

Second Act

With two buzzy film roles, singer Janelle Monáe takes her activist message to the big screen.

Janelle Monáe has six Grammy nominations and a record label to her name, not to mention a fan base that includes President Barack Obama. And yet, somehow, she is still haunted by a part she didn't get when she was growing up in Kansas City, Kansas—in a high school production of *The Wiz*. “One of my friends ended up playing Dorothy, and I was the understudy. I'll never forget it. I was really sad about it,” says Monáe, who went on to study drama at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York before launching a music career in Atlanta. “But things happen. And I'm just happy that I'm able to get back into the swing of it and redeem myself.”

Redemption has certainly been sweet for the 31-year-old, as she makes her professional acting debut in two films garnering serious Oscar buzz. In Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*, she plays Teresa, the nurturing surrogate mother to a poor African-American boy grappling with his sexual orientation. And in the recently released *Hidden Figures*, based on a true story, she stars as Mary Jackson, the brilliant mathematician who became the first African-American female engineer at NASA. Jackson's passion and drive resonated with Monáe in more ways than one. “I've always done things from the heart and not according to what society pressures me to do,” says Monáe, who thinks of her creativity as a form of activism. “I want to continue being a voice for the marginalized. That is my life's passion.”

VANESSA LAWRENCE

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