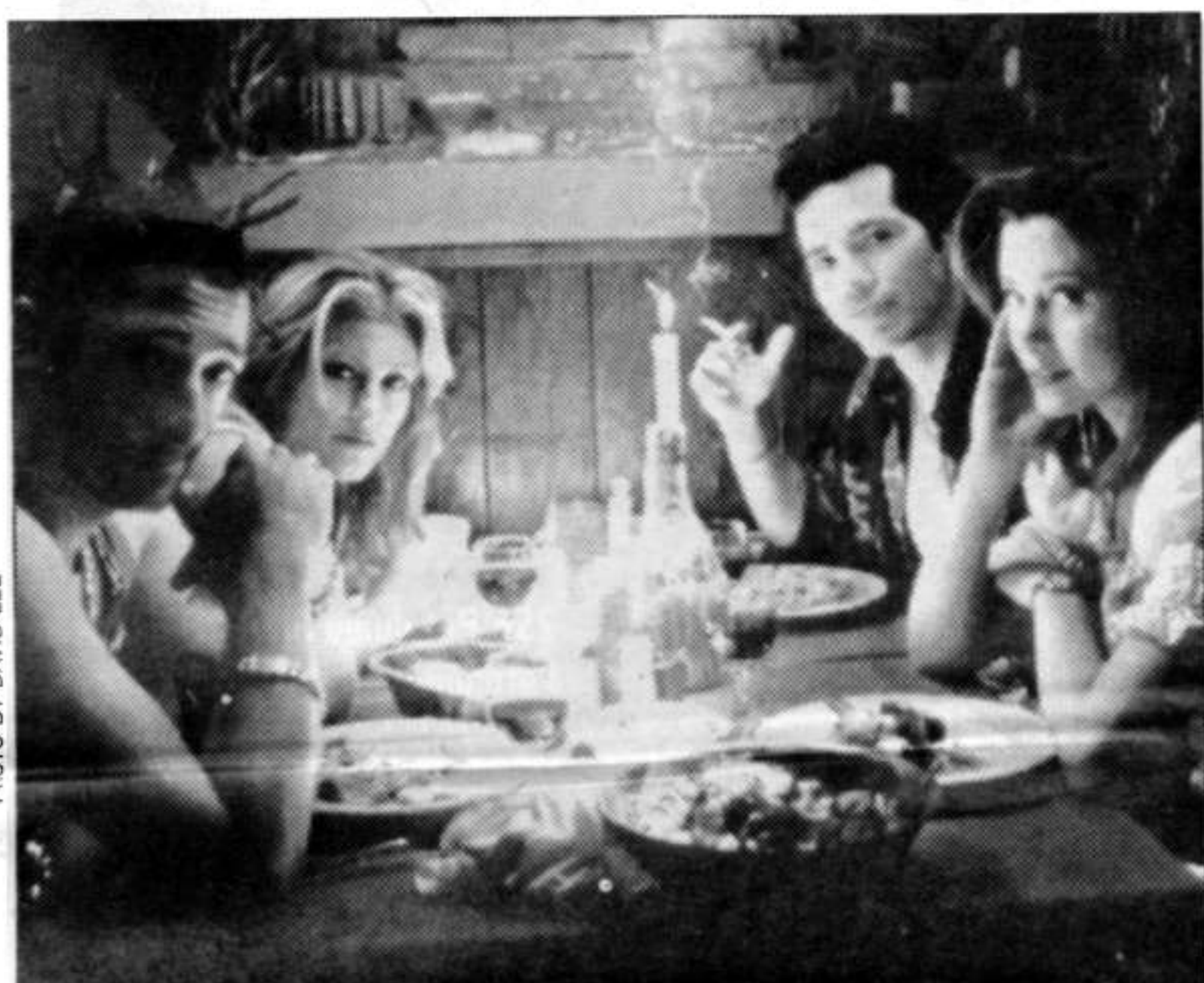


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PHOTO BY DAVID LEE



Sam I am: Ritchie (Adrien Brody), Ruby (Jennifer Esposito), Vinny (John Leguizamo), and Dionna (Mira Sorvino), from left, are part of the ambiguous whole that is *Summer of Sam*.

Sex 'n' violence

Summer of Sam is held together

by Krazy Glue. **By Alvin Lu**

H EY, WHAT happened to Spike Lee? Ten years after the long, hot summer of *Do the Right Thing*, the Spike Lee that people mostly talk about—if they aren't talking about the Knicks Fan who, like Lil' Penny (hey, what happened to Penny Hardaway?), is only a cartoon—is still the explosively emergent Spike Lee, the Air Jordan—campaign genius who came of age with Nike and Public Enemy. In that heady moment of hip-hop's greatest hubris, one could claim by sheer force of will that hype was revolution and, following Run DMC plugging their Adidas, endorsements were uplifting, starting with the shoes and moving up to that X—or was it X—hat on top of your head.

Even now I hear kids from (fill in the blank with underrepresented category) echoing Big Daddy Kane in "Burn Hollywood Burn": "Let's make our own movies like Spike Lee." Well, *duh*, but there was always something more to Lee than black ambition, wasn't there? Were those films—*She's Gotta Have It*, *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*—just long business cards for the director that cannily worked the blur between advertising and agitprop? And if that's the principal legacy Lee's left—independent film as entrepreneurialism, consciousness as by-product—then he has a lot to answer for.

Malcolm X's spirituality came as a surprise. Lee almost seemed forced into it, given his subject, but it also suggested new interior directions for the filmmaker. And the second, post-

X phase of Lee's career has seemed to be about fulfilling those possibilities. Problem is, as with all American second acts, who noticed ... uh, whatever those films were.

Summer of Sam, despite being a "white" (or Italian American, rather) film, feels like an echo of the old hysteria. It borrows *Do the Right Thing*'s multicharacter, simmering neighborhood narrative structure and during its filming it even won a bit of controversy. But it's a strange echo, or echoes. Given the period and soundtrack, the comparison with *Boogie Nights* seems both inevitable and self-conscious. Factor in the fashionably oversaturated art direction and the (also inevitable) evocation of Scorsese—not only in the neighborhood but also in the .44-wielding '70s New York atmosphere—and all this seems like a curiously random choice of elements to pastiche.

The familiar result is many scintillating parts that add up to a messy, ambiguous whole, held together by Krazy Glue. Tabloid frenzy—the use of *Post* headlines, newsreel montage, all the grotesque Son of Sam-in-action scenes—is alive and well here, under the wing of Lee's gift for headline art. John Leguizamo in the lead is very likable, versatile, and funny. The sex scenes are so many and so vivid and so outré that one thinks that '77 wasn't only the year Lee decided to become a filmmaker, as he's been saying in interviews; maybe it was the summer he lost his virginity, too.

Underneath it all, holding it together, is the weird stuff. Maybe it all comes down to what I think David

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Thomson said about Scorsese and particularly *Raging Bull*, that the subtext is all about fear of women and fascination with homosexuality. *Sam* does seem, despite (or because of) its bloat, very much a personal film. In its wandering narrative, with the Son as a kind of wandering ghost of the times, it possesses the intimacy and odd quirkiness of a private remembrance, even as it, clumsily, tries to secure these details to a large (very large: entire NYC) social canvas.

Orchestrating the Son of Sam's slo-mo red-carpet arrest, media bulbs flashing, with a neighborhood lynching and the Who blasting at max volume seems just like the thing to do for a climax. What the hell it all means, in the end, who knows? Another thing that's remained intact here is Lee's penchant for contradiction. In the opening introduction by Jimmy Breslin, it's made clear that this is a tale of, and a kind of tribute to, a different New York, a tougher, grittier one, unrecognizable in today's theme park. Perhaps part of the motivation for making this film is to recall that lost continent. But, in doing so in such superciliously glitzy fashion, hasn't Lee done to New York exactly what New York's done to itself, turned its corrugated history into an empty exercise in attitude? ■

'Summer of Sam' *opens Fri/2 at Bay Area theaters. See Movie Clock, page 115, for times and locations.*