

Slam

In recent years, Washington has been a focal point--or window dressing--for numerous motion pictures (e.g., *No Way Out*, *In the Line of Fire*, *Dave*, *The American President*, *Murder at 1600*, et al.). Other films use D.C. more as a setting for personal drama (*Being There*, *Heartburn*, *Broadcast News*, *Gardens of Stone*, etc.). No feature film in recent memory, however, has tried to depict life on the District's meanest streets--none until *Slam*, that is.

Slam is the first feature by documentary filmmaker Marc Levin, and it thrusts us into the life of a young, drifting African-American from Southeast named Ray Joshua (Saul Williams). Ray is into both small time drug-dealing (marijuana) and hip-hop versifying, his gift of gab on call for special occasions from friends like Big Mike (Lawrence Wilson), a big shot in a tough section called Dodge City. When Mike is shot with Ray beside him, cops who saw the hit arrest Ray, who--while not the shooter--is still clapped into D.C. Jail for possession of marijuana. Ray's introduction to the world of incarceration is stark and unfeeling: he is hounded by a mouthy Asian (Beau Sia), lectured by stern guards, and told by a public defender that his plea options--as a poor black guy from Southeast--are all bad.

Psychologically and physically, every part of him wants to break out, and Ray finally does break out verbally, spilling a cascade of poetry into the jail yard which stops the homies in their tracks. His performance is witnessed by Lauren Bell (Sonja Sohn), a teacher at the jail who eventually asks him to look her up on the outside. When one tough inmate Hopha (Bonz Malone) befriends him, Ray is able to make bail and look up Lauren, and to try and decide what to do with his future. His future looks like poetry, after he (invited by Lauren) triumphs in a spectacular slam riff on Connecticut Avenue. The only question that remains is whether Ray will do what Lauren wants him to do--take his medicine (i.e., a couple years for possession)--or try to run away from life...

Slam, made swiftly on a low budget, is less compelling narrative than an effective slice of life about one young black man in one American city. The story could be in Boston or Chicago or L.A., but it is nice to see it set in D.C., in a Southeast that many locals do not know well, if at all.

For those of us who *do* live in Southeast, it's fun to pick out the locations, which include RFK Stadium, Congressional Cemetery, Anacostia, the District Courthouse and the D.C. Jail itself (where the filmmakers were granted unprecedented access). Particularly pleasant is an Eastern Market scene which, with Lauren and Ray hand in hand, plays like an urban dream sequence. That's how many Hillites think about the Market anyway, so it's sweet to see it shown on film. Among the local sights, it's a special kick to see Marion Barry playing a judge and declaring "these drugs are killing our community"--a surefire laugh line for this town.

Its low budget makes for some choppiness in *Slam*, along with sequences that linger too long--like a lengthy argument Lauren and Ray have in the side yard of a rowhouse about his accepting his sentence or not. What the film does have is strong, convincing performances, especially from the leads, themselves slam poets who can twirl and spurt long hip hop rhymes that can mesmerize a crowd; audience members at my preview screening burst into spontaneous applause at several such readings. You may do likewise. (*Slam* poetry being current urban mouth music, of course, means plenty of profanity--the reason for the film's "R" rating.)

(November 1998)