

Lee film a commentary on racism

By Gerald White
Emerald Contributor

Spike Lee's newest film *Do The Right Thing* achieves a perfect balance between conventional narrative and pure visual technique which creates an excellent, coherent work of cinema.

Lee has not only used his film to make a comment on the problems and consequences

of racism, but has also made a very impressionistic work about a neighborhood and how its inhabitants function as a whole.

Movie Review

By doing this, the film avoids getting bogged down in social statement by allowing more accessible qualities to play a large role in the film.

Lee has stated in interviews that he does not feel it is necessary to "straddle the fence" between entertainment and substance. He has succeeded in not doing that, having made a film rich in both.

The action takes place in the small Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant on what is said to be the hottest day of the year. It primarily involves Sal, the owner of a popular pizzeria, and his two sons, Vito, a bigot, and Pino, a good friend of Mookie. Mookie is Sal's delivery boy played by Spike Lee.

Other important but lesser characters include Mother Sister, the local old maid; Da Mayor, the local drunk; and three guys who sit out in front of a bright red wall complaining about almost everything, but primarily about a very "successful" Korean grocer.

These characters do little to support the larger theme of racism directly but serve to create a community rich with personality and diversity where the larger concepts can take form.

Several minor characters who do serve the larger purpose of racism include Radio Ra-

heem, a silent martyr who blasts raps with deep political undertones; Buggin' Out, a not-so-silent radical who incites his friends to action when he feel his culture is being repressed, and Smiley, a mentally retarded man who stands on the corner trying to sell what he claims to be the only pictures of Martin Luther King and Malcom X together. Lee uses Smiley to create very powerful images expressing the difficulty and frustration of the struggle between the two leaders' views.

At the end of the film, Lee's camera probes the madness of a rioting crowd of mixed ethnic backgrounds (much like the crowd in the previous image) as the local police order the fire department to turn the hoses on them.

This contrast brings in the idea of relief from the heat being a great unifier. In the first image, the heat was concrete, but in the second image, the inhabitants of the film seek relief from the heat of racial suppression.

Lee has been the subject of a great deal of criticism because many claim he advocates racial violence through the film's message. I disagree with this idea and I feel that Lee leaves the film open at the end. He ends with two quotes, one from King advocating non-violence and one from Malcom X stating that violence in self-defence is not violence, rather it is intelligence.

These two quotes illustrate the main conflict in the film, instead of trying to solve it. Lee allows the audience to make it's own decision about the correct course of action. His violent sequences at the end of the film illustrate the destructive aspects of racism, rather than advocating them.

"Do the Right Thing" provides entertainment as well as substance. It is stunning not only for it's viewpoint and courage but it's aesthetics as well. The judges at the Cannes festival failed to give this film any of it's 10 awards, and after a single viewing, one cannot help but wonder what they were thinking.

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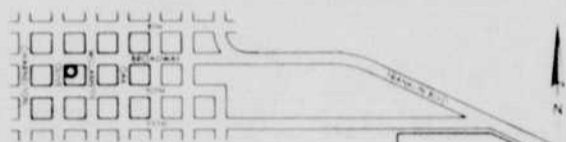
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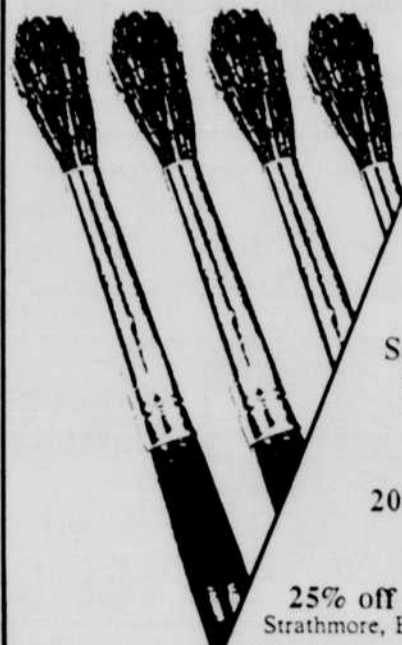
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