

CINEMA

'Higher Learning' fails to make the grade

Greg Hamilton

For the Oregon Daily Emerald

At the age of 23, John Singleton startled the world with his brutal urban vision *Boyz in the Hood*. Filled with vivid characters and a powerful message, Singleton showed in his directorial debut, for which he received an Oscar nomination, that youth is a force to be reckoned with.

Unfortunately, youth is also subject to idealistic behavior and questionable decisions. On the surface this may appear altruistic, but in the end it's sometimes plagued with structural problems and basic oversights.

To make a long story short, Singleton's latest effort, *Higher Learning*, reflects this youthful problem by trying to dig deep into issues of social conscience, but failing to get past the surface for lack of a good shovel.

The spirit is willing, but his tools are weak. Enter Columbus University, a thriving college campus that reeks of diversity (sound familiar?) and harbors the usual pack of social and ethical struggles. It is the hub of knowledge and ignorance, a point that Singleton brings down on the audience with the subtlety of a hydrogen bomb.

This jackhammer mentality carries over to the cast, a mishmash of 20-nothings who bear social crosses of every shape and size, who have no problem letting everyone know about them.

There's Malik (Omar Epps, *Juice*), an African-American athlete who thinks his athletic prowess and his race should allow him to glide through college with ease.

There's Kristen (Kristy Swanson, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), who is raped at her first frat party and subsequently flirts with lesbianism.

And then there's Remy (Mark Rapoport, *True Romance*), an Idaho hayseed who's so

socially inept (and obviously angry) that you know he'd wind up on top of a building with a rifle, which he does, even if he didn't hook up with a band of skinhead white supremacists, which he also does.

Mix these three with a host of here-and-gone supporting characters, stir in a tangle of ideologies, along with a pinch of political correctness, and you have the brew that fuels *Higher Learning*.

Higher Learning

Omar Epps, Ice Cube, Laurence Fishburne, Kristy Swanson
Director: John Singleton
Rated: R

★★

And what a brew it is. Singleton's vision blows past reality and seeks the worst case scenario for virtually everything. Instead of dealing with the insidious and silent racism that students experience on a daily basis, Singleton injects extreme swastika-toting skinheads into the picture, thereby inviting the (anti)climatic finale of violence and over-the-top melodrama.

Singleton's characters also suffer from this extreme perspective. Kristen and Remy experience violent personality changes that occur before we even know who they are. Swanson and Rapoport don't help things much with their acting skills, as both performances are wholly forgettable.

The only memorable roles in this picture are turned in by two of the periphery characters. Fudge White, played by the glacially cool Ice Cube, is the six-year super-senior sage who's got the white man all figured out.

He serves as a mentor to Malik, giving the greenhorn track star the lowdown on retaining his black identity in a white man's world. Also serving to help educate Malik is professor Maurice Phipps, played convincingly by Laurence Fishburne. Phipps is a hard-ass who doesn't take excuses and thinks even less of favoritism based on color. His academic hard line clashes with Malik, but eventually serves to make him a better student as well as teach him some self-reliance.

Unfortunately, the audience doesn't get much further than the surface in these relationships because they are just an example of the many subplots that are left hanging and undeveloped by Singleton. Instead of taking these small gems and polishing them, they are buried within an overbearing pile of similar unpolished items. The simple fact is, *Higher Learning* bites off way more than it can chew, attempting to address every last hot issue it can pawn off on the audience. By doing this, Malik and the rest of the supporting cast end up as social billboards rather than engaging characters.

The writing is also at issue. Convoluted and awkward at times, it often relies on cliches and stereotypes to explain that actions and motivations of a character. Supposedly serious moments become laughable, creating great gaps of credibility that might leave the viewer thinking "When are things going to get real?"

The harsh reality is, they won't. It's unfortunate because this could have been a powerful film, much like *Boyz in the Hood* was. If Singleton had focused more on the people being affected by social issues rather than trying to juggle everything at once, *Higher Learning* might have made the grade. As it is, Singleton needs to hit the books.

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