



Winter 1-24-1996

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Recommended Citation

Lindberg, Tim, "Spike Lee Acclaimed Black Filmmaker To Probe Race, Class Issues at IWU, Feb. 1" (1996). *News and Events*. 6555.
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Jan. 24, 1996

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Spike Lee

Acclaimed Black Filmmaker

To Probe Race, Class Issues at IWU, Feb. 1

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.-- Academy Award-nominated director and screenwriter Spike Lee, generally considered one of Hollywood's most important filmmakers, will discuss issues of race and class in America at Illinois Wesleyan University's Shirk Center at 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 1.

The Shirk Center is located at 302 E. Emerson St., Bloomington. Admission is free, and Lee's presentation is open to the public.

The critically acclaimed film, "Clockers," released last September, marked the eighth feature movie in the filmmaker's 10-year career.

At 39-years-old, Lee is considered the "grandfather" of the Black New Wave of American cinema, an influential group of young African-American filmmakers including Jon Singleton ("Boyz In The Hood," "Poetic Justice"), Albert and Allen Hughes ("Menace II Society," "Dead Presidents"), and Carl Franklin ("Devil In A Blue Dress," "One False Move").

According to *Black Enterprise* magazine, Lee's "ability to make films on his terms has in many ways been a more significant contribution to black filmmaking than the films themselves."

"Clockers" was the first screenplay Lee directed that he didn't write. He took over the film when director Martin Scorsese and actor Robert De Niro, left to work on "Casino."

According to "The San Diego Union-Tribune," he shifted the emphasis of "Clockers" from the homicide detectives to the streets, and instilled the movie with a touch of hope.

"We wanted this film to be somewhat optimistic," he said. "A lot of those films that I've talked about go on about young, black men dying: 'oh, it's tough in the 'hood. We're never gonna get out. There's no hope. We're all gonna be in prison.' I don't agree with that."

With "Clockers," Lee said he hoped to "put the final nail in the coffin- so we could bury this genre, this black exploitation, shoot 'em up, drug, rap genre. Lay it to rest."

Lee is displeased by some movies by other black filmmakers, who he believes often show a narrow slice of the African-American experience, according to "The San Diego Union-Tribune."

"Everything does not take place in the 'hood' and all of our stories are not just about black males selling drugs," Lee said in an interview with the San Diego newspaper. "If you keep telling the same story over again and again, how relevant is it?"

Lee started making amateur movies at age 20. After graduating from Atlanta's Morehouse University with a degree in communications, he received a master of fine arts degree in film production at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 1982.

"She's Gotta Have It" (1986), a comedy about a woman and her three lovers--Lee's first feature film--earned best new film honors at the Cannes Film Festival. The low-budget film was a commercial success, earning more than \$7 million.

"School Daze", Lee's second feature, "brought Lee notoriety as a provocateur within the black community," according to *Contemporary Authors*. "Prominent blacks protested that Lee had produced an unfavorable depiction of blacks, and others."

By this time, however, Lee was no stranger to controversy. His student film, "The Answer," which told the story of a young black screenwriter assigned to do a remake of D.W. Griffith's silent film classic, "Birth of a Nation," which deals with the Civil War and race relations, made him the center of controversy at NYU.

He made a major step forward in critical and popular acclaim with the racially-charged drama "Do The Right Thing" (1989), in which, Frankie Faison, a 1971 IWU graduate, played the role of Coconut Sid.

More controversy surrounded "Do The Right Thing," a film in which the death of a young black man leads to the burning and looting of a pizzeria, and the movie "Malcolm X" (1992). However, according to "The Independent," a British newspaper, it was these two films which cemented his reputation.

Lee is finishing his next movie, entitled "Girl 6," a comedy about a phone-sex line, and has acquired the rights to a story about Jackie Robinson, who broke baseball's color line in 1947.

In addition to feature films, Lee has produced commercials for Diet Coke, Levi's, Jesse Jackson and a Nike spot featuring basketball star Charles Barkley, currently of the Phoenix Suns. He also produced the famous Nike "Air Jordan" commercials, which starred Lee's "Mars Blackmon" character from "She's Gotta Have It."

He also has produced and directed videos for renowned artists such as Miles Davis, Tracy Chapman, Branford Marsalis, Anita Baker, Public Enemy and Arrested Development.

Lee has authored five books on the the production of his films, and taught a course in film at Harvard University 1992-93. He is a trustee of Morehouse University.

Lee's film production company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, a newly established record company and a retail store, Spike's Joint, are all based in Brooklyn, where he resides.

Lee is also writing a pilot for a CBS television network drama called, "Slim's Table."

Feature Films

"She's Gotta Have It" (1986)
"School Daze" (1988)
"Do The Right Thing" (1989)
"Mo' Better Blues" (1988)
"Jungle Fever" (1991)
"Malcolm X" (1992)
"Crooklyn" (1994)
"Clockers" (1995)

Books

Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerrilla Filmmaking (1987)
Uplift The Race: The Construction of School Daze (1988)
Do The Right Thing: A Spike Lee Joint (1989)
Mo' Better Blues (1990)
5 For 5 (1991)
By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X (1992)