

Spike Lee Returns to Brooklyn in Controversial 'Red Hook Summer'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 24, 2012 - 1:04pm

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – *"I ain't pawning my responsibility off as a parent and saying she's in God's hands."* What a powerful line. The idea that religion has been used as a crutch, an excuse for communities who preach that God will save their young ones when they need to do their part is a passionate and powerful one. And we all know that Spike Lee does his best work when he's inspired by powerful ideas. "Red Hook Summer," the controversial director's controversial latest features Lee playing with fascinating concepts and working well with setting even if the final result isn't quite the sum of its parts.

Flik Royale (newcomer Jules Brown) has been sent from Atlanta to Red Hook, Brooklyn to live with his preacher grandfather Da Good Bishop Enoch Rouse (Clarke Peters of "The Wire"). Flik immediately butts head with his passionate relative, one who calls him out in front of his entire congregation as a kid who needs God. Flik doesn't think he needs God. He's got his iPad2, which he carries around to chronicle his summer spent in Red Hook and it helps him keep an emotional distance from the people there. As time goes by, Flik falls for a girl named Chazz (Toni Lysaith) and draws closer to the sermons of his preacher relative.



Red Hook Summer

Photo credit: Variance

Spike Lee knows Brooklyn. "Red Hook Summer" is his sixth film set in the New York borough after "She's Gotta Have It," "Do the Right Thing," "Crooklyn," "Clockers," and "He Got Game." Considering how high most of those films would rank on anyone's list of Lee's best work to date, it's undeniably a setting that brings out the best in his filmmaking abilities. Just the way he shoots Red Hook brings this community to life. I loved the casual moments of "Red Hook Summer," the scenes of Flik moving around an area of the world that feels nearly alien to a kid from Atlanta. Lee loves Brooklyn and even makes an appearance as his character from "Right Thing," Mookie, who bafflingly is still delivering pizzas for Sal.

"Red Hook Summer" turns into an actor's showcase for Peters during three extended sermon scenes from Enoch. Peters is captivating, refusing to turn Enoch into a caricature and delivering his words with sincerity. When he talks about gangster mentalities taking over the community and looks at his bible and says, "*Meet my gangster!*", he means it. And Peters sells it brilliantly. His performance is the best thing about the movie (and the film sags when he's off-screen, especially when the young actors take the spotlight and don't deliver). Peters is so good that he draws you into his character, believing he actually could be the man to save Flik and Red Hook before Lee and co-writer James McBride take a drastic left turn with his character in the final act from which many audience members may never recover.



Red Hook Summer

Photo credit: Variance

I wasn't as startled by the turn because it grows from the general problem with the film – a lack of narrative focus. Lee and McBride have a ton of interesting ideas but haven't quite shaped them into a solid film. "Red Hook Summer" has some great scenes, some great performances, some great ideas, but also some narrative tangents and moments that feel like they should have been cut at some point in the process – writing, directing, editing, or just yelling "Stop!" during improvisation. At times, Lee seems to be wandering Red Hook himself just like Flik, looking for those powerful moments to capture on his camera like his protagonist does on his iPad2. Like Flik, he finds some amazing people and some remarkable moments but the film doesn't come together like it promises to in those great scenes.

I'm still willing to give "Red Hook Summer" a pass because of the ideas that Lee is playing with here and the personal passion he brings to the film. How does money, sexuality, sin, and forgiveness play into a world with little personal responsibility? When we can turn everything into "God's hands" do we take any true pain for our sins or do we ask any from the other people in our community? "Red Hook Summer" is most interesting for the conversations it could inspire.

"Red Hook Summer" stars Jules Brown, Clarke Peters, Toni Lysaith, Nate Parker, Thomas Jefferson Byrd, Jonathan Batiste, Heather Simms, and Isiah Whitlock Jr. It was written by Spike Lee & James McBride and directed by Lee. It opens in Chicago on August 24, 2012.



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