

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

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

THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2023

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

# CROOKLYN

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



CROOKLYN originated as a story by Joie Lee, Spike's sister, about their family in 1973, when she was eight years old. She and her brother Cinqué turned it into a screenplay, and unsuccessfully pitched it to "Nickelodeon" for a children's series, whereupon Spike decided to make it into a film. In addition to allowing him to evoke his own memories, it provided a respite after MALCOLM X, his epic biopic that was two years in the making, budgeted at \$35 million, filmed in over 40 New York locations as well as in the Middle East and Africa, and covering decades. CROOKLYN, budgeted at \$14 million, was filmed in two months almost entirely on Arlington Place, a one-block Bed-Stuy enclave, with a side trip to New Jersey (standing in for Virginia), covering about six months.

Joie (who plays Aunt Maxine), Cinqué, and Spike differ about how much of CROOKLYN is strictly autobiographical and how much is, in Roger Ebert's terms, "a distillation of things that are remembered and imagined." The basic elements of the Carmichael family are real: Joie had four brothers, three older (including Spike, embodied by the Knicks-obsessed Clinton), one younger; their mother was a school-teacher; their father was a jazz composer and pianist (Bill Lee, who scored all of Spike's previous films except MALCOLM X); they faced financial challenges that often led to quarrels; and had disputes with difficult neighbors. But there's ample poetic license, including shifting the family's most significant event from 1977 to 1973 for dramatic effect and character development.

Despite the family's conflicts, CROOKLYN is much less edgy than Lee's six previous "joints." It avoids the racial conflicts of DO THE RIGHT THING and JUNGLE FEVER, and the drugs that figure prominently in the latter film. (CROOKLYN confines drugs to two menacing glue sniffers, one of whom is played by Spike.) The relative lack of in-your-face confrontations inspired the *New York Times's* Janet Maslin to headline her review, "A Tender Domestic Drama From, No Joke, Spike Lee" and to call the filmmaker "a gentler, kinder Spike Lee." CROOKLYN is a love letter to a vanished (and idealized) time and place, conveyed immediately in the opening credits sequence: amid rows of elegant brownstones and street signs such as "A Cleaner Block is Up to You," children enjoy innocent, pre-Nintendo games—some of which (hopscotch, double dutch jump rope, red light-green light, stickball) Spike had to teach the cast—all accompanied by The Stylistics' soothing "People Make the World Go Round."

CROOKLYN's episodic structure, built on a series of vignettes, led J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* to complain that it has "no particular plot," and Maslin, although praising the film, to call it "messy." But the vignettes *are* the plot, and the seemingly random, often comic, slices of life evolve into a poignant coming-of-age story. Most remarkably, the coming of age is that of a strong, resourceful Black girl, unusual not only for Spike Lee, but also for cinema generally. CROOKLYN is held together by the charismatic performance of eight-year-old Zelda Harris. Like the other children, Zelda was making her film debut; her previous acting experience, starting at age three, was co-starring with Big Bird and the Muppets in 20 SESAME STREET episodes.

The film is also sutured by its almost wall-to-wall late 1960s-early 1970s soul soundtrack (with nods to the kids' favorite program, "Soul Train"). In addition to evoking the era, the songs comment on the action, often in heartending ways. Lee's visual style veers from cinéma vérité naturalism to flamboyant expressionism (including slow motion, upside-down shots, breaking the fourth wall, and his signature actors-on-dollies shots that give the impression of characters floating). Most audaciously, in the extensive section depicting Troy's visit to her affluent relatives in Virginia, Lee conveys the foreignness of the suburban world via an anamorphic lens, which squeezes the image. Lee: "We knew that some people were going to hate it. But I felt it was important to try something new; to try to be innovative, try to tell a story a different way."

No. 23  
SEASON 7

DIRECTED BY SPIKE LEE

SCREENPLAY BY JOIE SUSANNAH LEE, CINQUÉ LEE,  
AND SPIKE LEE FROM A STORY BY JOIE SUSANNAH LEE

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR JAJA

PRODUCED BY 40 ACRES & A MULE FILMWORKS  
(1994), 115 MINS.

STARRING ALFRE WOODARD, DELROY LINDO,  
AND ZELDA HARRIS

**DID YOU KNOW:** 7 ARLINGTON PLACE, THE 1874 VICTORIAN HOUSE USED FOR THE CARMICHAELS' RESIDENCE, HAD BECOME DILPIDATED BY 2013, WHEN IT SOLD FOR A SURPRISING \$1.7 MILLION. THE NEW OWNER FULLY RESTORED THE THREE-STORY BROWNSTONE, OPENED IT AS A B&B IN 2015, AND RESOLD IT JUST TWO WEEKS AGO—FOR \$4.15 MILLION.

**NEXT UP:** GET READY FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP WITH A BRAND NEW 35MM PRINT OF BILLY WILDER'S DARK COMEDY ABOUT A FADING STAR OF THE SILENT ERA AND THE SCREENWRITER WHO BECOMES ENTANGLED IN HER WEB. **SUNSET BLVD.**, CALLED BY CRITIC ANDREW SARRIS "THE BEST HOLLYWOOD MOVIE EVER MADE ABOUT HOLLYWOOD," SCREENS **FRIDAY, APRIL 14 AT 7 P.M.**