

# Readers comment on the WSWS review of Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam*

10 July 1999

To the editor:

I haven't been to one of Lee's films since sitting through *Do The Right Thing* many years ago. I was appalled at the crude stereotypes—not just of Italian-Americans, but of African-Americans as well. The pizza shop owners are presented as brutish, sweating morons, while the residents of the black neighborhood are shown as shiftless, jive-talking victims. Seeing the film, I had the feeling (later confirmed) that Lee had grown up in comfortable, middle-class surroundings, and that he had probably never spoken to or hung out with the sorts of working-class or poor blacks he was depicting.

For all of its faults, I suggest Carl Franklin's *Devil In A Blue Dress* (1995) for an accurate portrait of African-American workers. Set right after World War II, in the black ghetto of Los Angeles, the film shows what blacks had (and still have) to endure to survive in the United States. Denzell Washington plays a laid-off worker who takes on a shady bit of detective work to meet his mortgage payments. The rest is pretty typical, though well-done, film noir stuff. The director is African-American, though he is not highly touted like Spike Lee.

I think the studio might have wanted to do a series with Easy Rawlins [Washington's character], but seeing what I gather was poor box-office, decided not to go ahead. This, writ small, is what Hollywood has done with black directors: they've shut them out, except for the clownish ones and Spike Lee.

Another film worth seeing about the black working class is *The Killing Floor* (1984). It shows the role played by blacks in the fight to build the meat packers union in Chicago early in the century, and the way in which the bosses used race to split the fledgling union. The director is Bill Duke, a very talented African-American director, but also neglected by the media.

Duke also directed *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), from a Chester Himes 1950s' novel, and *Deep Cover* (1992), a superior cop-infiltrating-the-mob thriller. He is as well a good, menacing actor.

MJ

To the editor:

Finally someone has the courage to tell the truth about Spike Lee! Let me congratulate David Walsh for his dead-on comments about this man as one of the most—if not the most—repellent American film directors ever. Mr. Walsh is the only one I know among all the nation's critics who has taken Mr. Lee to task in no uncertain terms.

Mr. Walsh was almost too kind, but he has nevertheless expressed what many have felt, but have been afraid to say about this most disgusting, black-capitalism pusher, whom many black-actor friends of mine in the movie industry can't stomach either—either as a director or as a human being.

Anyone with a modicum of sensitivity and concern for humanity will despise his films.

Once again, the WSWS has demonstrated great courage in publishing David Walsh's excoriating review of Lee's latest movie.

I don't have any intention of seeing Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam*. Frankly, I don't ever intend to see another Spike Lee film. His latest movies have been an embarrassment in their vituperations against humanity as a whole.

RR

To David Walsh:

I admired much of your review of Spike Lee's film *Summer of Sam*. Vitriolic as all hell, but at least it does not palliate, as do most reviews of Lee's work. I quite agree with your implication that Lee's work is a hangover of black nationalism, and as such, it reflects the essential postmodern and petty boojwah crap that

frames much of that outlook. Personally, I'm not planning on seeing anymore of Spike's work. *Malcolm X* did me in on Spike a long time ago.

Eleven years ago, I was in a writer's support group in the northwest, and we hosted a meeting with E. Ethelbert Miller of Howard University. I think *School Days* had just come out, and I mentioned that I thought Lee had some promise, but I had only seen the first film *She's Gotta Have It*, which seemed to me to feature many a Woody Allen rip-off. Miller said he'd like to take his camera away from him. I laughed and said I thought that would be a shame, since his flair for cinematography is what holds up much of his work, his ability to compose a shot. Forget direction, storyline, plot, character development, all those things sought after in a film. Miller rejoined this with, "Than let him become a photographer, and stop pretending to be a filmmaker."

This was a harsh and controversial viewpoint back then in the black community, and given the tenor of the times, it's even less popular now. If you say something like this at many a gathering where one of his films is being talked about, people will tell you to "make your own movie."

The tragedy behind this sentiment—aside from its betrayal of the bankruptcy in the aesthetic component of black nationalism—is that it holds dearly to the icons like Lee, with the rationalization that black film makers are "standing on his shoulders." Histrionic and ahistoric, this philosophy ignores the legacy of Oscar Micheaux, or the current contributions of Charles Burnett, Mattie Rich, Julie Dash and John Singleton. Any of these filmmakers, including Rich and Singleton as young as they are, have much more illuminating things to say in their reflections of African American culture than Spike Lee. But Lee is a corporate product, so he is the one who will be pushed forward, and since, as Jimmy Baldwin used to say, there can only be one black artist of any note in the limelight at a time, Lee is the "golden boy."

He is a consumer product, pushed forward in much the same way Ali is featured on the box of Wheaties these days. (You should grab a gander at that advertising campaign, by the way. There's a bio of Ali on the box that drops his opposition to the war in Vietnam and prison time straight down the memory hole, no surprise. I'm always amazed at how craven

these people actually are, though. An act of resistance thirty-two years gone frightens them still.)

Now. Where do we split trails here? First, in your assertion that Lee is a racist. I can cop to the idea that he's a bigot, and that his internalized racism has made stereotypical portrayals of blacks, women, Asians, gays, Italians, Latinos, etc. *ad infinitum* standard fare in his films. His portrayal of Momma sister in *Do the Right Thing*, for example, is the standard "Sapphire" type send-up of black women that existed on the "Chitlin" circuit in black theatre for decades. Nothing new there. Forget "it's a dick thing" from *Mo Betta Blues*. Lee parades his self-hatred in front of the country in a way that must be extremely gratifying to some in corporate film offices, and that's why he's getting the sendup he's getting. He confirms for many in white America their deepest suspicions not only of blacks, but of the urban working poor, and he plays on the internalized fears the working poor have of each other. That's his value as a filmmaker. He's an unconscious creation of institutionalized racism. But a racist? I think it's a lot more complex than that.

As for whether he doesn't measure up to the likes of an Oliver Stone, well, that's a cold shot. I think Lee is at least that bad, but no worse. If you can think of any Oliver Stone film that wasn't a hodge podge of clichés with clever cinematic tricks, I'd like to see it. (That crucifixion motif with Sgt. Elias in *Platoon* is one of the most embarrassing moments in recent U.S. cinematic history that I can think of, and wouldn't you know it would be the scene that is blasted all over the world as a film promo, and wouldn't you know it would be the best film of the year at the Academy Awards that year.) I think that both Stone and Lee are elegant exemplars of the art of late capital, but no more. They rate a mention since they carry so much cultural weight, but if you can rate the silliest, you've got more patience than I do.

MHP



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