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*Red Hook Summer.* Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Jules Brown, Thomas Jefferson Byrd, Toni Lysaith. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 2012. Film.

*Red Hook Summer,* Spike Lee's latest installation in a portfolio of films chronicling life in Brooklyn, NY, explores the controversial subject of sexual abuse by church leaders. While this type of topical potency is what audiences have learned to expect from Lee, *Red Hook Summer* quickly fizzles out as Lee's poor execution of the film — performed by miscast actors, an elusive backstory, and several competing plots — leaves audiences generally disappointed and frequently confused regarding the movie's ultimate destination.

Bishop Enoch Rouse (Clarke Peters), head of Lil' Piece of Heaven Baptist Church in the project community of Red Hook in Brooklyn, establishes early on that his church is laden with the same burden that plagues many clerics — big bills with a small, yet loyal congregation to finance them. When his young grandson, Flik Royale (Jules Brown), comes to visit from Atlanta, GA for the summer, Flik learns that Bishop Rouse has other issues that are equally burdensome; Rouse is a religious fanatic disinterested in Flik's modern pleasures (i.e. iPad 2), his vegan diet, and his aversion to hard work. Flik is quickly assigned clean-up duties at Lil' Heaven where he meets and befriends Chaz Morningstar (Tony Lysaith), the daughter of a parishioner. Their summer adventures at the church and in Red Hook are regularly monitored by the shamelessly inebriated Deacon Zee (Thomas Jefferson Byrd) and Chaz's overprotective mother, Sister Sharon (Heather Simms), but Flik and Chaz still manage to balance church work and summer fun in frequently comedic ways.

The film's convoluted story culminates with the public disclosure of a heinous secret that Bishop Rouse has hidden for much of his career when a male congregant reveals to the church during the charismatic throes of morning worship that the bishop molested him as a child. This is the first time audiences are given a minute shred of backstory during a controversial recollection of Rouse molesting the young boy after prompting him to quote Biblical scriptures as a form of deviant foreplay. Confronted with the aftermath of this confession and the uproar that ensues, Rouse swiftly demonizes and excommunicates the congregant to avoid exposing his own skeletons. However, the inevitable occurs; the bishop's downfall

is set in motion as the foundation of Lil' Heaven is shattered when his innocence and credibility are called into question by those who remain. Easily considered the apex of the film, Spike Lee skillfully preserves this momentum when a group of neighborhood thugs later exercise their own form of vengeance against Rouse in a quasi-Crucifixion scene that becomes the film's final answer to a prevailing problem.

*Red Hook Summer* is often complicated by Spike Lee's abysmal mix of established actors with well-intentioned amateurs — a source of constant frustration for audiences as potentially high-energy scenes lose thrust amid poorly-delivered lines and emotionally-detached interactions. Lee attempts to remedy this mistake by offering a glimmer of hope with familiar faces from his past films, but their brief introductions and occasional lines make a promise they cannot possibly deliver as Lee's haphazard script leaves little room for their development. A highpoint of this reunion is Spike Lee's reprise of his own role as Mookie from *Do the Right Thing* (1989), but our bliss is quickly tempered by the fact that Mookie is still delivering pizza from Sal's decades after the Bed-Stuy good food revolution.

Spike Lee's choice to omit backstory until the film's climax is a decision that can only be labeled obscure at best. The opening scenes of the film show Colleen Royale (De'Adre Aziza), Flik's mother, leaving him at his grandfather's home — in a meeting that we learn is their first — then departing without any indication to audiences as to why this vacation was sanctioned. Viewers learn later that Colleen is fully aware of her father's sexual past, so her eagerness to leave Flik in his care is mind-boggling. Lee also alludes to a burgeoning romance between Bishop Rouse and Sister Sharon a few times in the film, but fails to further cultivate their relationship or explain the origins of it. When Rouse is later exposed by his abused congregant and tries to clarify the dispute with Flik, he makes a vague comment about his attempt to self-medicate his string of sexual perversions seemingly by castration, ultimately making a sexual relationship with Sister Sharon impossible — yet another contradiction that leaves viewers baffled.

Overall, *Red Hook Summer* is a cinematic gem in terms of its theme and camera technique. Unfortunately, the dilemma occurs when trying to decide which theme to weigh! Lee consistently muddles the issue of sexual abuse with a host of other divergent and distracting topics (gentrification,

HIV / AIDS awareness, violence) effectively robbing the film of its strength and addling viewers from his central focus. Nonetheless, a landmark a staple of Lee films — imaginative camerawork — is fully accomplished and adds vibrancy and authenticity to an otherwise dismal film. *Red Hook Summer* is shot almost entirely with a digital camera, and Lee expertly employs a series of scattershot views that audiences are expected to connect and align — perhaps paralleling Flik's perspective and his own attempts to make sense of a highly segmented summer.

*Red Hook Summer* does not represent Spike Lee's best work but it does not diminish his place as a groundbreaking filmmaker or detract from his diverse contribution of films. Some moviegoers have vowed to boycott Lee's impending films based on *Red Hook Summer* alone — which would be a colossal mistake. The confounding intricacies of *Red Hook Summer* leave viewers feeling that financial strain and pressure to produce are the culprits responsible for Spike Lee's substandard film, but surely these challenges were present when he created his first feature-length film, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) — also shot quickly and inexpensively. Yet Lee still managed to create a masterpiece that would eventually become a classic — in spite of a shoestring budget and novice actors. Loyal fans are confident that Lee will summon his "mojo" and make a substantial comeback with his next film. Hopefully, the screening schedule of his next endeavor will not be as nebulous as *Red Hook Summer's* and as equally hard to grasp.

## Works Cited

*Do the Right Thing.* Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee. Universal Pictures, 1989. Film.

*She's Gotta Have It.* Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Tracy Camilla Johns, Tommy Redmond Hicks, John Canada Terrell. Island Pictures, 1986. Film.

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