

ight things & wrong things

by MIKEL KOVEN

It has been two weeks since the release of Spike Lee's latest film *Do the Right Thing* and, as such, some retrospection is needed. The film demands that viewers do some retrospection on their own part: in what way have we been guilty of racial prejudice, even subtly? There is no denying that Lee's film is a remarkable piece of work, but as the emotional clouds begin to clear, some points need to be mentioned.

Set on the "hottest day of the year," the residents of Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant district are feeling not only the natural heat of the day, but the heat of racial hatred. The day climaxes in the destruction of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, caused by a horrific race riot.

There is fear, from theatre managers and distributors, that the violence in the film will incite violence on the streets. There has already been a case of two men exchanging gunfire over a popcorn box at a movie theatre playing the film. And this was before the movie even started! This is a hot summer, thermally (cinematically, it has been rather cool and dry). Temperatures are running high. I doubt that the gunfight was caused directly by the film but it is a hornet's nest of controversy, nonetheless.

The immediate response I had to the film was on how similar it was to Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*. Both films are less narrative than filmed essays or documents, if you will. The voices and ideas of *Do the Right Thing* are real. The fact that they are scripted is irrelevant. If you are to argue that because Lee's was able to choose what was said and what was not, as is the justified argument against a scripted film being a documentary, then how do you refute documentary filmmaker choosing his footage in the same way.

The fiction film chooses what is said with a pen and paper in the form of a script, the documentary filmmaker does exactly the same thing only with pieces of film and audio tape. The final distinction then, must be in the "reality" of what is presented. The reality of *Do the Right Thing* is a "real" as in the *Thin Blue Line*.

Although similar to *Weekend* in its use of

the "essay" form of filmmaking, it is very different in its mode of audience engagement. *Weekend* is an intellectual film; not that *Do the Right Thing* is non-intellectual but the way that *Weekend* engages its audience is on the cerebral level. *Do the Right Thing* is an emotional film. It engages its audience emotionally. Perhaps *Do the Right Thing* would be an even greater film if Lee had the courage to ignore the emotional elements of the issue and attack his audience with the same furor intellectually. If the film were not so emotionally charged, I do not think there would be a film.

Yes, you can hit "white liberals" over the head with the obvious, but you can't make them think. Much like the proverbial horse.

The fact that Lee has been able to start the conversation rolling with his film is great. This is an issue that will be as hotly discussed as last year's *Last Temptation of Christ*. Progress will have been made if, after seeking the film, one person thinks twice about telling a racist joke or even thinking a racist slur. The search for progress is not the sign of a "bleeding heart," it is a sign of brotherhood; the sameness in everyone, even if that sameness is that we are all racist sonsofbitches. And we are.

But what are we going to do about it? Lee's answer is in the endquotes: one by Martin Luther-King Jr. and one by Malcolm X. We have to choose between non-violence and love or Public Enemy's anthem, "Fight the Power." It is not an easy choice. The only thing that Lee's emotional battering results in is that open forum. I hope that is enough.

We of the metropolitan centres of the northern parts of North America know this already. We try to curb our racist tendencies because they are discouraged by the rest of society. It is where the Klu Klux Klan and the Nazi party "momba" together that this film needs to be shown. It won't. Even if it does show up, it will be as the second feature with *Surf Nazis Must Die* at the local drive-in. The people who need to be educated about the problems with racism won't see it.

Why should they? They have been taught a certain way and will refuse to see it as anything but liberal propaganda. The local Nazi and skinhead groups will also avoid the movie. The people who this information should be reaching don't care. If they did, they wouldn't need *Do the Right Thing* in the first place. I'm not saying *Do the Right Thing* is redundant, but at the screening I was at, the audience was filled with "white liberals." They already know what the problem is. Lee has gone for the wrong market.

All of the sociological repercussions aside, *Do the Right Thing* is the latest film by the most talented young filmmaker in the United States. Surviving the emotional annihilation that the film delicately delivers with a sledgehammer, still remains the hottest film in the current tepid sea of summer releases.

Currently, the best of the tepid lot is Ted Kotcheff's *Weekend at Bernie's*. Andrew McCarthy and Jonathan Silverman play two insurance correctors who discover a multi-million dollar embezzlement scandal and win a weekend at the bosses Hamptons home as a reward. Unknown to them, the boss is the embezzler and has arranged for the two boys to be murdered. This is all irrelevant, because it is the boss who gets murdered and the boys decide to continue with the weekend party using the corpse for a novelty party favour.

Needless to say, the film is a comedy. A rather black comedy at that. And the important question in assessing the merit of a comedic film is "is it funny?" Yup, it sure is.

The big difference between *Weekend at Bernie's* and other films of the "teen-sex genre," is that the jokes come out of the situation, they are not the situation itself. Most films would have the biggest joke be that these kids are playing with a dead guy. Here, the writers have used the dead guy to create jokes, rather than being the joke itself. Not a difficult thing to do, but too often comedy writers are less original and imaginative than writers for television sitcoms. *Weekend at Bernie's* is funny. It resists the urge to overdose on cheap macabre humour, ripping off Hitchcock's *Trouble with Harry*. Death is fun, not sick. Bernie deserves what he gets, the boys know this, and have a ball. So does the audience.

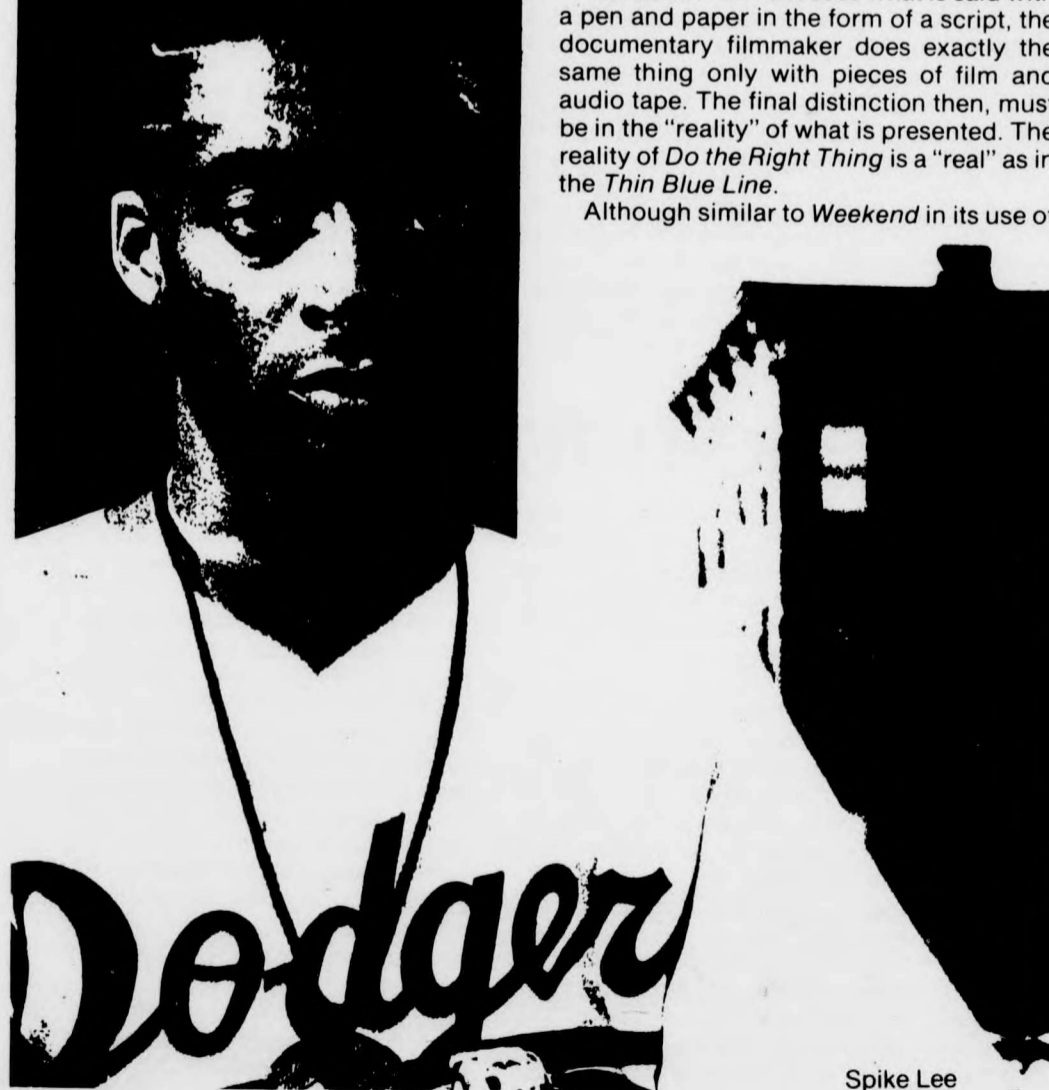
I like Andrew McCarthy. He is my favourite of the bratpackers, a group of "actors" I truly despise. The only films of his I like are the ones that are good. I had to be reminded that he did *Pretty in Pink*, a horrific piece of drivel. The good films he's done include *Class*, *Heaven Help Us* and he was the one good thing in *St. Elmo's*. McCarthy may be criticized for choosing some lousy scripts, but he usually handles them admirably.

The big thrill for *Weekend at Bernie's* was seeing a new comedy by Canadian director Ted Kotcheff. In the 1970s Kotcheff did some wonderful work in comedy including *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Fun With Dick and Jane* (starring Jane Fonda and George Segal and one of my favourite comedies of all time). It has been awhile since Kotcheff has done comedy. Most recently he did the *First Blood* movie, *Uncommon Valor* and, earlier this year, *Winter People*. When Kotcheff is doing an action drama he is pitifully inept, but he comes alive in comedy. Comedy seems to be the genre he is most comfortable with, or at least most skilled in.

Weekend at Bernie's is not going to win any Academy Awards, but out of the sex comedy genre, it is up there in the pantheon with *Risky Business*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Class* and even the first *Porky's*; films worthy of note for their daring, and ability at making the still stigmatized issue of sex fun. And that is what a comedy should be. *Weekend at Bernie's* starts off slowly, but when Bernie dies, the fun begins.

Much less successful is Paul Bartel's new film, *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills*. Where *Weekend at Bernie's* has nothing to offer apart from fun, *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills* has a lot to offer, too much perhaps, and accomplishes very little of it. The story is about two servants of different households who have been thrown together for a weekend to celebrate the death of one household's patriarch and because the other household is being fumigated. The two servants decide to bet on which one can bed down the other's employer first.

The most interesting moment of the film is the cross cutting between the wealthy women talking about the "hard bodies" of the servants, and the suave servants discussing the kinkiness of the employers. The differences in class are shown for what they are in this scene, different perspectives on the same thing. Both groups are horny, and dissatisfied with their sexual partners from the same class. The class struggle of the title



Spike Lee