

His trademark wild facial expressions and rapid-fire wit join with a seemingly endless parade of eccentric costumes and wigs to embody the outrageous persona on the stage, while his oft-untapped dramatic skill lays the foundation of an infectious, very human soul that exists beneath all of the bravado.

This is not to discount the talent of the ensemble.

Besides Robinson and Snoop Dogg, this tale is populated with a brilliant line-up including Wesley Snipes, DaVine Joy Randolph, Tituss Burgess, Mike Epps, Keegan-Michael Key and many more. Each brings their own explosive personalities to the unique individuals that form Moore's entourage, joining together to pursue his dream.

The chemistry of the cast is effortless, which lends a friendly, inviting aura to the film. It is elevated beyond just a professional cast — they feel like a community of friends just hanging out and making a movie. And given that is exactly who they are portraying on screen, it creates one of the most believable, magnetic collections of personalities that I've seen in a movie for some time.

In the end, "Dolemite" is a feel-good biopic at the highest levels of the genre. Murphy's iconic performance alone is well worth the price of admission. (Which, being on Netflix, is a negligible fraction of your subscription.) It is incredibly easy to cheer for Moore as he dauntlessly barrels through obstacle after obstacle in pursuit of an outsized dream, the only kind of dream that could match his personality.

The movie is more than that, however. It is not just a celebration of one man's career but of an entire culture, an era of Hollywood entertainment that is often overlooked altogether. But the ground that was broken by people like Moore and his friends still echoes decades later in the legacies of the artists they inspired. "Dolemite is My Name" is a worthy tribute. (4/5)

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