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Author(s)	Doris G. Worsham
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'Joe's Barbershop' a cut above the budget

Reviewed by Doris G. Worsham

Tribune Staff Writer

The barbershop is the centerpiece of "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads," the master's thesis film of New York University Film School graduate Spike Lee.

Barber shops in black communities are often popular gathering spots for assorted neighborhood types who come in for more than a hair cut.

"Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop," which was written, edited and directed by Lee, is no different. It will be shown tomorrow at 4 p.m. at the Ghirardelli Square Cinema in San Francisco as part of the San Francisco International Film Festival's New Director's series.

The 25-year-old Lee tosses in a few humorous vignettes: one customer talks about his funny dreams of white persecution; two Jehovah's witnesses drop in to sell their Watchtower magazines and to declare that "the world end is coming to an end."

But the film begs for more of that activity and more interaction between the barber and his customers. The comedy-drama, "Five on the Black Hand Side," superbly illustrated the barber shop as a microcosm of a black neighborhood. But that was a big-budget film.

Considering Lee's resources, the inexperience of some of the actors and the predictability of the plot, "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop" is often funny, dramatic, poignant and telling about black social and political attitudes.

The bulk of the film focuses on barber Zachariah Homer, stiffly played by Monty Ross, trying to make an honest living after the murder of his partner, Joe. It seems that Joe tried to double-cross the local numbers racket kingpin, Nicholas Lovejoy. The barber shop numbers game stopped after Joe's death.

Tommie Hicks, a fine New York actor, effectively turns Lovejoy into a "rhetoric machine." Hicks decries the lack of black entrepreneurship but rationalizes his illegal business with such rhetoric as "Jews stick together ... but when a black man does the same thing they're told get ... out of there — he becomes a threat."

Hicks urges Ross to open his shop for the "harmless" numbers operation, which Hicks' calls "the poor man's stock market." Hicks adds that he has "sent kids to college and enabled families to move out of here — I make dreams real."

Convinced by Hicks's persuasiveness, Ross agrees to the questionable deal and his once-empty shop becomes a thriving business, despite his wife's disapproval and his own initial misgivings.

But the prosperity of his shop leads to the inevitable temptation and, later, a self-examination by Ross about his life, ethics and marriage.

Lee's direction is crisp and there are very few wasted moments in this 60-minute film. Ernest Dickerson's photography vividly captures the graffiti-covered milieu of the five-square mile neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The film's fine lyrical score was composed by Spike Lee's father, the renowned jazz bassist Bill Lee, who employed some of New York's top musicians for the soundtrack, including tenor saxman George Coleman and guitarist Ted Dunbar.

Adding to the film's appeal is the spunky performance of Stua Smith as a precocio truant working par time in Ross' barbe shop who wants to b come photographer.