

ENTERTAINMENT

Lee introspective in Sentinel-Voice interview

Interview by Ramon Savoy,
Sentinel-Voice Editor-in-Chief

Savoy: What is it that inspires you to do something at a certain time?

Lee: Timing is everything; that's the way I operate. I'm a huge sports fan. It's taken me this long to do a film about sports — basketball in this case ("He Got Game" opened nationwide May 1) — I just never really had the story before. The first sports thing I wanted to do was the Jackie Robinson story, which hopefully will still get made one day.

Savoy: It's interesting that you use a young man who didn't play for the New York Knicks.

Lee: Ray Allen was an All-American at the University of Connecticut and one of the rising stars of the NBA. Ray plays Jesus Shuttlesworth, the top high-school basketball player in the nation. The film takes place the week before he has to make a decision: whether he's going to go to college or bypass college and go directly to the NBA.

Savoy: There's been a lot of conversation about more and more high school players skipping college for the NBA. Did that motivate you?

Lee: I feel very strongly that these young men who play Division I basketball or football — the two major revenue-generating sports — should get a stipend. They've got to give them something, because these schools are making billions of dollars, collectively. These guys don't get anything.

Savoy: Do we need more high-profile individuals speaking up or coming together to help these young men and women?

Lee: They have to do something because it's ridiculous.

Savoy: How long does it take for you to gather material to put a film together? And is it still as difficult as it once was for you to get the funding for these films?

Lee: It's much easier for me to get funding nowadays if the budget is in a certain range. But (if) we're talking \$45 million, \$50 million, that's going to be very hard for me to do. That's why we haven't made Jackie Robinson as of yet.

Savoy: Have you tried to get a collaboration like you did when you were trying to do Malcolm X?

Lee: Yes, but I have to be realistic. It was hard to raise \$3 million for "Get on the Bus," so it would be almost impossible to get the \$50 million (needed for Jackie Robinson).

Savoy: You've spoken out many times about the conditions for African-Americans in

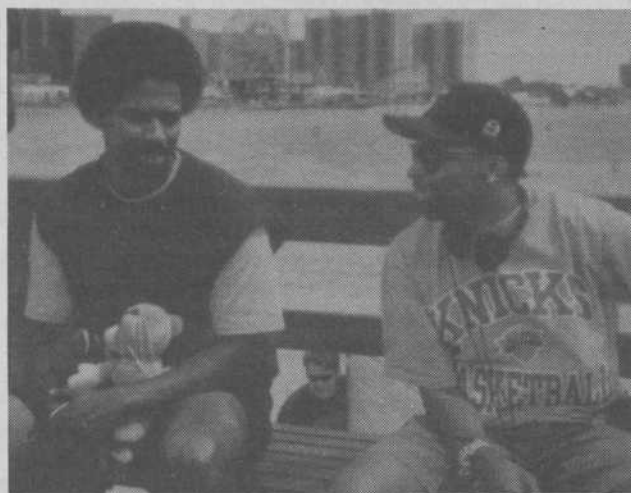


Photo special to Sentinel-Voice

During location shooting for Spike's "He Got Game," director/writer/producer Spike Lee (right) discusses a scene with Academy Award winner Denzel Washington.

Hollywood. When you speak out, does Hollywood slap your hand or find ways to make it more difficult for you?

Lee: I don't know if that's the case. I think that a lot of people in Hollywood really don't know how to handle me. A lot of how they decide to treat me is based on what they read in the papers and what they feel my persona is. When I say stuff, I don't say it as a spokesperson for 35 million African-Americans. It's just the beliefs that Spike Lee has.

Savoy: Do you feel that you get chastised too much in the press for your viewpoints?

Lee: I just feel that I have access to the media, and I feel that some things I just got to speak out on. The recent thing I've spoken about was what I feel was Quentin Tarantino's excessive use of the N-word in "Jackie Brown."

Savoy: How do you feel about comedians such as Chris Rock who also use that word in their routines?

Lee: I feel much more comfortable with Black people using that word than White people. People might say that's being prejudiced or whatever, but I feel that when you're a member of an ethnic group or race, that gives you a right to use that word, whereas somebody else might not use it. There's too much historical baggage with White people using that word. I'm sorry, it's different from how we use it.

Savoy: You're a graduate of Morehouse.

Lee: Morehouse College, Atlanta Ga., finished 1979.

Savoy: Today, we have low numbers of African-American males in college. What are some of the things you've been able to do to try

to offset that?

Lee: Number one, I just feel that by doing the work I've done, it's the best thing I could do, to show an example that you can make it, you can go to college. I got my Master's from NYU, from the graduate film school — a Master of Fine Arts. Throughout the years we've had scholarships. I have my own scholarship at NYU that we give to the top African-American students there. I'm heavily involved with UNCF (the United Negro College Fund). Anything with education I've always tried to be a part of.

Savoy: Have you ever considered doing a play?

Lee: I really enjoy theater, but I haven't had the desire as of yet to direct a play.

Savoy: You use a lot of the same... artists continually in your productions. Is it that because you have a rapport with them or they understand you?

Is it like a team?

Lee: Yes, it's like a stable, you know ... a repertory company, and they're very talented, they're very versatile, so even though they might be in several of my films, they're not repeating the roles they've done before. Everything they do is new and fresh.

Savoy: What is the one message that you're really trying to convey to the audience in "He Got Game"?

Lee: I don't know if I would answer with one message, but I think it's very important that we

talk about redemption and forgiveness in the film. I think that's something everybody can relate to.

Savoy: Are there any words you'd like to share with the readership of the Las Vegas Sentinel-Voice?

Lee: We need people to come out in numbers and support the film.

Editor's Note: "He Got Game" scored a victory it's first time out, topping the weekend box office with 7.6 million.

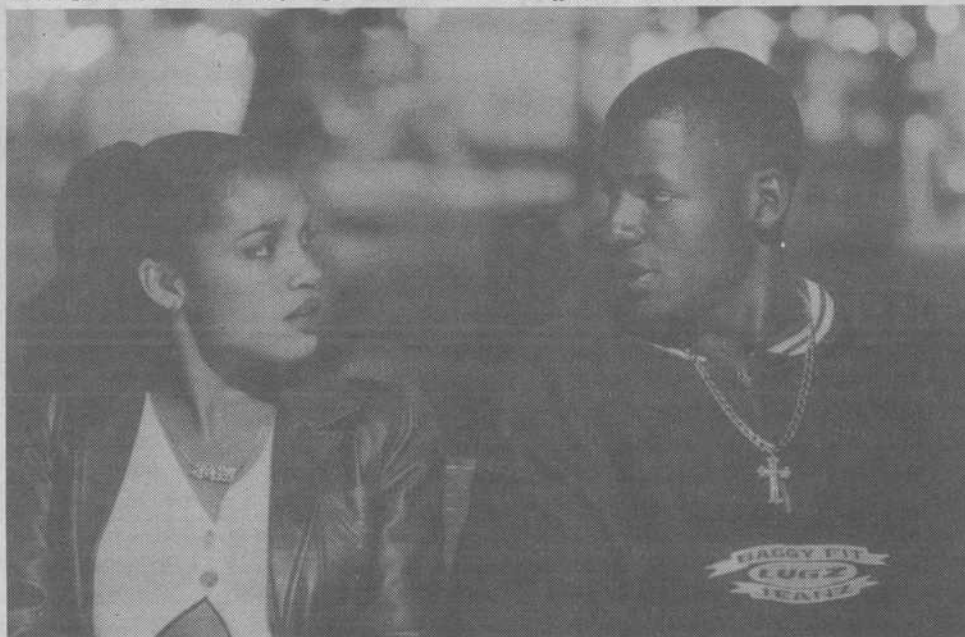


Photo special to Sentinel-Voice

In Spike Lee's drama "He Got Game," Rosario Dawson (left) stars as Lala Bonilla, the girlfriend with ulterior motives for convincing her boyfriend Jesus, America's #1 high school basketball player (played by Milwaukee Bucks star Ray Allen) to sign a lucrative contract with the National Basketball Association.

Movie highlights reconciliation

Special to Sentinel-Voice

"He Got Game," Spike Lee's newest feature film, hit the theaters on May 1. Subtitled "The Father, the Son and the Holy Game," the film addresses two very complex issues - family relationships and the big-money politics of the sports world - and examines the ways in which they intersect.

The starring roles of Jesus and Jake Shuttlesworth, an exceptional high school basketball player and his father, are played by Ray Allen and Denzel Washington respectively. Allen, the 22-year-old stellar Milwaukee Bucks guard, makes his acting debut in this film.

The story plucks the father out of prison with the promise of a commuted sentence if he can manage in six days to convince his estranged son to sign with Big State, the Governor's alma mater.

Shuttlesworth Sr. must confront his own resentment over having fallen short of NBA potential in his younger days.

Thus the film takes on a timeless dramatic theme whose roots can be traced back to ancient Greek theatre and mythology: in Washington's words, "the inevitable day when the son finally triumphs over his father."

The gifted younger man faces the task of having to make a critical decision while fending off the manipulative thrusts of family members and others who are hoping to profit from their association with him. "People see young athletes as walking banks and everybody wants a piece of the action," comments writer/director/co-producer Lee.

As a real-life star athlete, Allen could relate to his character's dilemmas. "He has a whole collection of things that can detour him from doing the right thing and making it to college, where he wants to be. And that is definitely what goes on today in sports," Allen says, adding, "People automatically believe that because you're going to be rich, they're going to be rich. I've seen it happen."

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