

Casts=Ruby Dee

Spike Lee



Comedy, Drama

runtime=120minutes

Release Year=1989



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It's sometimes difficult to separate artists' public statements from the work they're commenting on, or to ignore the politically charged aura a film generates. There's always that nagging feeling that a movie's point must be sussed out, that the real intentions of the filmmaker must be understood. But in retrospect- and despite director Spike Lee's rhetoric- Do the Right Thing may not be as profound as previously thought. While it should be applauded for taking on the subject of race without Hollywood's usual heavy-handedness, simply presenting a topic doesn't automatically mean anything is actually being said about that topic.

Whatever problems there are with the content, Do the Right Thing is still great filmmaking. It's a vibrant, passionate, funny movie, and like a true work of art, it both surprises and provokes. It's technically audacious and features one of the most successful displays of stifling, suffocating heat ever put on it does it without being languid itself. The dialogue is fast paced, the characters energetic, and the camera-work unpredictable, full of clever pans and Twilight Zone angles. And, except for the always excruciating Martin Lawrence, the performances are uniformly good throughout. Lee

also manages to out-Altman Altman by presenting a large cast of characters without it ever becoming confusing or disjointed.

Taking place over the course of one scorching day in Bedford-Stuyvesant, most of the action occurs in and around a pizzeria run by Sal (Danny Aiello) and his sons Pino and Vito (John Turturro, Richard Edson). But the entire neighborhood is featured as the film intercuts between various exchanges, many of them tinged with racial overtones: while Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito) challenges a white tenement owner when he feels slighted, down the street three men debate the right of a Korean to own a variety store in "their" neighborhood.

There are personal moments as well: Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) continually attempts to soften Mother Sister's (Ruby Dee) opinion of him, while Mookie (Lee) juggles time between his job at Sal's and his increasingly aggravated girlfriend (Rosie Perez). Although Lee doesn't have the time to make all his characters three-dimensional, he avoids sentimentalizing or demonizing any one group; there are both blacks and whites who are sympathetic (Sal, Da Mayor) and troublesome (Pino, Radio Raheem). Only the Korean storeowner played by Steven Parks is a blatant caricature. (Asians seem to get short shrift no matter who is behind the camera.) Presiding over the action is disc jockey Senor Love Daddy (Samuel L. Jackson). Like Wolfman Jack in American Graffiti, he provides ongoing background music, as well as periodic commentary.

Eventually, the heat and personal tensions culminate in an explosion of violence centered on Sal's pizzeria. The violence escalates after one of the characters is killed. It's at this point that the film becomes problematic. The murder is supposed to be a tragedy, meant to provoke outrage in the audience. But the killing of a fictional character isn't enough in itself to warrant a reaction. It's not that audiences are jaded, but drama usually elicits judgement based on the narrative alone. If a character is a jerk, his death won't elicit much of a response. Like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, *Do the Right Thing* relies too heavily on the personal baggage audiences are supposedly bringing to the film. Drawing on contemporary events and feelings may be provocative, but it dates the film and makes for poor drama. The reactions of Mookie and Mother Sister to the murder may have been understandable to a disenfranchised group, but in the context of the plot they appear unmotivated, almost random.

The somewhat ambiguous nature of the movie could easily be trumpeted as a selling point. Lee doesn't want to hold your hand; he wants you to make up your own mind. But there is a fine line between "bravely ambiguous" and "maddeningly directionless." While Oliver Stone continually has been pilloried for his blatantly didactic films, there is something to be said for being recklessly personal and taking a stand. Lee made a movie about racism; but we're so starved for challenging works, for thematically mature movies, we've embraced a film that ultimately says nothing more than "racism is bad" and "no one person or group is to blame."

The simplistic ideals of Do the Right Thing are most evident in four scenes: 1) Love Daddy lists practically every major black musician from the last fifty years; 2) in an overly contrived sequence, Mookie gets Pino to admit that his cultural heroes are all black (Magic Johnson, Eddie Murphy, and Prince) 3) Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan are all mentioned; 4) the words "Tawana Told the Truth" appear spray painted on a wall (a reference to the Tawana Brawley controversy of 1987. No differentiation is made between the listed artists, and no context is given for the black leaders mentioned. These aren't explorations of racially-charged issues, it's just name dropping.

Despite its flaws, Do the Right Thing provokes discussion. It's an impossible film to dismiss. Spike Lee's subsequent career has turned out to be a disappointment, but Do the Right Thing, along with Malcolm X, represent Lee at his creative peak.

Do the right thing was a really good movie. I wasn't really sure what to expect out of it. After watching it i got a really good idea of how race is still a big issue in many parts of the US.

DO the right thing is about an inner city community that faces with race day to day. From the abusive cops to the pizza's down the street. It focuses on the idea that even in such a small tight community were everyone knows one another there is still racism. I recommend this movie to anyone who enjoys a good comedy with a point. This movie was not only funny it really got its points of view on race and the way of life in the city really is. It helps people like me view what they go through day in and day out. Do the right thing is a movie that everyone should rent and watch. I guarantee that you will enjoy it.

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