

Tribes: A short comedy film mocks identity politics

Ed Hightower
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Someone once famously said it was impossible to dupe *all* the people *all* the time. There's also the famous historical episode, confirmed by various sources, of the Emperor's New Clothes, which turned out to be a case of transparent fraud.

This is by way of introducing a short comedy film, *Tribes* (available online), which dares to make fun of racial politics and its proponents. Hooray!

Obsession with race and gender is a cornerstone of contemporary bourgeois politics. The Democratic Party could not live a day without it. The advocates of identity politics, to the direct benefit of a besieged and wealthy ruling elite, view and distort every social question, from police violence to COVID-19 vaccination, through the lens (or fun-house mirror) of personal identity to obscure the real social processes behind power, privilege and property.

The more clearly that class divisions boil to the surface, the more hysterically, desperately, do the upper-middle class purveyors of identity politics insist that race, gender, sexuality, etc. represent insurmountable barriers to human solidarity.

But a certain shift is underway. As an international upsurge of the working class takes shape, and the decisive social issues and stakes become clearer, identity politics garners a cooler reception including among some layers of the intelligentsia and the artistic community.

One suspects too that a certain "crusade fatigue" may be setting in. Is the world a safer place with Garrison Keillor, Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor and Louis C.K. (to name only a few) and other MeToo witch-hunt victims placed in the stocks for public lambasting? And if this campaign was so life-and-death, why did it evaporate as soon as Joe Biden, with similar accusations hovering over him, started his semi-

conscious crawl toward the White House?

In any case, *Tribes* is a welcome development in this process. Written by satirist Andy Marlatt and directed by Nino Aldi, the film uses a subway train car as a metaphor for society at large.

A multi-ethnic trio—Kevin (Jake Hunter), a Caucasian; Ahmed (Adam Waheed), an Arab-American; and Jemar (DeStorm Power), an African-American—draw guns and stick up the passengers, who comprise a diverse sampling of various ethnicities, nationalities and other identities. As the passengers hand over rings, wallets and watches at gunpoint, Jemar quietly tells an African-American passenger, "Nah, you good," making an exception for one of "his people." Ahmed takes exception to the exception.

Chaos and hilarity ensue.

"The only way this is gonna work is we gotta agree on which associative subgroup to jack without betraying our own self-identity," Jemar preaches at a certain point, as he concludes an academic-style sermon on the subject.

The robbers divide and re-divide the train passengers along an ever-changing axis, sending the confused crime victims scrambling from one end of the car to the other and back again, depending on the robbers' latest dictates and pronouncements. They become absurd: "*Moonlight* over here, *La La Land* over there," "Cat people over here, dog people over there!"

The stick-up artists joust over definitions and sociological nuance while the passengers occasionally chime in with viewpoints of their own.

Questions arise. Can a person have more than one "people?" What about *identifying* with gays as an oppressed group? In assessing ethnicity, how much weight do popular DNA analysis kits carry?

The quick-moving plot, witty dialogue and strong

performances, not to mention the lighting and camerawork, highlight the arbitrary and alienating character of identity politics, giving it a concreteness that only a meritorious artistic work can. *Tribes* leaves the viewer feeling a sense of relief that *not everyone* is fooled (or cowed into submission) by the unrelenting choir of racial and gender and sexual identity obsession.

Tribes has earned a number of awards, including best short film script at the PAGE International Screenwriting awards and best short film at the Just For Laughs comedy film festival. Most recently *Tribes* garnered the most views at the LA Shorts Fest, winning best comedy there as well.

Director Nino Aldi outlined his approach to the script in an interview, saying, “I was drawn to *Tribes* because it deals with a pertinent issue in our society today about separatism and how different we all feel we are from one another. I want to tell this story to show that, in essence, we’re all part of the same tribe.” Actor Adam Waheed commented, “No matter how you separate people based upon age, gender, race, and ethnicity, we are all connected. This is what makes us humans and allows us to understand all that we have in common.”

There are various things the filmmakers haven’t figured out, including, of course, the fact that there are powerful social and economic interests invested in identity politics. But that will come.

The film can be viewed here (and should be). One hopes that the creation and favorable reception of *Tribes* anticipate a broader turn toward more challenging (even political) content in comedy. And it doesn’t hurt one bit to see the contemporary obsession with personal identity taken down a peg.



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