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'Hollywood outsider' finds success in film

By RICHARD FREEDMAN

The "Hollywood mystique" about how movies are made has been a deterrent to young filmmakers in general, and young black filmmakers in particular.

This is the contention of Spike Lee, whose remarkable hour-long "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads" is featured as part of the Newark Museum's Black Film Festival, tonight at 7:30 at the New Jersey Institute of Technology's Van Houten Library Theater, 99 Summit St. And Lee, who is young—he's only 25—and black, intends to do something about the Hollywood mystique.

"Being a filmmaker is like anything else," he says. "You can learn to be one. But since its inception Hollywood has carried on as if it's all such magic that only a chosen few can practice it. I'm trying to demystify it, make it accessible to more people.

"When I was showing 'Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop' in Atlanta, the black people in the audience assumed I'd written a play, not a movie. They'd heard of black playwrights, but never a black filmmaker. After it was over, they came up to me and said: 'That was good—just like a regular movie!' Heaven knows what else they were expecting, but movie-making is so mystical to them."

It's hardly mystical to Lee, a recent graduate of NYU's film school, where "Barbershop" was his senior thesis.

It's already won an Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Merit Award for the best student dramatic film of the year, a similar Mobil Oil Award, and has been shown in the Museum of Modern Art's New Directors/



Young filmmaker Spike Lee speaks at the Black Film Festival tonight in Newark

New Films series; at Filmex, and the San Francisco and Atlanta Film Festivals.

It differs from the standard Hollywood product in two essential ways: Every frame of it is riveting to watch, and it cost only \$13,000 to make.

Lee admits it cost so little because he had access to NYU equipment and its special arrangements with the Screen Actors Guild while he was working for his Master of Fine Arts degree.

Even so, his grandmother helped

finance the film, and his father, renowned bassist and jazz composer Bill Lee, wrote its haunting blues score. The Lees, including Spike's three brothers and sister, are an artistic family generally, the only question being which art each of them will specialize in.

The setting for Spike Lee's taut—but frequently very funny—film is a barbershop in Brooklyn's black Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood where Joe, the proprietor, collects for the numbers racket. When he's polished off, gangland fashion for some misdemeanor, his partner Zack (Monty Ross) takes over the shop.

Zack is happily married to lovely social worker Ruth (Donna Bailey), and on her urging he has taken in a troubled teenager, Teapot (Stuart Smith) to help clean up the shop. But there are hardly any customers to clean up after, so Zack and Teapot spend most of the day playing checkers.

Then the sinister numbers racketeer Lovejoy (Tommie Hicks) arrives on the scene with an offer Zack can hardly refuse. Either Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop resumes business in a numbers front, or it goes out of business entirely, with Zack joining his former partner at the bottom of the East River.

Posing as a legitimate businessman who is merely trying to help the black community, Lovejoy memorably defines the numbers racket as "the poor man's stockmarket"—a position Lee tends to endorse.

"The numbers are such an institution, most people don't even think of them as illegal. Lovejoy is an honorable man with his own code of ethics—if you don't mess with him, there are no problems. He's a black nationalist gangster, a rhetoric machine, who's oddly sincere in everything he says.

"Gangster movies have always been my favorite genre, and I wanted to make one with tongue in cheek. But above all, I wanted to make a film about black barbershops because after the church, they're the real congregating point in black communities.

"For my gangster, I was thinking of those heroin dealers in Harlem who are folk heroes because they hand out free turkeys on Thanksgiving—never mind that they're killing the community the rest of the year."

* * *

With the sensitive photography of Newark cameraman Ernest Dickerson, Lee has caught the ambiance of a real barbershop—he filmed in one for four consecutive Sundays, paying the barber \$100 each time—and the mean streets surrounding it.

So it's no surprise he considers the film his own, black version of Martin Scorsese's Italian "Mean Streets." Yet his favorite directors are Billy Wilder ("he's funny but not slapstick, there's always some fiber, some substance, some real black humor to his movies"), and George Miller, whose "The Road Warrior" and final segment of "Twilight Zone: The Movie" have convinced Lee he's "the best action director I've seen in a long time."

Miller's success, in fact, Lee takes as supporting his thesis about Hollywood. So far from being a "born filmmaker," the Australian director started out as a physician.

As for "going Hollywood" himself, Lee would like to direct big-budget movies, but can't see himself leaving New York to do so. Currently he's negotiating for a film he's writing called "Homecoming" about Homecoming Weekend in a Southern black college



Horace Long and Monty Rose welcome customers for haircuts, shaves or to play the numbers in Spike Lee's Academy award-winning film, 'Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads,' showing tonight at NJIT

(Lee has a bachelor's degree in Mass Communications from Atlanta's Morehouse College).

"It's a comedy-drama. I want to make you laugh, and I want to make you cry. It won't be an 'Animal House' or a 'Porky's,' but it'll be funny. My father's written half the music for it already, and I want to use all the talented people I can find who haven't made it yet.

"You know, Hollywood long ago discovered they don't have to make black exploitation films. If they just put out good films, black people will go.

"At first the exploitation flicks were successful because we were so

happy to see black faces on the screen that we didn't mind if the movies were devoid of plot or production values. Then we got tired of them. And 'The Wiz' didn't help, either.

"But now, with Coppola's 'Cotton Club' movie in the works, and with Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy such superstars, maybe there's some new hope for a real black presence on screen."

"Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads" will be shown at 7:30 tonight along with "Transmagnificent Dambamulality" and "The Performed Word," and will be introduced by Spike Lee. Heralding a vibrant new talent, it's a film not to be missed.