

Document Citation

Title	Piercing 'Girls' a window to civil rights movement
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Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1997 Oct 24
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	F2, F4
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	4 little girls, Lee, Spike, 1997

Piercing 'Girls' a Window to Civil Rights Movement

MOVIE REVIEW

By KENNETH TURAN
TIMES FILM CRITIC

From "Do the Right Thing" to "Get on the Bus," director Spike Lee has made some of the most hard-edged and unsettling American films on racism and its effects. Yet none has been as moving as this, his first feature-length documentary, simply titled "4 Little Girls."

Lee's first short feature, "Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads," was a documentary, and the desire to bear witness to history has often been a factor in what he's done, from the stately Denzel Washington-starring "Malcolm X" biography through possible projects on baseball stars Jackie Robinson and Curt Flood.

The best of documentaries—and "4 Little Girls" is one of them—

often have a piercing, heart-rending quality that insists we look with fresh eyes at material we think we know. Made for HBO, which will broadcast it during Black History Month early next year, Lee's film tells a story of such power that even those who think it sounds familiar will find themselves completely involved.

On one level "4 Little Girls" details the Sept. 15, 1963, bombing of Birmingham, Ala.'s 16th Street Baptist Church that claimed four young victims who were attending Sunday school in the building's basement. "At that moment," TV anchor Walter Cronkite says, "America understood the real nature of the hate that was preventing integration, particularly in the South, but also throughout America. This was the awakening."

One of the film's aims, which it realizes, is to make these four girls, ages 11 through 14, into real people whose absence we feel as much as the parents, relatives, friends and

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neighbors who are interviewed about their loss. It is especially shocking, somehow, to see the girls' childhood friends, not frozen in time like the victims, but now adults in their 40s still haunted by what went on.

But "4 Little Girls" goes further. With the ability to smoothly interweave the personal and the political, it serves as a window into the entire civil rights movement, a look at a society that needed to change and at the people who saw to it that change took place.

Though known as "The Magic City" for its rapid industrialization, Birmingham also was, journalist Howell Raines explains, a place with a long history of labor violence involving dynamite as well as enough institutional racism for Dr. Martin Luther King to call it "the most thoroughly segregated city in the country."

Paralleling its stories of those girls growing up, Lee uses people like historian Taylor Branch, author of the landmark "Parting the Waters," and civil rights veterans like the Rev. Wyatt T. Walker and Andrew Young to

describe how the movement came to the city and what kind of reception people like public safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, "the walking *id* of Birmingham," prepared for them. It also can't resist current footage of former Alabama Gov. George Wallace, physically wasted and apparently troubled by his segregationist past.

Mostly, however, "4 Little Girls" is blessedly straightforward and restrained, confident enough of the heart-breaking nature of its story to relate it with a dispassion that is always effective. Lee and his collaborators have also prepared with thoroughness, interviewing nearly 50 people on camera, utilizing more than 20 archive sources and striking just the right opening note with Joan Baez's searing version of Richard Farina's "Birmingham Sunday" on the soundtrack.

Those interviews, all conducted by Lee himself, are the core of the film. The girls' families especially seem to find a kind of empathetic solace in the director's presence that allows them to unburden themselves, to tell their painful

stories with honesty and dignity.

In contrast to some of Birmingham's white leaders, who talk of the early '60s as a bucolic time, the city's African Americans remember the debilitating pain of segregation. Christopher McNair, for instance, tells of taking his daughter, Denise, later one of the bombing victims, to a department store and trying to explain to her why she couldn't get a sandwich at the segregated lunch counter.

"It was as if the whole world of betrayal had fallen on her," he says slowly, adding that telling her the facts of racism was as difficult a moment as seeing her in death after the bombing. More than the twisty tale of how the church bomber was finally brought to justice, more than the way the violence of the incident galvanized the civil rights movement, moments like this father's terrible sadness have an indelible impact.

Scenes like that are also a powerful argument for seeing "4 Little Girls" during its current theatrical engagement. While all credit has to go to HBO for its continued support of excellent documentaries, only on

a big screen does the cathartic effect of a film like this play out to maximum effect.

■ **Unrated.** *Times guidelines: brief but disturbing glimpses of photographs of the victims in the morgue.*

'4 Little Girls'

A 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks production, released by HBO. Director Spike Lee. Producers Spike Lee, Sam Pollard. Cinematographer Ellen Kuras. Editor Sam Pollard. Music Terence Blanchard. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes.

■ *In limited release. Laemmle's Music Hall, Beverly Hills, (310) 274-6869; Magic Johnson Theatre, Baldwin Hills, (213) 290-5900.*