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FILM REVIEW

Get on the Bus

(Drama — Color)

A Sony Pictures Entertainment release from Columbia Pictures of a 15 Black Men production in association with 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks. Produced by Reuben Cannon, Bill Borden, Barry Rosenbush. Executive producer, Spike Lee.

Directed by Spike Lee. Screenplay, Reggie Rock Bythewood. Camera (DuArt color, Technicolor prints), Elliot Davis; editor, Leander T. Sales; music, Terence Blanchard; music supervisor, Alex Steyermark; production design, Ina Mayhew; costume design, Sandra Hernandez; sound (Dolby SR, SDDS), Oliver Moss; assistant director, Michael Ellis; casting, Reuben Cannon and Associates. Reviewed at Sony Studios, Culver City, Oct. 2, 1996. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 120 min.

Rick Richard Belzer
Junior DeAundre Bonds
Flip Andre Braugher
Evan Thomas Sr. Thomas Jefferson Byrd
Jamal Gabriel Casseus
Craig Albert Hall
Xavier Hill Harper
Randall Harry Lennix
Jay Bernie Mac
Wendell Wendell Pierce
Gary Roger Guenveur Smith
Kyle Isaiah Washington
Mike Steve White
Jeremiah Ossie Davis
George Charles S. Dutton

A vital regeneration of a filmmaker's talent as well as a bracing and often very funny dramatization of urgent sociopolitical themes, "Get on the Bus" represents Spike Lee's most satisfying work since "Do the Right Thing." An attempt at creating a microcosm of the black male community via a cross-country trip by 20-odd Los Angeles men to the Million Man March, pic will prove enormously entertaining to black audiences and should get many former Lee fans of all stripes back on board after his disappointing recent outings. Commercial prospects look chipper with sharp marketing.

Shot guerrilla-style in three weeks' time, the \$2.4 million production was entirely financed by 15 black men identified on the end credit crawl. Among those who threw in between \$100,000 and \$200,000 apiece were actors Danny Glover, Wesley Snipes, Will Smith and Robert Guillaume, music mogul Jheryl Busby and attorney Johnnie L. Cochran Jr., as well as Lee, scripter Reggie Rock Bythewood and producer Reuben

Cannon. They should all easily recoup their investments.

More important, however, the subject and circumstances of the shooting have combined to inspire the director in a refreshing way, away from didacticism and pretentiousness and toward a more mature consideration of the way politics, ethics, religion and personal behavior converge in everyday human lives. Lee engages his subject completely with both his head and heart, making it easy for the viewer to do the same.

Within the grand scheme of reinforcing the positive message of the march by underlining the importance of black self-reliance, responsibility and solidarity, Lee and screenwriter Bythewood are also intent upon displaying the vast diversity among black men. As one of the characters remarks, "Hollywood thinks they have us all figured out," that blacks are all about "rap, rape, rob and riot." In its tart, exceedingly humorous way, "Get on the Bus" is very much about showing otherwise.

Filming in Super-16mm in a jittery verite style that proves invigo-



Harry Lennix, left, and Isaiah Washington in Spike Lee's "Get on the Bus," from Sony Pictures Entertainment.

rating rather than annoying, Lee offers no preliminaries, plunking the viewer down with a bunch of men preparing to board the bus in front of the New AME Church in South Central L.A. Organizing the long ride to Washington is the affable George (Charles S. Dutton), and, while few of the men know one another, they quickly begin speaking enthusiastically and singing together as they set out across the desert.

Among them are Jeremiah (Ossie Davis), the oldest man on board, a religious, thoughtful, fun-loving man who didn't quite make it to D.C. three decades before to join Martin Luther King Jr., and whose good-natured demeanor cloaks a life of disappointment; Gary (Roger Guenveur Smith), a light-skinned cop whose policeman father was killed by a black man; Jamal (Gabriel Casseus), a recent convert to Islam; and Xavier (Hill Harper), a camera-wielding film student who is derisively called "Spike Lee Jr." at one point.

There is also an on-the-outs gay couple, straight arrow Randall (Harry Lennix) and former Marine Kyle (Isaiah Washington), the butt of taunts from egotistical actor Flip (Andre Braugher). But the most conspicuous duo consists of long-time absent father Evan Thomas Sr. (Thomas Jefferson Byrd) and his teenage son, Junior (DeAundre Bonds), whom he has shackled to him by 72-hour court order. Needless to say, the other men consider it highly inappropriate that anyone is traveling to the march in chains, but Evan is determined to take his balky son to the event and to make sure he doesn't escape.

Early going consists of considerable raucous good humor mixed with explanations of why each man is going to Washington. When the bus breaks down in the middle of nowhere, they are disgruntled to find that the driver (Richard Belzer) of their replacement vehicle is white; he eventually bails when he finds that, as a Jew, he can't in good conscience drive a bunch of men to hear Louis Farrakhan, whom he considers anti-Semitic.

The issue that proved of overriding concern to whites at the time of the march, that the controversial Farrakhan was its organizer and figurehead, is scarcely discussed by the men on the bus, who are simply motivated by the idea of taking part in what they view as an important historical moment. Lee and

Bythewood are clearly keen to keep the positive messages of the march under active discussion, and they have the men allow a greedy, cigar-smoking Republican car salesman (the enormously entertaining Wendell Pierce) on board just long enough to voice his views before unceremoniously tossing him out.

Thereafter, the tone turns more serious, as the proceedings are marked by an invasion of the bus by some malevolent white Southern cops and an escape attempt by Junior. Climactic event is seen only in brief TV and video clips, and what happens to the men simultaneously approaches theatrical melodrama with its convulsive circumstances and resulting speechifying.

But the positive, righteous and deeply human dynamics of the piece easily carry the day, enough so to marginalize the flaws. Latter would particularly include the fact that, while a good number of the men emerge as vivid, memorable characters, others on the bus don't get any attention at all. Most obvious of these is a young black Muslim in coat and bow tie who never opens his mouth once; as he is conspicuously positioned and photographed, the viewer expects some payoff from his presence, but it never materializes.

In the end, Lee and Bythewood, whose dialogue jumps vibrantly from the actors' tongues, succeed handily in creating their living cross-section, helped no end by the excellent ensemble cast. Vets Davis and Dutton each soar with major monologues, with Davis' recap of his character's misguided life decisions particularly moving. Braugher makes the most of his showy, big-mouthed wannabe movie star, Casseus compellingly relates the conversion of his newly religious young man, and Smith adroitly delineates the many deep conflicts felt by his handsome cop.

As before, Lee revels in his jump cuts and stylistic eccentricities, and they are used to good effect here to keep things lively in the largely constricted setting. Elliot Davis' deliberately rough lensing is in-your-face in a positive sense, and the music, a combination of Terence Blanchard's original score and many pop tunes, including the new "Put Your Heart on the Line," penned by Kenneth Babyface Edmonds and performed by Michael Jackson, keeps things hopping. —Todd McCarthy