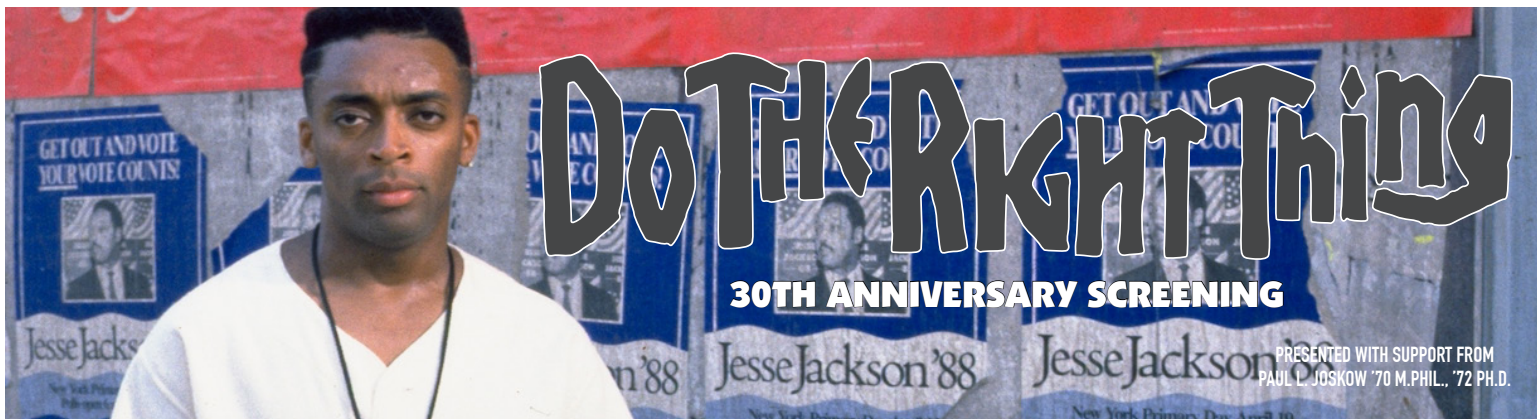


TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

THURSDAY
SEPTEMBER 19, 2019
7 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

AND THE DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA FILM SERIES PRESENT



Like many other Spike Lee “joints,” *DO THE RIGHT THING*—which opened in the U.S. on June 30, 1989—incisively depicts America’s continuing problems with race. The film examines the complex and uneasy racial dynamic of a predominantly black neighborhood that still feels the effects of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Lee views this from three perspectives: that of languid older residents who lived through that era, that of a disjointed and floundering younger generation, and that of a white Italian-American family whose pizzeria has served the neighborhood for 25 years, but who live elsewhere.

Lee dedicated the film to the families of six black people who died as a result of racism and/or police actions during the previous decade. Lee: “I wanted the film to take place in one day, the hottest day in the summer. And I wanted to reflect the racial climate of New York City. The day would get longer and hotter, and things would escalate until they exploded.” An immediate motivation was to “dump Koch,” the mayor whose 12-year administration had seen major racial conflicts, and whose opponent in the upcoming Democratic primary was a black man, David Dinkins. (Dinkins prevailed, and went on to become the city’s first black mayor.)

Despite the success of his first two features, *SHE’S GOTTA HAVE IT* (1986) and *SCHOOL DAZE* (1988), Lee struggled to obtain financing for this provocative project. Universal finally came on board, giving Lee artistic freedom but restricting him to a relatively low budget, \$6.5 million. Lee secured one block in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant area for six weeks of preparation and eight weeks of filming, and transformed it into his dreamscape: his team closed crack houses (drugs are absent from the film), created new facades for decaying buildings, constructed Sal’s Famous Pizzeria and the Koreans’ grocery on vacant lots across the street from each other, put up murals and graffiti, and painted walls orange and red to evoke the sense of heat, an effect enhanced by Ernest Dickerson’s brilliant use of color filters.

Lee masterfully orchestrated an ensemble of over two dozen actors, from iconic veterans Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee (a real-life married couple) as Da Mayor and Mother Sister to newcomers Martin Lawrence and Rosie Perez (who starts things off with an electrifying boxing dance to the film’s hip-hop theme, Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power”). Lee has the pivotal role of Mookie, a neighborhood man who works for Sal, thus bridging both worlds. His being a pizza deliverer helps director Lee to move fluidly through the block. It is Mookie to whom Radio Raheem delivers his right hand/left hand, love/hate story, and to whom Da Mayor pronounces, “Always do the right thing.”

As befits a tragedy, the film observes classical unities of time and space, and even has a Greek chorus: the three corner philosophers. The third classical unity, one principal action, seems to be defied by Lee’s polyphonic series of random, day-in-the-life events. But the randomness is deceptive: incidents such as Sal’s ordering Radio Raheem to turn off his boombox, Buggin’ Out’s demanding that black celebrities be on the Wall of Fame, and Smiley’s hawking photos of Martin and Malcolm lead inexorably to an incendiary and heart-rending climax.

Some critics warned that *DO THE RIGHT THING* would incite rioting (it didn’t), but most were highly enthusiastic—Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert both named it the best film of 1989—and its worldwide gross was \$37 million. Still, it received only two Oscar nominations (Danny Aiello, Supporting Actor; Spike Lee, Original Screenplay). Lee, who lost to *DEAD POETS SOCIETY*, was overlooked for Director and Picture nominations. Best Picture went to *DRIVING MISS DAISY*, somewhat the antithesis of *DO THE RIGHT THING*, and a film Lee intensely dislikes. When Barack Obama told Lee that he and Michelle saw *DO THE RIGHT THING* during the opening week, on their first date, Lee replied, “Good thing you didn’t choose *DRIVING MISS DAISY*!”

DID YOU KNOW: SAL’S FAMOUS, ALTHOUGH A SET, WAS A FULLY-FUNCTIONING PIZZERIA; WHEN FILMING OCCURRED ELSEWHERE, NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS ATE THERE. IT WAS TORN DOWN AFTER PRODUCTION, AND THE SITE IS NOW A SMALL PARKING LOT. IN 2014, IN HONOR OF THE FILM’S 25TH ANNIVERSARY, THE ONE-BLOCK PRODUCTION LOCATION (STUYVESANT AVENUE BETWEEN QUINCY STREET AND LEXINGTON AVENUE) WAS NAMED “DO THE RIGHT THING WAY.”

NEXT UP: ON **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 AT 7PM**, JOIN US FOR AN EVENING OF **SHORT FILMS BY YALE WOMEN FILMMAKERS** AND A POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION WITH FILMMAKERS AND SCHOLARS. PLUS, THE SECOND CO-PRESENTATION WITH THE *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* FILM SERIES: **BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID** IN A 50TH ANNIVERSARY PRESENTATION ON **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27 AT 7PM**.

No. 2
SEASON 6

WRITTEN, PRODUCED, AND DIRECTED BY **SPIKE LEE**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **ERNEST DICKERSON**

PRODUCED BY **UNIVERSAL PICTURES**

(1989) 120 MINS.

STARRING **DANNY AIELLO, OSSIE DAVIS, RUBY DEE, RICHARD EDSON, GIANCARLO ESPOSITO, SPIKE LEE, BILL NUNN, JOHN TURTURRO, PAUL BENJAMIN, FRANKIE FAISON, ROBIN HARRIS, JOIE LEE, SAMUEL L. JACKSON, ROSIE PEREZ, JOHN SAVAGE, ROGER GUEN-VEUR SMITH, MARTIN LAWRENCE, STEVE PARK, AND FRANK VINCENT**