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American Violet

Valor blooms in this Violet3halfstarsGo to showtimes

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Alfre Woodard, left, and Nicole Beharie star in *American Violet*.
Scott Saltzman / SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS

In *American Violet's* opening sequence, a lovely young mother of four (Nicole Beharie) runs through her morning routine. She rouses her children. Fills the teapot. Spritzes the African violet. Feeds the kids. Reacts

with Zen calm when one of them shatters a jar of peanut butter on the floor.

Then she leaves them with their grandma (Alfre Woodard), and it's off to work at the homey diner where she pours steaming coffee and smiles like an angel at the regulars. But not for long: Moments later, the cops rush in and drag her off to jail. "What'd I do?" she yells. "Would you tell me what I did?" She thinks it might be parking tickets. Turns out she's been accused of selling crack in a school zone.

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All of this happens in the first 10 minutes, establishing instant viewer sympathy for the woman in cuffs. We can see that [Dee Roberts](#) is a good single mother just trying to make an honest wage. From her saintly demeanor, we assume she's innocent. And we suspect that her fate is somehow linked to the violet at home, an obvious potted metaphor for a graceful heroine thrust into nightmare circumstances. Keep an eye on that thing; it seems to wilt or perk up according to Dee's well-being.

Based on the true story of [Regina Kelly](#), a 24-year-old African-American swept up in a Robertson County drug raid, *American Violet* is a conventional but wholly gripping docudrama that makes no bones about its viewpoint. It takes Dee's side. It also portrays her nemesis, District Attorney [Calvin Beckett](#) — a fictionalized [John Paschall](#), played with deathmask intensity by [Michael O'Keefe](#) — as an old-model racist out to arrest as many black people as he can manage.

Aside from Dee, we learn that 27 others were hauled in from that raid in November 2000, all of the drug charges stemming from one compromised informant. Some of the accused agree to plea bargains. Dee refuses, claiming the truth will set her free. In swoops an [ACLU](#) lawyer ([Tim Blake Nelson](#)) looking to file a civil rights lawsuit charging systematic racial bias against the D.A., the county, a special narcotics task force and the cops.

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Part courtroom drama, part *Erin Brokovich*, part Kafka, *American Violet* broadcasts the righteous anger and slow-building emotional crescendi of a well-acted movie on a mission: There isn't a bad performance in it. Director [Tim Disney](#) (Walt's grand-nephew) and writer [Bill Haney](#) give the cast and characters lots of room for outraged confrontations and confessional musings on the perfidy of racism.

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Beharie (*The Express*) is nothing short of sensational, her scrappy underdog proving far more complicated than those opening minutes suggest. She has a Past. And when her ex (played by a bullish Xzibit) messes with the custody of two daughters, Dee is one hellzapoppin' mama, bristling with the spiny determination to take on the big guys. She's no shrinking *Violet*.

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