

# In the Forest of the Night

I lived once in rural Virginia, in King George County near the Potomac River. My house stood in a broad clearing. On the far side of the bean field the old road

cut through second-growth woods down to the mill, abandoned around the turn of the century and now fallen into decay. On summer evenings, I often walked with Deacon, the family dog, between the high banks that loomed over the road.

Deacon wasn't any kind of dog. He was just a dog, discovered as a lost puppy by the highway. A friendly beast, he appeared to be the consequence of coupling between a German Shepherd and a boxcar. He liked to whuffle in the dead leaves while I supervised the evening.

Of a summer, vast flaming sunsets glowed through the overhanging branches that made the road a tunnel in the coming night, incandescent reds and oranges rolling off into eternity like burning dunes in some unimaginable desert. The air smelled of earth and mold. On such a night, the dog and I adjourned to the forest. The sky slowly burned out to embers, to blues and black as of some glowing bruise. Night fell. Scurrings came from the undergrowth as things came out to eat. From far off came the quicksilver whoop of a whippoorwill.

In my ragged dark woods, I felt as the ancient Greeks felt in their sacred groves, as people have always felt in forests at night—that I was in the presence of something huge and mysterious to which I was not greatly important. There are more things in heaven and earth, many more things, though we have lost sight of this. Just what they are, I cannot say. Deacon may have known.

He belonged in the night as I, a man, somehow did not. Bats flittered and squeaked at the ragged edge of hearing.

I could not have explained the night to a psychotherapist living in the air-conditioned warrens of suburbia, nor to one of the earnest legislative aids on Capitol Hill. For this they are out of tune. Besides, it has become just short of illegal to ponder questions of things above and beyond, of origin and destiny, life, death, good and evil, sin, and what might lie beyond the final heart attack. The abolition of the spiritual is perhaps the most curious accomplishment of our curious civilization.

Odd: until the ashen emptiness of Marx overcame much of the world, humankind thought much about the whence and why and whither of existence. It is strange that Americans no longer do. We all die. Here is a fact that might deserve an occasional comment. The ancients noticed this truth and thought it of note. So have all people in all times—until now. We alone never mention death nor purpose nor meaning. The whole world has thought otherwise. What can be wrong with the whole world?

I sat in the road and called Deacon over to have his ears scratched. He was a companionsome lunk though not much concerned with matters eschatological. Shortly he ran off again to investigate a rustling.

I listened to the intricacy of the woods, to things that crept and flew and chirped and croaked. Again came the sense of an otherness, not a being pre-

cisely but ... perhaps just an intuition of things beyond our comprehension.

The determined hostility to religion today puzzles me. In any age there have been many who didn't believe the prevailing creed and others who concerned themselves only with getting and spending. The active hostility is something new. Not just the government but the schools, writers of commentary, and politicians regard as somehow disreputable not merely a particular religion, not merely all religions, but even the suspicion that there may be something beyond physics.

I suspect that the quiet unhappiness, almost an anger, that grips the U.S. arises largely from the denial of human nature, from a totalitarian social engineering that believes in the unlimited malleability of mankind. The abolition of the spiritual is one of its chief projects. The full force of the federal government compels acquiescence.

The attack has been successful. Few people know anything about the Bible, and in the bland suburban denominations they believe that God is a pervasive force for social betterment, to be tolerated but not to be taken too seriously. And so people have substituted psychotherapy, embraced materialism both economic and philosophical, and do not publicly dare to suspect that there is more to existence than we ourselves. It is a long step down from classical antiquity.

Eventually Deacon and I walked back under the stars toward the house. I doubt that he had decided anything, but then perhaps he didn't feel a need. I had concluded that humanity was perhaps some sort of cosmic mistake and one day would go away. Perhaps it would be as well. ■

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*She Hate Me*]

### Spike Lee Hits Bottom

By Steve Sailer

AFTER ITS GLITTERING LAUNCH in the Eighties, Spike Lee's career has been in steady decline. Perhaps the joy went out of Spike's filmmaking in 1991 when his father and employee, score composer Bill Lee, was arrested for heroin possession, shattering Spike's dream of being the patriarch of the kind of dynastic family enterprise that is rare among African-Americans. He replaced his dad with Terence Blanchard, whose morose minor chord maunderings have undermined what little fun remained in Spike's later films.

Spike reaches rock bottom in his new "She Hate Me," one of the more embarrassing movies ever made by a famous director. Critics will no doubt rationalize "She Hate Me" as a satire on ill-informed black male attitudes, but are we laughing with Spike or at him? Spike appears to espouse those knuckleheaded views in earnest.

For white conservatives, Spike has always been an intriguing and disturbing photographic negative because, like his hero Malcolm X, he is a classic grumpy social reactionary: nepotistic, capitalistic, elitist, sexist, and racist. In "She Hate Me," Spike takes his stand slightly to the right of Shaka Zulu as he endorses family values, extremely traditional

African family values: namely, polygamy. Hey, if gays can get married, Spike implicitly asks, why can't a Big Man have as many wives as he can keep amused?

In "She Hate Me," Jack Armstrong, a handsome but glum black Wharton MBA, blows the whistle on his pharmaceutical company's crooked CEO (Woody Harrelson) and ferocious assistant (Ellen Barkin, made up to look like Martha Stewart).

Spike is desperate to tell us his opinion of corporate corruption. Spoiler Alert! He's against it. But then so is everybody else. Even worse for Spike, there was no racial angle to the recent Wall Street scandals, so he laboriously wedges in a lame analogy to Frank Wills, the black security guard who discovered the Watergate burglars. The interpolated fantasy scene where Nixon and Halde- man start shooting at Wills is bad enough, but when Jack sanctimoniously proclaims to a congressional hearing, "I am Frank Wills!" I cringed at how far Spike has fallen.

The now unemployed Jack is propositioned by his ex-fiancée Fatima, who has become a lesbian. She and her girlfriend Alex, who both look like lingerie models, are willing to pay him \$10,000 each to have him impregnate them. Fatima then lines up 16 more lovely lesbians desperate enough for Jack's genes to pay him ten grand apiece.

With so many lower-cost suppliers available, Spike never explains why any woman would offer \$10,000 for any man's DNA, much less for Jack's. Once able to cast Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, and Samuel L. Jackson in 1990's "Mo' Better Blues," Spike can now only afford unimposing newcomer Anthony Mackie. He has that under 4-percent

body fat level you only see in black guys, and Spike makes clear that his Jack has good IQ genes, too. Yet, Jack's a Gloomy Gus and is only about 5'-8" (although compared to Spike, he's practically Wilt Chamberlain).

Spike's knowledge of lesbians seems derived mostly from close perusals of the girl-girl layouts in old *Penthouse* magazines. As Fatima, kewpie-doll starlet Kerry Washington makes the least persuasive lesbian in non-porn film history—at least until Italian love goddess Monica Bellucci (Mary Magdalene in "The Passion") shows up later.

We also learn from Spike the real reason lesbians don't like men when the assembled sapphists insist Jack drop his drawers. One glance and they discard their turkey basters and demand he get them pregnant the old-fashioned way. Clearly, their problem is they've just never seen a real man before.

In fact, Jack is such a real man that he not only wins back Fatima, but her girlfriend Alex falls in love with him too. At the end, the three have formed a cozy polygamous family, although Jack, being a tolerant modern man, lets his women make out with each other, as long as he gets to watch.

Football great and legendary wife-beater Jim Brown, the subject of Spike's hero-worshipping 2002 documentary "Jim Brown: All American," plays Jack's dad. In the movie's last shot, he gazes upon his son's new family and chuckles with paternal delight. Spike seems to suggest that if only white society had allowed poor Jim Brown the polygamous arrangements natural to such a magnificent hunk of manliness, he wouldn't have had to smack his ex-wives around so much. ■

Rated a hard R for lots of (unsexy) sex.