

Get on the Bus

In 1989, director Spike Lee offered an exhortation to urban America in his controversial *Do the Right Thing*. Seven years later he offers another one in *Get on the Bus*. In the earlier film, the exhortation was ambiguous since it was not altogether clear what the “right thing” was. In the current movie, the call is clearer: Lee is urging African-American men to get on a vehicle that will lead them to self-affirmation, discipline, and pride.

The film’s release was tied to the first anniversary of the Million Man March on Washington last October 16 (1995) and, indeed, the film itself revolves around a score of men on a bus from Los Angeles heading for the March. But *Get on the Bus* is not really *about* the Million Man March; it concerns, rather, how a cross-section of black Americans react to the challenge that event represents.

That cross-section includes, among others: the solid, squarish leader of the tour, a testy, pugnacious actor, a regretful father and his cheeky son, a smooth, upscale policeman, a grizzled, out-of-work old timer, a gay couple at the point of breakup, a callow film school student, and a “homey” turned devout Muslim. They interact with others on their cross-country route, but it is essentially the intercourse between this collection of riders that makes up the film (according to Lee, 75 percent of the film was shot on the bus).

Get on the Bus could be considered a thesis film, the thesis being: how can the filmmaker portray the variety and complexity of the motivations for the Million Man March through the microcosm of a few imagined souls? Lee develops his thesis by introducing at one point or another many of the issues that swirled around the black community and the March itself: the mutual responsibilities of fathers and sons, the role of women in the black struggle, the nature of African-American leadership (including the debate over Louis Farrakhan as leader or loser), feelings of victimization, minority employment problems, how can successful blacks give back to the community, etc. All these questions, and others, are touched on and worked out in the film, mostly naturally, in conversations and quips, in debates and in brawls.

Such a presentation could easily fall into “preachiness,” but Spike Lee, while definitely didactic, avoids sermons by giving each side of a controversy its due and not plainly landing on one side or the other.

Even more importantly, his actors are not mouthpieces but mostly complex, surprising individuals. Standouts among a passel of good performances are Roger Guenveur Smith as Gary, the cop, who exudes a cool yet sympathetic intelligence, veteran Ossie Davis as Jeremiah, the old timer, both sagacious and sad, Charles S. Dutton as George, the bus driver, hearty and heartfelt, and Thomas Jefferson Byrd and DeAundre Bonds as, respectively, Evan Thomas Senior and Junior, warily making a connection between each other. (Showy, but over the top for my taste is Andre Braugher--from TV’s *Homicide*-- as Flip, the actor.)

Not all the exchanges on issues are serious ones. There is some sharp humor in this script (turned out in record time by young Reggie Rock Bythewood, making his first feature film writing debut). For example, there is a lively and raunchy singing of a “Roll

Call” round on the bus that introduces all the characters in their own bawdy words. Another great bit is provided by a last-minute rider, Wendell (Wendell Pierce), a super self-reliant hustler who has no use for the Million Man March except “to use it for networking.” Wendell’s bluntly conservative views are more than these boys on the bus (and Spike Lee?) can stomach: they toss him off!

Along with appropriate doses of humor are tinctures of drama. Yet here, Lee usually avoids the obvious and keeps it subtle--and real. There is a scene, for example, when a redneck Tennessee policemen (played by an uncredited Randy Quaid) forces his way on to the bus with his drug-sniffing dog. It’s a tense scene that could so easily be overplayed, but the director keeps it taut without ever going sloppy. Similarly, when the bus gang stops for a drink at a whitebread bar in Tennessee, their exchange with local clients, rather than producing predictable anxiety, offers easy conviviality. It’s Spike going against facile expectations.

Get on the Bus had a distinctive genesis. Inspired by the March itself, film producer Barry Rosenbush, along with two co-producers, convinced Spike Lee to direct this vision of a group of marchers. Another co-producer, Reuben Cannon, corralled a group of 15 prominent African-American personalities to finance it. Besides Lee himself, celebrities like actors Wesley Snipes and Danny Glover, lawyer Johnnie Cochran, pro basketball player Charles D. Smith and BET boss Robert Johnson contributed a total of \$2.5 million--a dirt cheap budget for a mainstream feature these days. The low budget meant an extremely tight shooting schedule--only three weeks--and a cast and crew that skipped the amenities. All of this was aimed at getting the film out in less than a year, to make the October 16 anniversary date.

The bus trip--and the movie--reaches a bittersweet conclusion. The bus mates make it to D.C. (scenes in the capital figure little in the film), but they do not make it to the March itself after a personal tragedy intervenes. But a heartening conclusion comes for this Road Picture: the final goal need not be reached, it’s the journey itself which matters. Movie goers might enjoy going along on this one.
(*The film is rated “R” for liberal use of obscenities.*)

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