

One film scores racism; three score low on scale

By Judith Trojan
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — A powerful look at racism, "Do the Right Thing" (Universal) is by turns hilarious and harrowing. Few will leave the theater without emotional scars or without reflecting on the provocative manner in which filmmaker Spike Lee points a finger. In questioning the "right" way to handle racial issues before, during and after they escalate into violence, Lee gives viewers an uneasy sense that currently there is no "right" way.

Although filmed in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the one-block neighborhood shown here looks more like an idealized Hollywood set than a grungy, crack-house locale. But this tree-lined haven of scrubbed brownstones works as an amiable cocoon for its predominantly black and Hispanic denizens. The characters — deliberate ethnic and racial stereotypes each of whom provokes a specific reaction — and not their physical habitat, are the key focus, giving the film a strong allegorical feel.

The screenplay unfolds in playlike fashion from dawn to dusk in and around Sal's Famous Pizzeria during a scorching summer heat wave. Italian-American Sal (Danny Aiello in an award-caliber performance) has kept his pizzeria afloat in the changing neighborhood for 25 years, despite admonitions to close from his obnoxious, bigoted elder son, Pino (John Turturro), and the fact that his customers are no longer white.

It's obvious from the beginning that Sal works hard not to be a bigot and to play fair with his predominantly young patrons. He's as rough on his riotously squabbling sons, Pino and Vito (Richard Edson), as he is on Mookie (Spike Lee), his mellow black pizza-delivery boy. But Sal will never be black, and he'll never comprehend the frustration of blacks who can't afford to run businesses of their own in the neighborhood. He refuses to put photos of noted black Americans on his "Wall of Fame" that is papered with every Italian-American who ever made good. And he won't tolerate loud boom-box music.

Writer-director Lee populates his Bed-Sty block with a satiric array of characters. There's the riotous trio of black street-corner philosophers (Paul Benjamin, Frankie Faison and Robin Harris); the rap-happy neighborhood disk jockey (Sam Jackson); the boozy unofficial mayor and peacemaker (Ossie Davis) and the wise old "mother" confessor (Ruby Dee). Buggin Out (sassily played by Giancarlo Esposito) is the angry black-pride advocate who scratches the neighborhood's racial wounds until they bleed. Meanwhile, Lee's

Mookie tries unsuccessfully to roll with his boss's Italian-American punches, his Hispanic girlfriend's (Rosie Perez) non-stop nagging, and the fact that he's still delivering pizzas while newly arrived Koreans have opened a profitable neighborhood market across from Sal's.

Lee plays the resident straight man well, and rivals Woody Allen with the incredible talent he has packaged so well in this film. His previous efforts as writer-director-actor, including the black-oriented "She's Gotta Have It" and "School Daze," showed great promise. But with "Do the Right Thing," he speaks to a larger audience about universal racial and ethnic issues.

With its passionate characters, sharp satire, savvy musical counterpoints and overt theatricality, "Do the Right Thing" is an incendiary film that will win awards and harsh criticism for its depiction of violence as a potentially justified means to an end.

Due to heavy profanity including incessant racial and ethnic slurs and some sexual vulgarities, intense climactic racial violence and a brief sexual scene with fleeting nudity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted. **'Licence to Kill'**

James Bond is back in "Licence to Kill" (United Artists), but given the current glut of celluloid super-heroes, Bond has nothing new to offer film fans except more of the same numbing stunts and grisly violence.

This time 007 (Timothy Dalton) has a personal vendetta to avenge. With his "licence to kill" revoked, he disregards professional dismissal to track down and slaughter sadistic Latin American drug lord, Franz Sanchez (Robert Davi), who hides behind a puppet government defying efforts to nab him on U.S. land and sea.

007 fans may enjoy the watery Florida and mock island (Mexican) locales; various Bond in-jokes; a brief, worried appearance by Miss Money Penny (Caroline Bliss); the comical gizmos of ever-faithful Q (Desmond Llewelyn); and the mind-boggling stunts, the best of which opens the show. But the grisly deaths by torture and intense fiery chases soon make this film indistinguishable from every other recent action-adventure film exploiting Ramboesque feats, a slimy drug-trafficking villain and nubile young beauties.

Due to numerous scenes involving grisly rub-outs, tortures, intense chases and explosions, and implied sexual promiscuity, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some mate-



Sal (right), a pizzeria owner played by Danny Aiello in Spike Lee's newest film "Do the Right Thing," makes a point during an intense exchange with Mookie, played by Lee.

rial may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Weekend at Bernie's'

The dream weekend of two low-level insurance executives meets with an early demise as a result of their boss' inopportune death in a "Weekend at Bernie's" (Fox), a silly, one-joke farce.

After Larry (Andrew McCarthy) and Richard (Jonathan Silverman) uncover a scheme to defraud their company, the perpetual losers are rewarded with a Labor Day invitation to their boss's posh Long Island beach house. With dreams of big promotions and nubile beach bunnies swimming in their heads, Larry and Richard are unaware they are being set up by boss Bernie (Terry Kiser) for a mob rub-out.

But Bernie is an embezzler who's been fooling around with the don's girlfriend. So he, not his witless employees, is the first to be rubbed out.

When the young men descend on the Hamptons, they find Bernie's corpse and mistakenly believe him to be the victim of a drug overdose. The rest of the film covers their slapstick struggle to blend in with Bernie's interminable yuppie beach party all the while camouflaging Bernie's state of rigor mortis.

As written by Robert Klane ("Where's Poppa") and directed by Ted Kotcheff ("North Dallas Forty"), "Weekend at Bernie's" does make its point about the conscienceless upper-class hedonists who are so self-absorbed that they never for a minute notice that Bernie is dead. And slovenly Larry, poor and going nowhere fast, is also devoid of a conscience as he tries to convince straight-laced Richard to conceal Bernie's death so they can continue their weekend in paradise.

Richard also has his price — to impress coed Gwen (Catherine Mary Stewart) — so looking for good role models in this film is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Lies are the order of the day for Larry, who conceals Bernie's death in silly ways, and for Richard, who'll concoct any adde-brained story to win Gwen's heart. For most of the film, Bernie, played riotously by rubbery, smirking Kiser, is the only true-blue character on board.

Corpse jokes aside, Bernie's body takes all manner of physical abuse to make him look alive, including a real wave beating as he's accidentally dragged from the back of

his speedboat. He's also tastelessly accosted alive and dead (off camera) by the sex-starved mobster's girlfriend who apparently can't tell the difference.

Due to its pointless look at a glamorized amoral lifestyle that includes lying, cheating, alcoholism, drug abuse, murder, implied sexual promiscuity and necrophilia, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Lords of the Deep'

Another sci-fi outing, "Lords of the Deep" (Concorde), spins ahead to the year 2020 when the Earth has become virtually uninhabitable due to environmental desecration.

This low-budget ecological warning produced by Roger Corman is set underwater where the last of Earth's resources are being exploited. A motley crew of deep-sea scientists employed by an ominous corporation discover a new life form that seems to survive and mutate no matter what is done to it.

Mesmerized by the gooey substance, Dr. Claire O'Neill (Priscilla Barnes) is drawn to its source, an alien colony of friendly beings who settled at the bottom of the sea when their planet was similarly destroyed by pollution. Despite their harmless nature, Claire's slimy commander (Bradford Dillman) does everything he can to destroy her investigation.

With its cheesy sets and costumes, derivative scripts ("2001," "Aliens," "Deepstar Six") and amateurish direction by Mary Ann Fisher, this would be forgettable fare except for the fact that it ends with a worthwhile ecological warning. No one should be immune from hearing this message, and the film virtually hits viewers over the head with its final plea to save Earth before it's too late.

Due to some mild rough language and sexual innuendo and comic-book menace, the USCC classification is A-II, adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Trojan is on the staff of the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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