



FILM

The black middle class and Lee's school of hard knocks

By Salim Muwakkil

SPIKE LEE'S *SCHOOL DAZE* MAKES no concessions to the general — white — audience's need for cultural translation. Nor does it bow to the dogmas of those various ideologues who cast themselves as image police. Lee attempts to portray the contradictions and complexities of African-American culture without the distortions to which all of us—from our differing perspectives—have grown accustomed. It's an effort that is both simple and torchbearing, and continues the direction he began in *She's Gotta Have It*.

Lee's passion for authenticity gave that film a cultural integrity rarely found in films by or about blacks. But he was after more than just realism. The hypocrisy of double-standard, gender morality was the film's implicit message. In *School Daze*, the message concerns the dilemma of the black middle class and it is much more explicit. In fact, Lee's candor has angered many blacks (see accompanying article).

More importantly, the film offers some succor to those awaiting the emergence of a new black cinema. Lee is part of a growing group of black artists who feel no reverence for the cultural icons of black American tradition. Everything's up for grabs in these troubled times. Theater pieces like George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* and Wesley

Brown's *Boogie Woogie and Booker T.*, express this new sensibility well. To some extent, Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* shares this new attitude. The undercurrent of anarchic, adolescent energy in Lee's work is generated by this spirit of aesthetic iconoclasm.

School Daze does not condescend to its audience and, until the heavy-handed ending, does not moralize. Lee's portrayal of the black middle class as "wannabe" whites is both a condemnation and a paean. But most of all it's an authentic depiction. Questions regarding the black middle class' relationship to the masses of African-Americans are intimately connected to values associated with skin color. These issues remain among the black community's most vexing.

Inauspicious beginnings: Despite their relative affluence, middle-class black Americans have a beleaguered history. Since their privileged status usually was dependent on their proximity to whites (genetically and culturally as well as physically), they were usually distrusted, often hated, by most blacks. And that's understandable; the initial members of what became the black middle class were the "house slaves," plantation overseers and others who managed to earn the trust of white slavemasters. In those days, to be black and middle class was in most cases *prima facie* evidence of racial treason.

Later on, the middle class were those black business folks who benefitted most by segregation: barbers, morticians, merchants, publishers and teachers. They were also prominent among those who profit from exploiting black Americans' racial inferiority complex, those merchandisers of hair-straighteners and skin-lighteners.

Madame C.J. Walker, celebrated as the first African-American millionaire and widely emulated, earned her bucks "beautifying" black women by devaluing their natural characteristics. For blacks, lighter skin and straighter hair became signifiers of higher class. In fact most black middle-classers were members of what essentially was a light-skinned elite. This elite was also disproportionately represented among black leadership.

Lee's implicit criticism is nothing new. Protests against this light-skinned aristocracy have periodically rocked the African-American community. Around the turn of the century, the clashes between the followers of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, and later between acolytes of Marcus Garvey and DuBois, were rooted in such class differences. In general, the civil rights movement has been dominated by this middle-class elite, while the self-help, black nationalist movements were populated largely by those from the lower classes of black America.

Esteemed commentators, like historian Carter G. Woodson and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, writers like Nathan Hare and Amiri Baraka who were influenced by the radical fashions of the '60s, racial ideologues like Elijah Muhammad and Stokely Carmichael, have all weighed-in with various complaints about the inordinant influence of an insipid black bourgeoisie.

The cover of realism: These are some of the issues Lee tackles in *School Daze*. And although he's received a blizzard of criticism for his effort, the accuracy of his portrayals are beyond dispute. Lee's depiction of the gestures, the speech patterns, even the body postures of black Americans, is uncannily authentic.

In fact, much of the film's charm lies in its affectionate rendering of the subtleties and nuances of black social life. Due to the scarcity of such portrayals (no points for *The Cosby*

Questions regarding the black middle class' relationship to the majority of African-Americans are intimately connected to social values associated with skin color.

Show), authenticity has assumed an exaggerated importance for African-American filmgoers. And Lee presents this flesh-toned portrait even

as he reveals the cultural conceits that poison relationships between classes of black Americans.

School Daze's portrayal of campus fraternities and sororities, organizations that have served as de facto boot camps for the black middle class, is as ambiguous as are their roles in society. Even though these groups have not abandoned their functions as major inculcators of elitism, sexism and class divisions, many have demonstrated a new concern for problems in the black community. Some Greek groups have initiated programs designed to ease the burden of the black underclass. What's more, the desire for fraternity-sorority relationships seems to be a universal human trait. Accordingly, Lee's depiction of these groups is not an unqualified put-down.

But as the class gap in black America continues to widen and an increasingly isolated underclass continues its expansion, so grows the black middle class' importance as a community resource. But how can those former denizens of fraternity row deliver assistance to their more vulnerable brethren when they have yet to develop a way to support the very schools that produced them? Most historically black colleges depend on white philanthropy for their tenuous survival.

Lee's film touches all of these bases. In fact, *School Daze* bristles with so many ideas, its true accomplishment is the maintenance of any narrative element. And, although Lee's cinematic impulses lead him away from didacticism, there's so much that must be said and the need is so urgent.

As the accompanying story points out, he's being accused of exposing blacks' "dirty laundry" by his open depictions of class/color antagonisms. This criticism is similar to that levelled at *The Color Purple*, both Alice Walker's novel and Steven Spielberg's film, and is motivated by the fear that these productions provide data that validate negative stereotypes.

It's the same motive that for many years kept crime off the agendas of civil rights organizations, though it was topic No. 1 for the masses of blacks these groups purportedly represented. Enraged community leaders eventually forced those obdurate civil-righters to at least give lip service to the everyday needs of the black masses and address the issue of black-on-black crime.

Similarly, Lee and his like-minded cohorts are sounding a few cultural alarms and, in the process, are broaching subjects many blacks would prefer remain private. But their determination to present African-Americans in all their self-deceptive guises bespeaks a growing cultural confidence and is an encouraging development. African-Americans must first know who they are before they can become who they need to be. ■

Dioxinville

Continued from page 13

In addition, Means says Vertac kept such poor inventory records that some barrels contain unidentified solid substances that may have to be destroyed differently from the dioxin-contaminated drums. Now state officials say that not even a test burn on the waste can occur before next fall at the earliest. Meanwhile, ITC is rumored to be on the edge of ipsolvency due to its other environmental liabilities. So Arkansas is reportedly negotiating once again with Ensco—a firm with an equally dubious record—to eventually handle the incineration.

"Explosive situation": Despite the delay, the concerns of Jacksonville citizens have not abated. "If there is a malfunction out there," says Frase, "it could cause cancer through the whole community. During the incineration, they are not going to do any secondary monitoring (monitoring after the

incineration takes place). Yet dioxin would show up as a secondary chemical, because it's formed in the combustion. The other terrible thing is that the turn-around period for sending in lab samples is six weeks, so if there is a problem and dioxin is pouring out, we won't know until much later."

Hazardous-chemicals expert Epstein believes "the only real way to cope with this issue is to have a high-level congressional inquiry that would investigate not only the role of the chemical industry, but also the EPA, the state and the industry's consultants. You are dealing in Jacksonville with an already tragic, and potentially explosive, situation."

Incineration expert Connett adds, "I am really distraught by the whole Jacksonville phenomenon. I believe those people; they're not giving me a song-and-dance about what they've been through. You hear story after story of health damage done to people of all ages. To me, it's outrageous that this 'anec-

dotal' information is dismissed as being non-scientific and therefore irrelevant, when clearly it demands an answer. If these agencies don't get their act together pretty soon, no one is going to believe anything they do."

In Jacksonville, where the people talk about "cancer alley" and wear T-shirts reading "Hostage of Vertac and Clinton," it is the 11th hour in a tragic microcosm of America's toxic time-bomb. And if the federal and state governments eventually do get their way on incineration, the people of Jacksonville can only hope that it won't cause an apocalyptic high noon.

Dick Russell is a freelance writer whose environmental reporting regularly appears in national publications.

(Next week: In Part 3 of *In These Times*' investigation into the Jacksonville imbroglio, the interlocking ties among the chemical companies—including Dow Chemical and other multinationals—are revealed.)

Repentance

Continued from page 24

this a flaw—because the interrogation is theatrical. But I don't agree with this," Abuladze said. "The thoughts, the mood, the emotions that a person must have experienced at this moment are called up in the viewer, so why show [the interrogation] realistically? It wouldn't be humane."

The same desire to spare the viewer apparently motivated a scene in which an arrested man is shown martyred, hanging by his arms. "We have an expression for 'I've been tortured'. It's 'I've been crucified like Christ.' We didn't want to present a realistic scene of his being tortured, because people wouldn't be able to bear looking at such a thing. So we decided to use a metaphor." (In fact, even under *glasnost*, it isn't clear that scenes of torture would be allowed in Soviet films, since Western movies that include extreme violence are not being imported for distribution in the U.S.S.R.)

Out of time: I have heard some Soviets express impatience with Abuladze's lack of historical specificity. (The film juxtaposes armor with a Rubik's cube, mixing various eras.) But Abuladze said he deliberately erased the time and place where the events occur "because they happen everywhere and always. And there's no guarantee they won't take place in the future." The dead tyrant in *Repentance* is repeatedly dug up for a similar reason. "It's hard to bury him—and there's meaning in this."

How many people can decode all the symbolism in this film is hard to tell. There are references to Hieronymus Bosch and Breughel. And some, I think, to Eisenstein. (The gleam of the tyrant's glasses recalls not only Beria, Stalin's henchman, but the bespectacled doctor in *Potemkin* who declares that maggot-ridden food is fit for sailors to eat.)

Yet reading between the lines is a survival skill that not only intellectuals have mastered in the U.S.S.R. Abuladze notes that a cook and a waitress in his Moscow hotel congratulated him warmly on *Repentance*. The "warning" genre—which this film fits into—is well known in the Soviet Union, and cautionary tales have often been set outside the Soviet period (even in outer space) to evade the censor. If *glasnost* prospers, it may turn out that such evasive tactics are no longer needed and we'll say they were characteristic of earlier periods of Soviet culture.

Yet for many artists, Abuladze included, a metaphorical style does not seem to be second choice, but the form in which they can best express themselves. Under complete freedom, they would use it, too, one suspects. Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to prove that hypothesis. Only when artistic works conceived in an uncensored environment are set before the public, can we tell if that is true.

Karen Rosenberg often writes on Soviet culture.

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REPENTANCE

By Karen Rosenberg

MOSCOW

IN 1946, SERGEI EISENSTEIN RECEIVED a letter from Tengiz Abuladze and Revaz (Rezo) Chkheidze, two young men from the Soviet republic of Georgia who had decided to become directors after seeing Eisenstein's work and who longed to study filmmaking at his feet. It was not a good moment for the man who'd made *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The revolution that Eisenstein had embraced had given way to Stalin's terror, which the arts were supposed to cheerfully ignore or sweetly praise. In *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, Eisenstein strongly hinted that he despised paranoid, brutal dictators like Stalin, and he must have known that criticism of his work was inevitable.

In the hospital, recovering from a heart attack (later, another would kill him), he wrote his admirers that he was glad that young people were interested in the great art that film sometimes can be. But they should know, he said, that the filmmaker's work is hard, the hardest of all the arts. Think hard, he cautioned, before you take it up.

Getting to *Repentance*: Tengiz Abuladze, whose film, *Repentance*, about a paranoid, brutal director was banned from 1984 to 1986, has not forgotten this letter. He recited parts of it to me during my recent visit to Moscow. Having decided to become a director, he learned fast how right his idol had been. Later in 1946, Eisenstein was viciously

attacked by the Central Committee of the Communist Party for *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*. And after Abuladze's first year at the Moscow film school, his professor, director Sergie Yutkevich, was fired for "cosmopolitanism," the euphemism for Jewishness.

"What we didn't see in our lives..." the 64-year-old director said, quietly. "And I have to tell you," he added later, "that no people suffered as much as mine. I emphasize this because some think that since Stalin was from Georgia he spared the Georgians and didn't arrest anyone, but protected them. Nothing of the kind."

As perhaps the most popular of the arts, film was tightly controlled in the U.S.S.R., even after Stalin. Some directors stopped making films rather than produce rot; others compromised their talent and fell into deep depression. For years, Abuladze was lucky to find a relatively liberal atmosphere in Gruziafilm, the Georgian film studio. There, for instance, he made two feature films about tyranny: *A Plea* (1968) and *The Wishing Tree* (1977). At the end of 1982, he finished the scenario for *Repentance*, which was to be the last in this trilogy about the victimization of innocent people. He says he was encouraged to write the screenplay

by Eduard Shevardnadze, then first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, and now (under Gorbachov) the Soviet foreign minister. **Evading the censors:** But Abuladze feared the Soviet film agency Goskino would not approve the script, so he took the advice of his old friend Rezo Chkheidze, who had become the head of the Gruziafilm studio, and produced the film for Georgian television. There was a two-hour time slot over which the republic station had control. Moscow had to know only the theme of the program and the director.

"We sent a telegram to the central television station in Moscow saying that the director Abuladze, winner of a People's Artist award, would shoot a film on a moral/ethical theme. They were delighted that Abuladze had finally decided to work in television and gave us permission."

What made the script of *Repentance* so controversial were details of the Stalin era that had long been covered up in public in the U.S.S.R. "We interviewed many people—in fact, they wrote most of the scenario," Abuladze said.

The scene where children and adults examine a pile of logs to see if prisoners they know had scratched their names or addresses on them is based on fact. "It would

be impossible to think up such an episode. We were told about it." And history suggested the music from René Clair's film of the '30s *Under the Roofs of Paris* that can be heard as a long line waits to deliver parcels and letters to prison authorities. In Georgia, Abuladze noted, there was a prison with a movie theater next door. They shared a common wall, and you can imagine the contrast of sounds....

Tunnelling to Istanbul: And then there's the man in *Repentance* who confesses to being a spy and says that his mission was to dig a tunnel from Bombay to London. Clearly absurd. But, says Abuladze, the secretary of one regional Communist Party committee actually confessed that he was supposed to build a tunnel from the Black Sea Georgian city of Batumi to Istanbul.

Now, under Gorbachov, Soviets like Abuladze can say openly how some such confessions were obtained: "People were beaten till they lost consciousness, and when they came to, they were asked, 'Well, are you going to sign?' They signed, and if they didn't they were beaten again, until they signed because there was no point in resisting further."

Yet *Repentance* does not include such scenes of beatings. The interrogation in the film is highly stylized, even surrealistic. (It's set in a garden where there's a white grand piano.) "I've overheard people say that this is a very beautiful film—and they consider

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SOVIET FILMMAKER TENGIZ ABULADZE:
A GREAT DIRECTOR CONFRONTS A GREAT DICTATOR