

Pungent & Trippy Satire in ‘Sorry to Bother You’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 9, 2018 - 8:47am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – If the film “Get Out” was a shot across the bow in satirizing black and white skin relationships, then “Sorry to Bother You” is a freaking Tomahawk missile. It’s about the time, the space and the state of the human race, which comes to a crescendo of wild and untamed proportions.

It is the debut film of writer/director Boots Riley, a 1990s hip hop artist originally from Chicago. The flow of the story is stream of consciousness, but the narrative drives many issues and economic/political points home. Art, commerce, materialism and even slavery is skewered, often to no points of recovery. The centerpiece is the use of the “white voice” in sales (aided by the voiceover work of David Cross and Patton Oswalt) to gain success for an African American telemarketer, and what he must lose along the way to keeping gaining. It’s radical tone is similar to a 1960s satire called “Putney Swope” (set in advertising), but applying the accelerator, as it speeds along to its own rhythm. It is the most original artist statement in cinema so far this year.

In an alternate universe Oakland in the modern day, a young adult African American man named Cassius (Lakeith Stanfield) is starting a new job as a telemarketer at a company called RegalView. This workaday world is counter to his performance artist girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson), but Cassius needs the money to pay his Uncle Sergio (Terry Crews) his back rent.



Wounded Warrior: Cassius (Lakeith Stanfield) in 'Sorry to Bother You'

Photo credit: Annapurna Pictures

Cassius sits next to Langston (Danny Glover), who gives him a tip on how to be more successful in phone sales... use a “white voice” (David Cross). The absurd nasally tone makes the redubbed “Cash” the biggest seller on the floor. When he moves up to the executive tower, his success comes with another price, amid a strike at RegalView and a secret at its questionable subsidiary WorryFree. But Cash is going to the top, and CEO Steve Lift (Armie Hammer) wants to use him on the way.

There are several interesting pathways in the film, all leading to a pit of hell that keeps descending to madness. The extreme nature of the story is in the build-up of commerce, and what everyone has to sell to everyone else to survive. And how does a black man “sell” something to the white devil? By putting on his voice and airs, to reassure their whiteness that everything is a-okay. The white voice is simply hilarious, and emphasizes a still powerful-yet-dying breed of humanity in America.

The company called WorryFree is so likely that I expect it to start up soon. It offers basic subsistence... food and shelter... for a life of assembly-line work on various technologies (similar to a labor force in China). This new slavery is so slickly marketed, that Cash becomes entangled in its reach. Lakeith Stanfield has a star-making performance in “Sorry...” and handles all the stages of his character’s sellout and rise with equal aplomb, and is especially hilarious mouthing that white voice.



Cassius and Detroit (Tessa Thompson) Face the Future in ‘Sorry to Bother You’
Photo credit: Annapurna Pictures

The bizarre rapidity never lets up in the story, which concludes in a debatable point that is elusive and somewhat overwrought in its symbolism, but certainly not beyond the realm of the human condition (if it were available). It’s all part of Boots Riley’s manifesto within the film, how we’re all cogs in this hyped-up machine, and we’re all replaceable until we are not, which for most people is death.

Again, when reality is screwing us into the ground, cinema art comes to save our souls, or at least put us in a place where we can cope. If you are feeling a lesser sense of your own place in this life, “Sorry to Bother You” is there to remind us that this life can always be surreal and more desperate, so all we can possibly do is laugh.

“Sorry to Bother You” began its nationwide release in Chicago on July 6th, opening wide on July 13th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Lakeith Stanfield, Tessa Thompson, Jermaine Fowler, Terry Crews, Armie Hammer, Steven Yuen, David Cross and Danny Glover. Written and directed by Boots Riley. Rated “R”



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