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Young Men Making History

By Dwight Brown

The lack of Black filmmakers in Hollywood is evident. This perplexing situation could lead one to suspect that film schools across the nation are experiencing a death of young, talented, upcoming Black filmmakers. But that's not necessarily true. Take for example, Spike Lee.

He's a gifted writer, director and editor who has just completed N.Y.U.'s grueling graduate filmmaking program. His thesis movie, "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barber Shop: We Cut Heads," got him an A for his efforts. The film also has been accepted by the film society of Lincoln

B.A.: Where did you start your film education?

S.L.: I got my B.A. from Morehouse in Atlanta, Georgia in '79. My degree is in mass communications. I was really interested in film then, but they only handled super 8 there, so I really couldn't do that much. But from there I went to N.Y.U.'s film school.

B.A.: How did you get into N.Y.U.? Did you submit some kind of film?

S.L.: N.Y.U. is different from other film schools, because you can come from any kind of media: writing, photography, anything. So I showed them some of my writing,



Young partners Joe Ballard and Zack Homer (played by Horace Long and Monty Ross) welcome you into their shop for a cut, shave or to play the numbers in Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads.

Center's Museum of Modern Art's New Directors/New Films Series and by Filmex, a Los Angeles film festival. Spike will exhibit his film and answer questions on a brief college tour this month.

With only a few role models to follow, and an obvious up hill climb, how did this man come so far? Black American: Where are you from?

Spike Lee: From Washington Avenue, Brooklyn.

B.A.: What gave you the "film bug." What made you want to become a part of the entertainment industry?

S.L.: I guess it started with my mother. When I was four or five years old she used to drag me to Broadway plays. I remember once she took me to see "The King and I," with Yul Brenner. But she had to take me home because I was so scared that I started crying. And my father is a great jazz bassist, Billy Lee. So, I've just always been exposed to the arts.

and some of the photographs I'd taken.

Other schools want to see a film, plus you have to get some kind of astronomical score on the Q.R.E.'s (Graduate Record Examination — often a prerequisite for graduate school entry.) And those tests are bias. So you know they are not going to get any Black people in those schools.

B.A.: What was student life like at N.Y.U.?

S.L.: Ernest Dickison, my cinematographer on "Joes..." and myself were the only Blacks in the school. So I knew things were going to be rough. In fact I almost got kicked out of school my first year of their three year program. At the end of each year, the faculty sits down and screens your film. That's how you get a grade. My film was called, "The Answer." It's about a Black screenwriter who's hired to direct a \$50 million remake of "Birth of a Nation." When the faculty saw it, they were appalled.

They couldn't believe that I would dare to assault D.W. Griffith, the father of cinema. They had a fit, and I almost got the boot. But it was one of the better films of that year.

B.A.: Then what happened?

S.L.: My next film was "Sarah." It was my first synch-sound film. It's adapted from a short story, by Martin Hamer. It takes place in Harlem on Thanksgiving day. It's basically about a family. It's a nice little film, but I think I should have written my own script.

Being a Black filmmaker is a heavy burden. People think that everything you do must represent every Black person in the United States. That's too much of a burden for Black film to carry. I really can't blame them though, because there is so little Black film.

B.A.: What gave you the idea for "Joe's..."?

S.L.: Funny enough, I had the title of the film long before I had anything else. I knew I wanted to do something about barbershops, because I was always intrigued by them. Barbershops in the Black community are like meeting points. Men come and talk about sports, sex, the hottest things, whatever. I wanted to do something about the numbers, because that's another Black Institution. And, I always liked the gangsters genre. So I tried to combine those three and make it entertaining too.

B.A.: How did you finance your film?

S.L.: First of all, when you're a film student at N.Y.U. you work under an agreement they have set up with equipment rental companies. The equipment I used was free. Normally it would have cost me \$65,000. So I had that going for me already. I was a teaching assistant,

so I didn't have to pay tuition and I got a stipend. I used money I would have used for my tuition on my film. The Brooklyn chapter of the Delta Sigma Thetas saw my film "Sarah." They liked it and they gave me \$1,000. The Brooklyn Arts and Cultural association has a film search program, and they gave me \$500.

Every graduate student is entitled to a guaranteed student loan, so I took my \$5,000 loan and put it towards the film. And my grandmother, who put me through

Morehouse and N.Y.U. made up the difference.

When the film was finally finished it cost \$13,000. But I was determined that it would look the best it could, for that kind of money. And it does because Ernest Dickison, my cinematographer and I gave it all we had. Oh sure, there were other films in the school which had backers who put \$30,000 to \$45,000 in student films. But ours came out the best. Even the people at the lab who developed the film, wondered how we could get such great quality out of what we had.

B.A.: Have you found a distributor for "Joe's..."?

S.L.: Yes, First Run Features will release it.

B.A.: So what is your next project?

S.L.: I'm working on a film about a homecoming at a Black college. It's somewhat autobiographical and about my days at Morehouse.

B.A.: What's your ultimate ambition?

S.L.: I just want to be given the opportunity to make films. Because I know I can make good film.

B.A.: How and where can people see your films?

S.L.: "The Answer," and "Sarah" are part of the Black Filmmakers Catalogue. They are available for rent. People can write or call: The Black Filmmaker's Foundation, Centre Street — NYNC TU-26th Floor, N.Y., N.Y., 10007, (212) 619-2480.

And I hope that people will come see "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads," at the New Directors/New Films series. It will be screened March 26th at 8:30 p.m., March 27th, 3:30 p.m., at the 57th Street Playhouse and tickets can be purchased through the Museum of Modern Art or by writing to the Film Society of Lincoln Center, 140 W. 65th St., N.Y.C. 10023, Att: New Directors/New Films Series.

For Distribution contact: First Run Features, 144 Bleecker St., New York City 10012 (212) 673-6881