

Southside With You: An insufferable account of the Obamas' first date

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Written and directed by Richard Tanne

Southside With You is a fictionalized account of the first date between Barack and Michelle Obama in Chicago in 1989. The film features a racialized view of society where white and black people do not get along nor can they even understand one another. It is also an attempt to humanize and legitimize an individual identified with the massive bailout of Wall Street, drone strikes and “kill lists,” and unprecedented social inequality.

In Richard Tanne’s film, Barack Obama (Parker Sawyers) is a Harvard law student spending his summer working for a law firm in Chicago. Michelle Robinson (Tike Sumpter) works in the same firm, as his supervisor, and the two have plans to attend a community meeting in an impoverished neighborhood on what Robinson insists is not a “date.”

During the first portion of the film, Robinson repeatedly confronts Obama about his intentions, insisting that their outing cannot be a date because that would undermine her position in the law firm, where she already struggles as a black woman. Obama reveals that he tricked Robinson into coming with him several hours early and has made plans for them to attend an art gallery and eat lunch together. Robinson hesitantly agrees, but only if he agrees to be strictly “professional.”

The two eventually make it to the meeting. Robinson is embarrassed when the attendees, with whom Obama has previously worked, refer to her as his “woman.” She overcomes her annoyance, however, after Obama demonstrates his oratorical skills. He gives a rousing speech and helps the assembled overcome their discouragement following the city’s rejection of their proposal to build a community center.

Robinson agrees to accompany Obama to the movies.

They watch Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* no less! Unfortunately, after exiting the theater, the couple cross paths with one of the law firm’s partners, who tells Robinson to “take good care of” Obama. While she is initially appalled and tells Obama she does not ever want to go out with him again, she changes her mind after he buys her favorite kind of ice cream. She rewards him with a kiss. The two return to their respective homes and grin complacently to themselves until the credits roll.

The film is as dreadful as it sounds. First of all, a backward, racialized view of social life is present throughout *Southside with You*. When Obama tells his grandmother over the phone that he is going on a date, she asks whether his date is black. When he answers affirmatively, she answers, “Good.” When the couple arrive at the community meeting, the participants are excited that Obama is dating a “sister” this time. When the pair meet their law firm’s partner outside the movie theater, the white man is hopelessly inept when it comes to interpreting Lee’s film, and Obama comforts him by offering his insight as a young black man. (Of course, Obama is as much white as he is black.)

The foulest expression of this outlook finds expression during dinner when Robinson asks Obama whether he prefers white or black women. Obama explains that he once dated a white girl for two years—someone who offered him great comfort when he was lonely—but once he met her family and saw all of the family pictures on their walls with only white faces in them, he felt the need to leave, despite their generosity and kindness towards him. “I felt like such an outsider,” he complains.

The script for *Southside with You* was based on those details about the 1989 date that are publicly known, combined with the imaginings of writer-director

Richard Tanne. Tanne prepared himself for writing and directing a film about the most powerful political figure in the world by acting in such works as *2001 Maniacs*, *Swamp Shark* and *Mischief Night* and producing and writing *Worst Friends*.

The result is a 90-minute dialogue between two human beings competing to see who can give the most mind-numbingly predictable advice to the other. Obama attempts to psychoanalyze Robinson by probing why she has joined a firm that goes against her ethics, and Robinson in turn chastises Obama for his outburst of hostility when she asks about his father. When he finally explains that his father's life was incomplete, she tells him that "every father's life is incomplete. That's why they have sons—to finish what they started."

The exercise in banality peaks during Obama's speech at the community meeting, where he tells his downtrodden audience that they only need to understand other people better and turn self-interest into "shared" interest. He reminisces about how exciting it was when Chicago elected its first black mayor, Harold Washington. He further tells them that it is not easy to get things done. "'No' is just a word," he claims at one point, "but it means something else when you spell it backwards: 'on.' We need to carry on!" This is followed by ritualized chanting of the phrase "carry on." This is a pathetic effort to maintain illusions in the present system.

Tanne's aim was clearly to provide the future residents of the White House with human characteristics, but the couple's existence throughout *Southside with You* is often far removed from the people around them. The discussions frequently turn to the motives behind their respective decisions to pursue law careers. Both express a desire to help the less fortunate, but they have both joined the firm hoping to make a good living and have somehow lost their way. Obama vaguely (and ominously) states that he "just want[s] to do more," but adds there is also nothing wrong with enjoying life in the meantime.

The audience in the community center are depicted as simple people who are easily swayed by Obama's inspirational rhetoric. This initially angry group swallows his patronizing platitudes without question.

Southside with You has been well-received by the popular media, which has labeled it a "feel-good"

movie that could serve well on a "date night" for couples. The fact that such a stupid, flattering film could be made about the instigator of bloody neo-colonial wars and defender of the plutocracy speaks volumes about the current film industry. Tanne manages to present Obama, who has overseen the greatest transfer of wealth in history to the upper 10 percent of society, as an activist for the impoverished—a courageous man who just wants to do good in the world.

A final note: we have another "biopic" about Obama, *Barry*, directed by Vikram Gandhi coming out soon, to look forward to.



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