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Review/Film; Spike Lee Tackles Racism In 'Do the Right Thing'

By VINCENT CANBY

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From the sinuous and joshing solo dance sequence, which begins the fable on the dawn of the hottest day of the summer in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section, until the mournful fadeout 24 hours later, "Do the Right Thing" is living, breathing, riveting proof of the arrival of an abundantly gifted new talent.

Mr. Lee has been edging up on us. First there was the slyly subversive comedy "She's Gotta Have It," about a young woman who can be satisfied only by three men. Then there was "School Daze," which examines intra-racial prejudice in the terms of the old-fashioned college movie-musical, which, until Mr. Lee came along, had always been Wonder Bread-white and utterly brainless. Each film was by way of preparation.

With "Do the Right Thing," which he wrote, produced, directed and stars in, Mr. Lee emerges as the most distinctive American multi-threat man since Woody Allen.

The film, which opens today at the National Twin and other theaters, is the chronicle of a bitter racial confrontation that leaves one man dead and a neighborhood destroyed. The ending is shattering and maybe too ambiguous for its own good. Yet the telling of all this is so buoyant, so fresh, so exact and so moving that one comes out of the theater elated by the display of sheer cinematic wizardry.

"Do the Right Thing" is a big movie. Though the action is limited to one more-or-less idealized block in Bed-Stuy, the scope is panoramic. It's a contemporary "Street Scene." It has the heightened reality of theater, not only in its look but also in the way the lyrics of the songs on the soundtrack become natural extensions of the furiously demotic, often hugely funny dialogue.

The film begins with disarming ease, introducing its dozen or so characters while Mister Senor Love Daddy (Sam Jackson), the local disk jockey, wakens the citizenry from the store-front studio of Station W(e)L(ove)R(adio). The sun is scarcely up, but it is already steamy. "The color of the day is black," says Mister Senor Love Daddy, "to absorb some of those rays!"

The rummy old "Mayor" (Ossie Davis) arises to search for a can of Miller High Life. The unexcitable, skeptical Mookie (Mr. Lee), who works as a delivery man for Sal's Famous Pizzeria, sits on the side of his bed, counting his cash. Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) is walking the street with his giant boom box blasting into consciousness everyone who has managed to sleep through Mister Senor Love Daddy.

In the Cadillac that eases to a stop in front of the pizzeria are Sal (Danny Aiello) and his sons, Pino (John Turturro) and Vito (Richard Edson). They haven't yet started work but the brothers are arguing about who must do what. Sal, who wants nothing but peace, threatens to kill someone before the day is over.

Other characters are introduced: Mother Sister (Ruby Dee), whose eye on the world is the window from

which she monitors the street; Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito), a young man whose anger has no target as yet; Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith), a retarded man with a bad stutter who hawks copies of what is apparently the only photograph ever taken of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X together, and Tina (Rosie Perez), Mookie's pretty Puerto Rican girlfriend and the mother of his son, Hector.

Tina, who seldom stops talking, is impatient and loving at the same time. The only way she gets to see Mookie is by ordering pizzas.

There is also the three-man chorus: M L (Paul Benjamin), Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison) and Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris). Protected by a small umbrella, they sit on the corner, backed by a brick wall of brilliant vermilion. When they aren't commenting on each other, they are commenting on the people around them, including the Korean operators of the fruit-and-vegetable shop across the street.

As the heat intensifies, so do the tempers. For a while potential fights are defused by good humor, but then the kidding starts to turn mean. Buggin Out asks Sal why the pizzeria is hung with photographs of Frank Sinatra, Sophia Loren and John Travolta, but no blacks. Says Buggin Out, "Rarely do I see any Italian-Americans eating here." He decides to organize a boycott of Sal's.

Mr. Lee's particular achievement is in building the tensions so gradually and so persuasively that the explosion, when it finally comes, seems inevitable. He doesn't deal in generalities. The movie is packed with idiosyncratic detail of character and event, sometimes very funny and sometimes breathtakingly crude.

Every now and then Mr. Lee pulls back from the narrative to present montages that characterize time, place and urban condition. Heat and noise are palpable in the juxtaposition of images scored by the Steel Pulse number "Can't Stand It." At another point, blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans and Koreans come forward in turn to recite a litany of bigoted epithets. At times, characters speak directly to the camera, as if in desperation to vent their rage.

None of this would have the impact it does if the film didn't also possess a solidly dramatic center in the well-meaning but fallible Sal. As written by Mr. Lee and played by Mr. Aiello, he is the film's richest, most complex character, his downfall as harrowing as the events that bring it about.

Mr. Lee is almost as good as a fellow who has been biding his time, good-naturedly slouching through life until the events of this day change him forever. Especially funny and affecting are Mookie's relationship with Tina and a love scene that is a temporary reprieve from all that is going on outside.

Tina, silent for the moment, lies on the bed in her darkened room. "Thank God for lips," says Mookie as he rubs an ice cube over her mouth. "Thank God for necks, thank God for kneecaps, for elbows, for thighs."

All of the other actors are fine, but some demand to be singled out: Mr. Edson, Mr. Turturro, Miss Perez, Mr. Esposito, Mr. Nunn and - performing dual functions - Miss Dee and Mr. Davis. Miss Dee and Mr. Davis are not only figures within the film but, as themselves, they also seem to preside over it, as if ushering in a new era of black film making.

Note should also be made of the camerawork of Ernest Dickerson, Wynn Thomas's production design, and the original score by Bill Lee (the director's father), which makes a lot of witty comments on its own as it backs the narrative and provides the bridges between the musical recordings.

"Do the Right Thing" is a remarkable piece of work. The Anatomy Of a Cataclysm DO THE RIGHT THING, written, produced and directed by Spike Lee; photographed by Ernest Dickerson; edited by Barry Alexander Brown; music by Bill Lee; production design by Wynn Thomas; released by Universal Pictures. At National Twin, Broadway and 44th Street; Manhattan Twin, 59th Street east of Third Avenue, and other theaters. Running time: 120 minutes. This film is rated R. Sal ... Danny Aiello Da Mayor ... Ossie Davis Mother Sister

... Ruby Dee Vito ... Richard Edson Buggin Out ... Giancarlo Esposito Mookie ... Spike Lee Radio Raheem ...
Bill Nunn Pino ... John Turturro M L ... Paul Benjamin Coconut Sid ... Frankie Faison Sweet Dick Willie ...
Robin Harris Mister Senior Love Daddy ... Sam Jackson Tina ... Rosie Perez Smiley ... Roger Guenveur Smith