

He Got Game: More of Spike Lee's filmmaking

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17 June 1998

He Got Game is Spike Lee's film about a few days in the life of an outstanding high school basketball player, Jesus Shuttlesworth (the Milwaukee Bucks' Ray Allen), and his father, Jake (Denzel Washington). In prison for (accidentally) killing his wife, Jake is offered the possibility of an early release if he can get Jesus, the best prospect in the country and much sought after by college coaches, agents and so forth, to attend the governor's *alma mater*. Established in a flophouse in the rundown Coney Island section of Brooklyn, he has one week in which to make contact with his son, who lives nearby, and accomplish the deed. Will Jesus avoid the snares and temptations set in his path? Will Jake win his release from prison? Will father and son be reconciled?

Why "Jesus"? Because of his basketball skill and the wealth it will presumably generate when he turns professional, Jesus is looked upon as a savior by family members, friends, the entire neighborhood, as well as the basketball establishment and the media. Many want to live through him, as many or more want a piece of him. He is tempted by promises of every worldly pleasure. He is a martyr to America's obsession with sports.

If all this were worked out objectively, coherently and thoroughly, it could prove to be the basis of a valuable work. But it is not.

He Got Game (which means, more or less, "He can play") contains numerous plot lines and thematic strands. Indeed, it seems to be half a dozen or more unrelated films: the story of Jesus and Jake; the story of Jesus and his efforts to raise his younger sister, which is dropped quite quickly; the story of Jesus and his corrupt girlfriend; the story of Jesus and his corrupt uncle; the story of Jesus and his school friends, which is never developed; the story of Jake and a prostitute;

the story of Jake and the two prison guards shadowing him, another red herring; the story of the Coney Island housing projects, dropped from lack of interest; the larger story of America and sports—undeveloped; and so forth. These threads are never woven together to form a coherent film. The different elements, one assumes, must have struck the director as worthy of treatment, but he either lacked the skill or the patience to develop them.

Lee takes the world he confronts as given and the surface of life as it presents itself. His treatment of poverty-stricken Coney Island communicates no sense of outrage or protest. Nor is he any more critical or penetrating when he examines the sports world. In his production notes, he writes that it is "*impossible* to overstate the impact of sports on my life" when he was young. But the disproportionate significance that sports has taken on in American life is a social phenomenon. It is a symptom of a politically and socially stagnant period. An enormous amount of popular energy and attention has been absorbed by activities which, while fascinating and rewarding in their own right, do not have a decisive influence on the course of history or even on the course of individual lives. One can only grasp why so many Americans adopt a life-and-death attitude toward events which are not life-and-death matters by considering *what is missing* from their lives. This appears to be an entirely closed book to Lee. So he invests the story of a talented basketball player with world-historical significance. This is not a promising starting point.

All right, but perhaps through sports a grander statement might be made, about American society or life in general? The opening credits suggest that there will be such an attempt. In the first image of the film a kid plays basketball somewhere in rural America, to the

music of Aaron Copland. But this is a fraud. There is not the slightest hint in the rest of the film that Lee is interested in the situation of such a kid, or in the state of the society as a whole.

There is no real indication that the director is that fascinated in a kid from the inner city either, except insofar as he is a potential sports star. Jesus' friends (and ultimately his family) get short shrift in the film. The future that lies ahead for those not destined for the NBA seems to be of little interest. They are "losers," like the neighborhood youths left behind in *Good Will Hunting*, and therefore their lives are not worthy of screen time.

No, the real subject of *He Got Game*, in my view, is not basketball, father-son relations, much less social conditions in Coney Island, but celebrity. But here too the film director is not honest. While ostensibly issuing a warning about the dangers lying in wait for the unsuspecting star, the film revels in its depictions of the delights available: mansions, sports cars, swimming pools and, especially, sex. This is what fascinates Spike Lee and what he depicts with the greatest enthusiasm. When Jake appears on screen, after one particularly graphic sequence in which Jesus has paid a visit to the flesh pots of an upstate university, one suddenly remembers, "Oh, yes, that's right, he's in this film too."

In general, Denzel Washington, a tremendously talented actor, has the unfortunate and unrewarding task of playing the lead character in scenes that are, in reality, quite peripheral and almost irrelevant to the film's real emotional and intellectual center. In any event, does anyone seriously believe that a one-on-one confrontation on a basketball court, with a predetermined outcome, says anything about the relations between the father and son? The final competition is a neat, but entirely empty, way of resolving a relationship about which Lee has very little to say.

One has the distinct impression that the problem closest to the director's heart is the painful and (to the filmmaker) apparently endlessly fascinating predicament of being Spike Lee, a talented black artist, snubbed or worse by "white society" and stabbed in the back all too often by his "own" people.

It is difficult to determine on the basis of viewing his films how much or how little talent and artistry Lee

might potentially possess. He belongs to that layer of the black petty bourgeoisie which has been deliberately cultivated, encouraged and flattered over the past two decades. In that sense, he is the victim of a social process. His films have been praised in nearly every quarter. The more discerning critics point out that the films are sloppy and unbelievable, but then invariably go on to say that Lee, after all, has his heart in the right place. I'm not at all convinced on the basis of the evidence that Lee has his heart in the right place. To me he seems opportunist, consumed with self-importance and, worst of all, mean-spirited. *He Got Game*, like most of his films, simply left me with a bad taste in my mouth.



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