

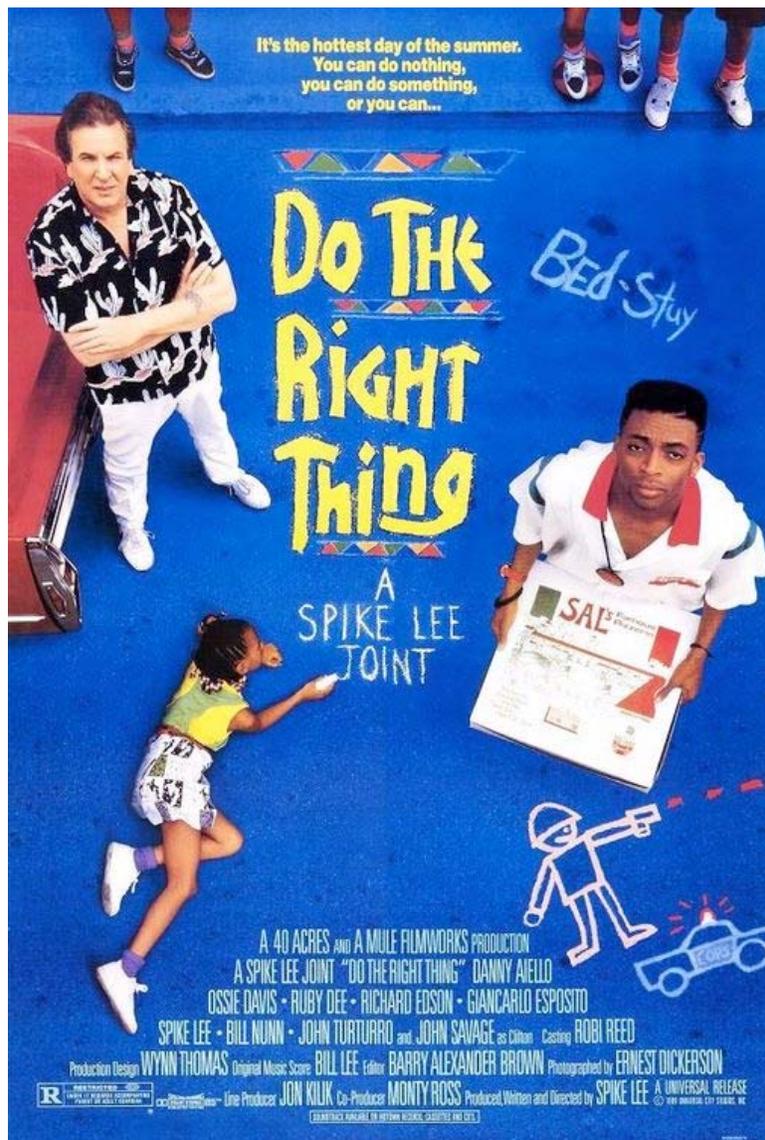
November 28, 2006 XIII: 13

DO THE RIGHT THING (1989) 120 min

Produced, Written and Directed by Spike Lee
 Cinematography by Ernest R. Dickerson
 Film Editing by Barry Alexander Brown
 Bill Lee...conductor: The Natural Spiritual Orchestra
 Branford Marsalis... tenor and soprano saxophone, The Natural Spiritual Orchestra
 Rosie Perez...choreographer

Ossie Davis...Da Mayor
 Danny Aiello...Sal
 Giancarlo Esposito...Buggin Out
 Richard Edson...Vito
 Spike Lee...Mookie
 Ruby Dee...Mother Sister
 Bill Nunn...Radio Raheem
 John Turturro...Pino
 Paul Benjamin...ML
 Rosie Perez...Tina
 Robin Harris...Sweet Dick Willie
 Frankie Faison...Coconut Sid
 Steve White...Ahmad
 Leonard L. Thomas...Punchy
 Samuel L. Jackson...Mister Señor Love Daddy
 Joie Lee...Jade
 Miguel Sandoval...Officer Ponte
 Rick Aiello...Officer Long
 Martin Lawrence...Cee
 Roger Guenveur Smith...Smiley
 John Savage...Clifton
 Christa Rivers...Ella
 Frank Vincent...Charlie
 Luis Ramos...Stevie
 Richard Habersham...Eddie
 Gwen McGee...Louise

Selected by the National Film Preservation Board for the National Film Registry, 1999



SPIKE LEE (20 March 1957, Atlanta, Georgia) has directed 42 theatrical and tv films, the most recent of which is the HBO documentary on the New Orleans Katrina disaster, "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts" (2006). Some of the others are "Sucker Free City" (2004), *She Hate Me* (2004), *25th Hour* (2002), *Come Rain or Come Shine* (2001), *Bamboozled* (2000), *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000), *Summer of Sam* (1999), *He Got Game* (1998), *4 Little Girls* (1997), *Get on the Bus* (1996), *Clockers* (1995), *Crooklyn* (1994), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *School Daze* (1988), *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983), *Sarah* (1981), *The Answer* (1980) and *Last Hustle in Brooklyn* (1977). He produced all of his own films and wrote most of them as well.

ERNEST R. DICKERSON (25 June 1951, Newark NJ) has shot theatrical films and tv episodes, but for the past several years he has worked primarily as a director for such tv shows as "Tell Me You Love Me," "The Wire" (5 episodes, 2003-2006), "ER" (3 episodes, 2005-2006), "Heroes" (2006), "CSI: Miami" (2006), "The L Word" (2004), and "Night Visions" (2001). Some of the films he shot were *Malcolm X* (1992), *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll* (1991), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *School Daze* (1988), *Eddie Murphy Raw* (1987), *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *Desiree* (1984), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) and *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983).

OSSIE DAVIS and **RUBY DEE** often appeared in films and theatrical productions together during their long marriage. **DAVIS** (18 December 1917, Cogdell, Georgia— 4 February 2005, Miami Beach, Florida) appeared in 195 films and tv series, among them "The L Word," *She Hate Me* (2004), "JAG," "Cosby," 12 Angry Men (1997 TV), *I'm Not Rappaport* (1996), *The Client* (1994), *Grumpy Old Men* (1993), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Joe Versus the Volcano* (1990), *School Daze* (1988), *Don't Look Back: The Story of Leroy 'Satchel' Paige* (1981 TV), "Ossie and Ruby!" (1980-81 TV Series), "King" (1978 mini TV Series), "Bonanza," "N.Y.P.D.," "The Fugitive," and *The Emperor Jones* (1955 TV). **DEE** (27 October 1924, Cleveland) has been in nearly 100 theatrical and tv films and tv series. She has one film in post-production (*Clarksdale*, one filming (*Steamroom*) and one in production (*Flying Over Purgatory*). She also appeared in *The Way Back Home* (2006), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005 TV), *Dream Street* (2005), "Touched by an Angel" (1999), "Cosby" (1999), *Tuesday Morning Ride* (1995), "The Stand" (1994 mini TV Series), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), "Spenser: For Hire" (1987), "The Atlanta Child Murders" (1985 mini TV Series), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1982 TV), *Cat People* (1982), "Ossie and Ruby!" (1980-81 TV Series), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979 TV), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (1972 TV), "East Side/West Side" (1963), "The Fugitive" (1963), *The Balcony* (1963), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Edge of*

"Spike Lee" from *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink, Detroit, 1998.
Entry by Charles Derry.

Born Shelton Jackson Lee in Atlanta, Georgia, 20 March 1957; son of jazz musician Bill Lee. Education Morehouse College, B.A., 1979; New York University, M.A. in Filmmaking; studying with Martin Scorsese.

Spike Lee is the most famous African-American to have succeeded in breaking through the Hollywood

the City (1957), *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), and *What a Guy* (1939).

DANNY AIELLO (20 June 1933, NYC) has acted in 90 films, one of which is in production and three in pre-production. Some of the released films are *The Last Request* (2006), *Lucky Number Slevin* (2006), *Prince of Central Park* (2000), *Mambo Café* (2000), "The Last Don" (1997 mini TV Series), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), *Mistress* (1992), *Hudson Hawk* (1991), *The Closer* (1990), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *Harlem Nights* (1989), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Moonstruck* (1987), *Man on Fire* (1987), *Radio Days* (1987), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *Fort Apache the Bronx* (1981), *Hide in Plain Sight* (1980), *Bloodbrothers* (1978), *Fingers* (1978), *The Front* (1976), *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973).

JOHN TURTURRO (28 February 1957, Brooklyn, NY) has acted in 73 films and television programs, among them, *The Good Shepherd* (2006), *Romance & Cigarettes* (2005), *She Hate Me* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), *Secret Passage* (2004), *Collateral Damage* (2002), *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (2001), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), *Rounders* (1998), *He Got Game* (1998), *The Big Liebowski* (1998), *Girl 6* (1996), *Clockers* (1995), *Quiz Show* (1994), *Mac* (1992), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Barton Fink* (1991), *State of Grace* (1990), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *The Sicilian* (1987), *The Color of Money* (1986), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *Raging Bull* (1980).

ROSIE PEREZ (6 September 1964, Brooklyn, NY) has acted in 34 films and tv programs, among them, *Just Like the Son* (2006), *Jesus Children of America* (2005), *Lackawanna Blues* (2005 TV), *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001), *King of the Jungle* (2000), *Somebody to Love* (1994), *Fearless* (1993), *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

establishment to create a notable career for himself as a major director. What makes this all the more notable is that he is not a comedian—the one role in which Hollywood has usually allowed blacks to excel—but a prodigious, creative, multifaceted talent who writes, directs, edits, and acts, a filmmaker who invites comparisons with American titans like Woody Allen, John Cassavetes, and Orson Welles.

His films, which deal with different facets of the black experience, are innovative and controversial even within the black community. Spike Lee refuses to be content with presenting blacks in their "acceptable"

stereotypes: noble Poitiers demonstrating simple moral righteousness are nowhere to be found. Lee's characters are three-dimensional and often vulnerable to moral criticism. His first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It*, dealt with black sexuality, unapologetically supporting the heroine's promiscuity. His second film, *School Daze*, drawing heavily upon Lee's own experiences at Morehouse College, examined the black university experience and dealt with discrimination within the black community based on relative skin colors. His third film, *Do the Right Thing*, dealt with urban racial tensions and violence. His fourth film, *Mo' Better Blues*, dealt with black jazz and its milieu. His fifth film, *Jungle Fever*, dealt with interracial sexual relationships and their political implications, by no means taking the traditional, white liberal position that love should be color blind. His sixth film, *Malcolm X*, attempted no less than a panoramic portrait of the entire racial struggle in the United States, as seen through the life story of the controversial activist. Not until his seventh film, *Crooklyn*, primarily an autobiographical family remembrance of growing up in Brooklyn, did Spike Lee take a breath to deal with a simpler subject and theme.

Lee's breakthrough feature was *She's Gotta Have It*, an independent film budgeted at \$175,000 and a striking box-office success: a film made by blacks for blacks which also attracted white audiences. *She's Gotta Have It* reflects the sensibilities of an already sophisticated filmmaker and harkens back to the early French New Wave in its exuberant embracing of bravura techniques—intertitles, black-and-white cinematography, a sense of improvisation, characters directly addressing the camera—all wedded nevertheless to serious philosophical/sociological examination. The considerable comedy in *She's Gotta Have It* caused many critics to call Spike Lee the "black Woody Allen," a label which would increasingly reveal itself as a rather simplistic, muddle-headed approbation, particularly as Lee's career developed. (Indeed, in his work's energy, style, eclecticism, and social commitment, he more resembles Martin Scorsese, a Lee mentor at the NYU film school.) Even to characterize Spike Lee as a black filmmaker is to denigrate his talent, since there are today virtually no American filmmakers (except Allen) with the ambitiousness and talent to write, direct, and perform in their own films. And Lee edits as well.

Do the Right Thing, Lee's third full-length feature, is one of the director's most daring and controversial achievements, presenting one sweltering day which culminates in a riot in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. From its first images—assailing jump cuts of a woman dancing frenetically to the rap "Fight the Power" while colored lights stylistically flash on a location ghetto block upon which Lee has constructed his set—we know we are about to witness something deeply disturbing. The film's sound design is incredibly dense and complex, and the volume alarmingly high, as the film continues to assail us with tight close-ups, extreme angles, moving camera,

colored lights, distorting lenses, and individual scenes directed like high operatic arias.

Impressive, too, is the well-constructed screenplay, particularly the perceptively drawn Italian family at the center of the film who feel so besieged by the changing, predominantly black neighborhood around them. A variety of ethnic characters are drawn sympathetically, if unsentimentally; perhaps never in American cinema has a director so accurately presented the relationships among the American urban underclasses. Particularly shocking and honest is a scene in which catalogs of racial and ethnic epithets are shouted directly into the camera. The key scene in *Do the Right Thing* has the character of Mookie, played by Spike Lee, throwing a garbage can through a pizzeria window as a moral gesture which works to make the riot inevitable. The film ends with two quotations: one from Martin Luther King Jr., eschewing violence; the other from Malcolm X, rationalizing violence in certain circumstances.

Do the Right Thing was one of the most controversial films of the last twenty years. Politically conservative commentators denounced the film, fearful it would incite inner-city violence. Despite widespread acclaim the film was snubbed at the Cannes Film Festival, outraging certain Cannes judges; despite the accolades of many critics' groups, the film was also largely snubbed by the Motion Picture Academy, receiving a nomination only for Spike Lee's screenplay and Danny Aiello's performance as the pizzeria owner.

Both *Mo' Better Blues* and the much underrated *Crooklyn* owe a lot to Spike Lee's appreciation of music, particularly as handed down to him by his father, the musician Billy Lee. *Crooklyn* is by far the gentler film, presenting Lee's and his siblings' memories of growing up with Bill Lee and his mother. Typical of Spike Lee, the vision in *Crooklyn* is by no means a sentimental one, and the father comes across as a proud, if weak, man; talented, if failing in his musical career; loving his children, if not always strong enough to do the right thing for them. The mother, played masterfully by Alfre Woodard, is the stronger of the two personalities; and the film—ending as it does with grief—seems Spike Lee's version of Fellini's *Amarcord*. For a white audience, *Crooklyn* came as a revelation: the sight of black children watching cartoons, eating Trix cereal, playing hopscotch, and singing along with the Partridge family, seemed strange—because the American cinema had so rarely (if ever?) shown a struggling black family so rooted in popular-culture iconography all Americans could relate to. Scene after scene is filled with humanity, such as the little girl stealing groceries rather than be embarrassed by using her mother's food stamps. *Crooklyn*'s soundtrack, like so many other Spike Lee films, is usually cacophonous, with everyone talking at once, and its improvisational style suggests Cassavetes or Scorsese. Lee's 1995 film, *Clockers*, which deals with drug dealing, disadvantage, and the young

'gansta,' was actually produced in conjunction with Scorsese, whose own work, particularly the seminal *Mean Streets*, Lee's work often recalls.

Another underrated film from Lee is *Jungle Fever* (from 1991). Taken for granted is how well the film communicates the African-American experience; more surprising is how persuasively and perceptively the film communicates the Italian-American experience, particularly working-class attitudes....

The most important film in the Spike Lee *oeuvre* (if not his best) is probably *Malcolm X*—important because Lee himself campaigned for the film when it seemed it would be given to a white director, creating then an epic with the sweep and majesty of David Lean and a clear political message of black empowerment. If the film on the whole seems less interesting than many of Lee's films (because there is less Lee there), the most typical Lee touches (such as a triumphant coda which enlists South African President Nelson Mandela to play himself and teach young blacks about racism and their future) seem among the film's most inspired and creative scenes. If more cautious and conservative, in some ways the film is also Lee's most ambitious: with dozens of historical reconstructions, and the biggest budget in his entire career. *Malcolm X* proved definitively to fiscally conservative Hollywood studio executives that an African-American director could be trusted to direct a high-budget "A film." The success of *Malcolm X*, coupled with the publicity machine supporting Spike Lee, helped a variety of young black directors—like John Singleton, the Wayans brothers, and Mario Van Peebles—all break through into mainstream Hollywood features.

And indeed, Lee seems often to be virtually everywhere. On television interview shows he is called upon to comment on every issue relevant to black America: from the O.J. Simpson verdict to Louis Farrakhan and the Million Man March. In bookstores, his name can be found on a variety of published books on the making of his films, books created by his own public relations arm particularly so that others can read about the process, become empowered, find their own voices, and follow in Lee's filmic footsteps....There may be no other American filmmaker working today who is so willing to take on all comers, so politically committed to make films which are consistently and unapologetically in-your-face. Striking, too, is that instead of taking his inspiration from other movies, as do the gaggle of Spielberg imitators, Lee takes his inspiration from real life—whether the Howard Beach or Yusef Hawkins incidents, in which white racists killed blacks, or his own autobiographical memories of growing up black in Brooklyn.

As Spike Lee has become a leading commentator on the cultural scene, there has been an explosion of Lee scholarship, not all of it laudatory: increasing voices attack Lee and his films for either homophobia, sexism, or anti-

Semitism. Lee defends both his films and himself, pointing out that because characters espouse some of these values does not imply that he himself does, only that realistic portrayal of the world *as it is* has no place for political correctness....

Notable also is the director's assembly—in the style of Bergman and Chabrol and Woody Allen in their prime—of a consistent stable of very talented collaborators, including his father, Bill Lee, as musical composer, production designer Wynn Thomas, producer Monty Ross, and cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, among others. He has also used many of the same actors from one film to another, including Wesley Snipes, Denzel Washington, his sister Joie Lee, John Turturro, Samuel L. Jackson, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee, helping to create a climate which propelled several to stardom and inspired a new wave of high-level attention to a variety of breakout African-American performers.

***Do the Right Thing*. Ed Guerrero. BFI Publishing, London, 2001.**

"No doubt this film is gonna get more heat than any other film I've done. I know there will be an uproar about this one.... We're talking white people and racism in a major motion picture. It will be interesting to see how studios deal with it. This film must have a wide, wide release. I have to have major assurances going in." Spike Lee

Lee is an issues-oriented film-maker whose work is always, in some way, grounded in collective, social values. Indeed, the controversies and representational politics of urban *blackness* are his fortune. All of Lee's films radically and thematically depart from one another, each marking a break with the style and content of its predecessor, with each film situated in its particular historical moment, attendant set of issues and circumstances of production, with none adhering to a particular formula or genre. Significantly, each of Lee's films is organised around a social issue, political conflict, or a personal theme, mixed with an insightful rendering of the subtle nuances and rhythms of African American culture and urban life....Broadly then, Spike Lee's features reveal a restless, developmental experimentation and creativity over what is an ongoing, successful and fast-moving trajectory of issues-focused films made increasingly popular by media-hyped public debate and controversy...

The charged, political, critical and media atmosphere at *Do the Right Thing*'s moment of release was, also, partly energised by sharply exploding controversies in the realms of American art and cultural production, as the nation's political right wing (coincident with a worldwide upsurge of religious fundamentalism) became politically visible and increasingly vocal about policing issues of 'decency' in the arts, humanities and popular forms of cultural production and consumption.

With the slow disintegration of the Soviet Union and its alliances, and the fall of the Berlin Wall marking the official end of the Cold War, the United States was left with no grand ideological scheme or external counter-point superpower enemy to define, unify and defend its citizens against. Thus the complex weave of political debates and tensions between America's Left and Right, rich and poor, white and non-white, straight and gay, tended to sharpen and implode, focusing on escalating struggles over religion, culture, class and an array of identity and group differences....

Do the Right Thing's social and political influence was deemed important enough to impel both *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Nightline* to devote entire programmes to the film's broad reception and social impact. *The New York Times* ran at least five articles, a symposium of critics and experts on cinema, violence and race, a couple of Sunday features, as well as several reviews of the film....

More than any other issue on *Do the Right Thing's* complex representational agendas though, the film's astute and timely focus on police brutality, in all of its attendant, corrupt expressions, will always rank it as one of the socially relevant and prophetic masterpieces of American cinema. At this writing, eleven years after its critically hailed and contentious premiere, the issues that *Do the Right Thing* has most expressly framed and persistently forecast—police brutality, racial profiling and the pervasive, differentially ill, treatment of communities of colour by the nation's police departments—are still stubbornly with us. In a reactionary sense, conservative film critics have been correct to fear racial unrest, once again, spreading across the land; they're just in deep denial, or callously indifferent, as to the enduring causes of that unrest.

That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It. Spike Lee as told to Kaleem Aftab. W.W. Norton & Co., NY, 2005.

*Gotta give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be.*

Public Enemy, "Fight the Power"
(Shocklee/Sadler/Ridenhour)

By 1988 rap acts were selling out stadiums across America and starting to dominate the *Billboard* black music chart....The growth in rap's popularity since the release of "Rapper's Delight" in 1979 was emblematic of a shift in the cultural tastes of African-Americans. Rap music—unlike gospel, rhythm and blues, or the pop crossover sounds of Michael Jackson—was revisiting African roots through its syncopated polyrhythm and raw street-talk expressiveness, distantly derived from the songs that were developed as a mode of communication by African slaves.

Rap's crucial break from the preceding black musical traditions of the twentieth century was that the street-talk style, similar to that used by Jamaicans in "toasting," served as celebration of the black working class; one that also criticized the sociopolitical system that clocked the progress of African-Americans.

Spike had previously conceived of a film called *Heatwave* to be set on the hottest day of the year. "In New York you have eight million people on top of each other," he points out, "and people get crazy when it's hot. Things start to get frayed. If you bump into someone, you might get shot." Piecing together his story, Spike wondered what might happen if a black person was murdered by police on a hot, humid New York summer's day. He then borrowed details from the true-life accounts: from Howard Beach, the baseball bat, the pizzeria, conflict between blacks and Italian-Americans, and a call issued by blacks to boycott pizzerias for one day in protest of the Griffith death. From the case of Michael Stewart, he took the lethal choke hold. But as he acknowledges, "there were many different things that influenced *Do the Right Thing*. I remember seeing an old *Twilight Zone* where a scientist had conducted a study showing that the murder rate goes up after the temperature hits 95 degrees....In terms of the racial climate in the city at that time, Mayor Koch had really polarized a lot of New Yorkers." Spike was determined to contribute to the downfall of Koch, who had been mayor of New York since 1978.

...As soon as Spike decided he would set his film on the hottest day of the year, he sought out the visual input of Ernest Dickerson...."I remember Spike had a yellow legal pad and the title on it was *Heatwave*. He said to me, 'I want you to really think about how you can give the feeling of the hottest day of the summer. What can you do visually to make the audience sweat?' Even before he showed me the script, he threw that at me, I've always been influence by the psychology of color. I think it's been proven that when you look at the color red your heart beats faster, and when you look at blue and green your tendency is to calm down. So I thought, What if the color scheme was all reds, yellows and earth tones, and nothing blue? On the East Coast, the weather changes a lot. Spike made sure that I had enough time to work that out, because the decision that I made ultimately determined where we were going to shoot. I knew that we needed to shoot on a street that traveled from north to south, because where the sun traveled east to west, one side of the street was always going to be in the shade. So if it was raining I could shoot cloudy conditions and make it look like the shaded side of the street."

Spike wrote *Do the Right Thing* at a furious pace, taking only twelve days to complete the first draft. The film would take its lead from Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the great black literary work of protest. *Native Son* shocked many on its publication in 1940, as it broke from the stance popular among black authors of the time, who were

advancing the idea of the sophisticated and cultivated “new Negro”—so called because this creature could assimilate into mainstream American society without difficulty. Instead Wright (as would Ralph Ellison a few years later in *The Invisible Man*) sided with the more aggressive and disillusioned black masses, turning the psychic and physical violence of black life outward onto white America.

In the course of post-production, the final scene of *Do the Right Thing*, which had once led to Spike’s deal with Paramount collapsing, would again cause problems. Barry Brown remembers, “Jim Jacks and Sean Daniels, the executives at Universal, were very concerned about the ending of the film. They really didn’t want Mookie to walk away with Sal’s money. I was adamant in myself—Spike had been there, I have been there, broke, and you’ve got nothing coming in down the line, you can’t see where the next money is coming from—you don’t walk away from \$250 lying on the ground. You have to pick up the money. Otherwise it’s bullshit.” Spike concurs: “Money is all Mookie cares about. That is his god. When Sal throws the money at him, if he had any self-respect he wouldn’t take it. But he’s about the money, so he took it. Sam Kitt, another executive at Universal who was assigned to the film, he felt the same old shit where the studios want their main characters to be the most lovable people otherwise people won’t like the movie. I don’t agree.”

...Spike was also criticized in some quarters for making a film about the urban black population and not addressing the issue of drugs. In his defense he asserted, “This film is about racism. Drugs are too big an issue to have to share space with a film on racism.”...

Edward Norton was a student at Yale at the time of *Do the Right Thing*’s release and he remembers his surprise at watching the film: I think that, for me, the disconnect between seeing what was written about the film and the feeling that it had provoked in me was the beginning of an ongoing observation I’ve had over the years about the incredible misrepresentation of Spike Lee’s work. The failure of the mainstream critical community to understand the true message of that film, the underlying humanity and compassion of it, was astonishing to me. When a certain kind of blind acceptance of what people have to say informs your view of life to a certain degree, and you then have that first experience of feeling like you are a generation and the things you believe, the values that you have are being attacked and misrepresented—in a way, that’s your first experience with culture clash, and it’s an intense one. I felt people were responding in exactly the opposite way to the people who were writing about the film and saying, ‘This is a dangerous film, it’s going to cause violence.’ I sat there thinking the exact opposite. What I realized, way down the road, is what made people uncomfortable with it was that it didn’t offer any easy answers.”

from *Inner Views Filmmakers in Conversation*. David Breskin. Da Capo Press NY 1997

Do you feel you’re an angry person?

Not at all. [Pause.] The funny thing to me is when white people accuse blacks, when they see somebody black who’s angry, they say, “Why are you so angry?” [Laughs.] If they don’t know why black people are angry, then there’s *no* hope. I mean, it’s a miracle that black Americans are as complacent and happy-go-lucky as we are.

Malcolm said, “Yes, I’m an extremist. The black race in America is in extremely bad condition. You show me a black man who isn’t an extremist and I’ll show you one who needs psychiatric attention.”

Or is dead. But I don’t think I have that much anger. I don’t think I’m angrier than I have a right to be.

You get angry on a personal level though—like at Cannes when you said Do the Right Thing was “robbed” of an award.

It was really anger at Wim Wenders, that’s who.

“I have a Louisville slugger baseball bat deep in my closet with Wim Wenders’ name written on it,” is what you wrote.

[Laughs.] I just said that. I would never hit him in the head with a bat. What I was talking about was that it got back to me that the reason Wim Wenders didn’t like the film was that he considered what Mookie does [throwing a garbage can through the window of a pizzeria and triggering a riot] as unheroic. But the James Spader character in *sex, lies, and videotape*, what’s heroic about jerking off with an 8-millimeter camera? I didn’t understand that thinking. [Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape* won the award.]

Yeah, but that wasn’t a movie about heroism. I mean, that wasn’t even an issue in that movie?

But why have two separate rules?

Do the Right Thing, *even in its very title, sets up a moral universe and a code, so it’s going to provoke a kind of scrutiny on the action that a movie in which things are more relative will not.*

See, I never buy that shit. Because I want my shit—I mean, if you’re going to critique my work use the same motherfucking standards for everybody. Don’t let shit slide and call me anti-Semitic every single way and then the shit goes by and nobody says nothing about the other stuff, work that’s just racist in general.

I was trying to say that the film itself, within its own universe, sets up an expectation of moral action and heroism, and—

All I’m saying is that they gave out twelve or thirteen awards. Thirteen films got awards that year and we didn’t get one.

I know you’ve complained about not receiving Oscars as well, but don’t you ever feel that your work is more validated by not receiving the awards than if you were everybody’s favorite?

I understand that. See, I'm not saying that awards are validating my work, saying it's great. But if you win an Academy Award, you know how much money a film makes after it wins one? That's it. Studios don't spend a million dollars on a campaign just to get the award, but they know the award will bring in a lot more revenue. That's why I wanted it for *Do the Right Thing*.

...I'm not asking about Jewish-black relations, I'm asking why you think Jews are more unified than black people.

As far as America is concerned? Because I don't think Jews have ever been taught to hate themselves the way black people have. I mean that's the whole key: self-hatred. That's not to say that Jewish people haven't been persecuted. I'm not saying that. But they haven't been taught to hate themselves to the level black people have been. When you're persecuted, it's natural for people to come together; but when you're also taught at the same time that you're the lowest form of life on earth, that you're subhuman, then why would you want to get together with other people like that? Who do you hate? Yourself...

How many people have asked you, "Does Mookie do the right thing?"

[Laughs.] How many people are there in New York City?

And what's your answer to them?

Black people never ask me that. It's only white people.

Why's that?

Because black people understood perfectly why Mookie threw the garbage can through the window. No black person has ever asked me, "Did Mookie do the right thing?" Only white people. White people are like, "Oh, I like Mookie so much up to that point. He's a nice character. Why'd he have to throw that garbage can through the window?" Black people, there's no question in their minds why he does that.

Yeah, but why one does something and whether what one does is right are very different things. I know why he does it, but—

But only white people want to know why he does it. I spoke at twenty-five universities last year and that's all I ever got asked. "Did Mookie do the right thing?"

What do you tell them?

I feel at the time he did. Mookie is doing it in response to the police murdering Radio Raheem, with the infamous Michael Stewart choke hold, in front of his face—also knowing this is not the first time that something like this has happened, nor will it be the last. What people have to understand is that almost every riot that's happened here in America involving black people has happened because of some small incident like that: cops killing somebody, cops beating up a pregnant black woman. It's incidents like that that have sparked riots across America. And that's all we were doing was using history. Mookie cannot lash out against the police, because the police were gone. As soon as Radio Raheem was dead, they threw his ass in the back of the car and got the hell out of there so they could make up their story.

What about attacking Sal?

I think he likes Sal too much. For Mookie, in my mind, Sal's Pizzeria represents everything, and that's why he lashed out against it. It was Mayor Koch, it was the cops—everything.

That's "the power" to him?

It's the power at the moment. But when it's burnt down, he's back to square one, even worse. Look at all those riots: black people weren't burning downtown, they were burning their own neighborhoods....

One of the disturbing things to me about the reaction to that film is that people focused on the burning of the pizzeria and not the death of Radio Raheem, and there might be a reason for that other than just hog-calling racism.

The thing I like about *Do the Right Thing*, especially for critics, is that it was a litmus test. I think you could really tell how people thought and who they were. And if I read a review and all it talked about was the stupidity of burning the pizzeria, the stupidity of the violence, the looting, the burning, and not one mention of the murder of Radio Raheem, I knew *exactly* where they were coming from. Because people that write like that, who think like that, do not put any value on black life, especially the life of young black males. They put more importance on property, white-owned property.

THE FINAL FILM COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIII, FALL 2006:

Dec 5 Peter Greenaway **Prospero's Books** 1991

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