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spike lee spins a raucous '70s
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rumbling in the bronx



Boys of *Summer*: Brody, Leguizamo, and Lee do the white thing.

It's the last night of summer, and on a quiet, tree-lined street of modest brick houses in a faraway corner of the Bronx, there is an unmistakable air of menace. Crouched next to a powder-blue '75 Dodge Dart and dressed to the hilt in the garish garb of the disco decade is a circle of actors about to beat up Richie, a wild-haired punk rocker. "Roll sound!" barks director Spike Lee, in front of monitors displaying

three simultaneously shooting cameras. "Real kicks!" he shouts. As Richie is pummeled, fake blood starts spurting out of his mouth; his father comes streaking out of the driveway in his underwear, shooting a gun that gives off a booming echo. He was too late, his son a victim of a mob of neighbors who had decided he was the serial murderer David Berkowitz, a/k/a Son of Sam.

Summer of Sam, which has been dubbed Lee's first white movie, boasts an ensemble cast including Mira Sorvino, Ben Gazzara, Patti Lupone, John Leguizamo, and Adrien Brody. Shot in the north Bronx and Manhattan, it's a sprawling film that tries to make sense out of the social upheaval of the '70s. Like many of Lee's films, it's grounded in historical events, and, demographics aside, Lee claims it as another of his New York stories.

"It was a very crazy time in New York," says Lee, clad in a Knicks jacket and an Aussie field hat. "You had the blackout, Son of Sam,

Plato's Retreat. The Yankees won the World Series. We're trying to get all of that into this film. And something we demonstrated already in *Do the Right Thing*—the heat definitely makes people go over the edge, particularly in New York. With so many people living on top of each other, when it's about 95 degrees, things happen."

The climactic sequence being filmed tonight caps a story that is not so much about a serial killer, but how fear of difference can cause a community to pick a scapegoat. "These guys, when it's all said and done, they're just using the Son of Sam thing to fuck people up they don't like," says Lee. "Anybody that doesn't fit their narrow definition of what is normal is a suspect. These guys were so stupid they put Reggie Jackson on their list of suspects, because he wore #44 and Son of Sam used a .44 caliber gun."

Although there was an early protest against the film led by [continued on page 56]



Adrian Brody (left) and John Leguizamo in a cool moment.

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the father of one of Berkowitz's victims, the people of Throgs Neck have welcomed the shoot. "This is the most time I've spent in the Bronx," says Lee. "People that live in Brooklyn don't go to the Bronx, and vice versa. All the Italian American women around here said if you don't want to eat that catered food, come up, I'll cook you a meal, bake you some cookies."

Summer of Sam's ensemble of neighborhood types are native New Yorkers. Adrien Brody, who stars in Terence Malick's upcoming war flick *The Thin Red Line*, plays Richie, the blond-Mohawked punk rocker who desperately needs to break out of the Bronx mold. "It's a little like growing up in Woodside, like I did, not fitting in," says Brody, lingering outside his trailer with fake blood still caked on his scalp. "Richie was this guy who was taking a radical stand against normalcy. This is a character I could dig into." Brody got to play in a punk band in a raucous CBGB's sequence where real hardcore fans were brought in as extras. "They were spitting all over me," says Brody. "But I think the highlight was dancing to 'Ma Vie en Rose' by Grace Jones in this gay strip club."

Jackson Heights native John Leguizamo brings the manic energy of his white ethnic characters from his Broadway show *Freak*. Lee, who "directed" Leguizamo in the upcoming HBO version of the play, says, "Actually, I just filmed John. He directs himself." Decked out in a funky brown paisley shirt and bell-bottoms, Leguizamo clowns for the crew as they prepare for the beat-down scene. When Lee is away, he jumps into the director's chair and orders the crew around. Leguizamo seems intent on keeping the cast in character, flinging a barrage of adolescent barbs at his costars off camera. In the van hauling the actors back to a local church for a midnight "lunch," he teases Ken Garito for trying to cop a feel of Jennifer Esposito, who plays Brody's girlfriend. Leguizamo's infamous Plato's Retreat sex scene with Mira Sorvino has already been the stuff of tabloid gossip. (Lee, who says he was a virgin during Plato's heyday, scoffs at charges of gratuitous sex: "It was a place they had group sex. How are you going to shoot that? Cut to a squirrel?")

Lee, who originally intended to executive-produce the film, has nurtured *Summer of Sam* since 1995, when he was first presented the script by actors Michael Imperioli and Victor Colicchio at the wrap party for *Girl 6*. The Richie character is inspired by the real-life experiences of Imperioli and Colicchio, who grew up in and around the north Bronx. Colicchio wrote the first draft, which drew on the experiences of members of his punk rock band; they

had been threatened by vigilantes trying to protect the neighborhood from Son of Sam. "When Victor showed me the script," said Imperioli, "I was shocked because I had a cousin who was beaten almost to death by people who thought he was Berkowitz."

Imperioli feels the vigilantes were reacting to alternative lifestyles that began spreading into working-class areas in the '70s. Says Imperioli: "The Vietnam War was over, there's free sex and love. Casual drug use moved into the suburbs. People in the Bronx at the time didn't know what the fuck punks were. They were like aliens. When Jimmy Breslin printed Berkowitz's letters with all these Satanic references, urging him to kill, and then you see these punks, some people made connections."

Imperioli, who had worked with Lee on *Jungle Fever*, *Girl 6*, and *Clockers*, initially hoped to direct the film, but soon felt overwhelmed by the project. "As the script evolved, it became this big New York story including events like the blackout in '77—it was kinda beyond someone who was going to direct for the first time. Besides, Spike is a New York storyteller." Lee has been involved in extensive rewrites of the script for the last year and a half. Jennifer Esposito, whose sister and grandmother lived on the same block as Berkowitz victim Stacy Moskowitz, feels that Lee's involvement does the period and the neighborhood justice. "As someone who's been asked a lot to do Italian stereotypes, like I did in *Kiss Me, Guido*, I think Spike has presented a really broad range of characters."

"There are still folks who, after *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*, think I don't have white characters in my films," says Lee. "Then the African Americans are going to say I'm a sellout because the movie doesn't have a black theme." Lee felt he could do *Summer of Sam* not just because he lived through the era, but because he knew the characters well. Lee, who said his was the first black family to move into Brooklyn's Cobble Hill in the '70s, says, "I don't think there's anybody in this script that I haven't met or I'm not familiar with. One thing I will admit that was alien to me was punk rock music. I had to do serious research on that. I like the energy, and their conviction that even if they can't sing or play instruments, they still have something to say. The fact that they're not musicians doesn't stop them from expressing themselves."

Bristling at the pretty vacant tone of '70s revivalism, Lee seems determined to let the '70s express themselves. "Nowadays, when people look at the decade, they want to make fun of it as a joke—the bell-bottoms, the hair and the disco music. . . . But I'm telling you, when you're from that era, and you were in it, that shit was slammin'." **V**