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or almost 35 years, Spike Lee has chronicled African-American life in his films—from love, friendships and family to racism and police brutality. The Oscar-winning director, 63, is well aware that real life doesn't always have a happy ending—and neither should his art. “No, that's some other guy's movies,” he says.

As protests sweep the nation over the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd—the last two at the hands of the police—Lee's films are now more poignant than ever. “They should be required viewing for all Americans,” says actor Jonathan Majors, who stars in his new Netflix movie *Da 5 Bloods*. Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* tells the story of a young black man in Brooklyn who is choked to death by a cop using excessive force. Anger, grief and protests ensue. “What we're seeing today is not new,” Lee told CNN on May 31. “We've seen this again and again and again.” The next day he released the new short film *3 Brothers—Radio Raheem, Eric Garner and George Floyd*, which linked footage of the death

SPIKE

LEE



‘WE MUST
KEEP HOPE
ALIVE’

THE RENOWNED FILMMAKER REFLECTS ON TELLING AFRICAN-AMERICAN STORIES ONSCREEN, HOW BRUTAL HISTORY HAS REPEATED ITSELF AND HIS DREAMS FOR A BETTER FUTURE

By GILLIAN TELLING



**Rethinking
America**

“For this country to move forward, we have to look at everything from top to bottom,” says Lee.





Voice of Support
On June 7 Lee rode his bike during a peaceful protest in Brooklyn: "I haven't seen this diverse protests since I was a kid," he's said.

of his fictional *Do the Right Thing* character with the two real-life men killed by police. "Why are people rioting? Why are people doing this?" Lee asked. "Because people are fed up, and people are tired of the debasing, the killing of black bodies.... People are reacting the way they feel they have to to be heard."



Lee understands their pain. He's been showing audiences the injustices facing African Americans—and celebrating black culture onscreen—ever since his 1986 debut, *She's Gotta Have It*, an influential independent comedy about a single woman dating three men in Brooklyn. More serious movies like *Malcolm X* followed as well as semiautobiographical films like *Crooklyn* and *School Daze* and comedy-dramas like *Jungle Fever* and *Mo' Better Blues*.

Lee's latest film, *Da 5 Bloods*, tackles a different type of black American experience: serving in the military. Set in Vietnam, it's an action-packed tale about veterans who reunite to reminisce and unearth some long-buried secrets. (See review, page 40.) The film touches on the plight of black



DA 5 BLOODS' FAMILIAR FACES

For his new film, Lee cast mostly actors he's worked with before. "They're family," he says.



1. ISIAH WHITLOCK JR.

Whitlock, 65, was in Lee's *25th Hour* and *She Hate Me*. "I've learned a lot from him over the years," says the actor, "and I come in prepared as possible!"

2. NORM LEWIS

"He's a friend," says Lewis, 57, who worked with Lee on the *She's Gotta Have It* Netflix series. "He's just a great leader on-set."

3. DELROY LINDO

Lindo, 67, also starred in *Crooklyn* and *Malcolm X*: "I had a sense the work we were doing was special," he says of *Da 5 Bloods*.

4. CLARKE PETERS

Peters, 68, also starred in Lee's 2012 film *Red Hook Summer*. "The great part is Spike knows what he wants. He doesn't waste money or time."

5. JONATHAN MAJORS

This was the 30-year-old's first Spike Lee movie. "It's the most honorable position you can be in as an actor," he says. "He's a legend."

'I'M NEVER GOING TO RUN FOR OFFICE. ALL I CAN DO IS MY ART. THAT'S MY CONTRIBUTION'



OUTSPOKEN AT THE OSCARS

Lee, who had been nominated five times for an Oscar, finally won Best Adapted Screenplay in 2019 for *BlacKkKlansman* (above, on-set with Topher Grace and Adam Driver) and used his speech to urge viewers to vote. "Let's all mobilize. Let's all be on the right side of history," he said. "Make the moral choice between love versus hate. Let's do the right thing!"

soldiers who fought and died for their country while facing racism and hatred back home. Their PTSD also usually went untreated. "After Vietnam, they were called baby killers, all kinds of stuff," Lee says, adding that as a teen he watched the Vietnam War play out on the TV each night. "I think it's a disgrace that with Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, you have soldiers who fought for this country who are homeless. That's a travesty."

Lee has long been critical of Hollywood war movies for minimizing the stories of black soldiers. "There have definitely been African-American soldiers depicted in the Vietnam War in films before—Forest Whitaker in *Platoon*, Dorian Harewood in *Full Metal Jacket*—but I think this one is about the [black] experience, which is different," he says.

On Feb. 25, 2019, the day after winning his first Oscar, for Best Adapted Screenplay for *BlacKkKlansman* (a real-life story about a black man who infiltrated the KKK), Lee was on a plane to Thailand and Vietnam to start filming. "The people are beautiful there, particularly in Vietnam," he says. "Vietnamese people have no ill feelings toward Americans. They love Americans," he says. "What they told me is they don't have a problem with Americans—they have problems with the American government."

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: STEVE GRANITZ/WIREIMAGE; EVERETT; VINCENT BARONE/NY POST/MEGA; EVERETT; JIM SPELLMAN/GETTY IMAGES; IAN WEST/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; CARA ROBBINS/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES; DIA DIPASUPIL/WIREIMAGE

He can relate. Amid the current turmoil, Lee hopes people will vote for change this November. “As President Obama has said, this upcoming presidential election will probably be the most important presidential election in the history of the United States,” he says. “I want to take it one step further. I think this election is going to be the most important election in the history of the modern world.”



Lee was born Shelton Jackson Lee to mom Jacqueline, who taught arts and black literature at a private school, and William, an accomplished composer. He was nicknamed Spike as a child and raised with his three siblings in a middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, close to where he still has his film studio 40 Acres and a Mule. “My mother was a film fanatic,” Lee says. “She passed on her love of films to me. My father hated Hollywood films, so he wasn’t going with her. At that time I didn’t know I wanted to be a filmmaker—I was just my mother’s movie date.” After his sophomore year at Morehouse College, his mother died of cancer, and that’s when he understood his life plan. “I chose mass communications as my major, and that was it,” he says. Success came quickly. *She’s Gotta Have It*, made for just \$175,000 in 1985, made more than \$7 million at the box office. *Do the Right Thing* was nominated for an Oscar. His personal life also flourished. In 1993 he married Tonya, 54, a TV producer and author, and they raised daughter Satchel, 25, and son Jackson, 23. “They’re interested in art all around,” Lee says proudly of his kids. “Photography, dance. They’ve very well-rounded in their taste. They’re not just the kids of Spike Lee—they are who they are in their own right. Individuals.” Did they grow up



Radio Raheem



Eric Garner



George Floyd

FIGHTING INJUSTICE ON- AND OFFSCREEN

“Will history stop repeating itself?” Lee asks in his new short film *3 Brothers*, which shows clips of his *Do the Right Thing* character Radio Raheem (above, played by Bill Nunn), who was choked to death by police, alongside footage of Eric Garner, who died in New York in 2014 after being put in a choke hold, and George Floyd, who died in Minneapolis on May 25 after an officer knelt on his neck. “We’ve seen this again and again,” Lee said. “Now we have cameras, but the attack on black bodies has been here from the get-go.”

Family Man

Below left: Lee with son Jackson, wife Tonya and daughter Satchel at the 2019 Golden Globes. “They’re who they are in their own right,” he says of his kids. Below: watching the Knicks with Jackson.

thinking they had a cool dad? “Yeah. They still do!” he says with a laugh. “But they think their mother is cooler. Which is great.”

In the past few months, Lee has been isolating at home in New York with his family, riding his bike, missing his beloved Knicks and Yankees games and feeling new waves of anguish about more senseless deaths of black Americans. His only solution? To overhaul the entire system. “We have to look at everything as we enter A.C., or ‘After Corona,’” he says. “The inequality between the haves and have-

nots, the racial injustices from top to bottom. This country has to, and *must*, rectify what’s wrong. We *have* to make a concerted effort at all levels to address American life, and the areas where we’ve been lacking. We just have to. All those deaths will have been in vain if we just go back to the same thing.” He notes it’s not just the African-American community fed up with the violence. “This stuff is diverse,” he said. “I’m seeing a whole lot of white young people out there who are joining with us.” He believes things can get better if we work together—or at least he hopes so. “As Jesse Jackson has said, ‘Keep hope alive. Keep hope alive.’” ●

