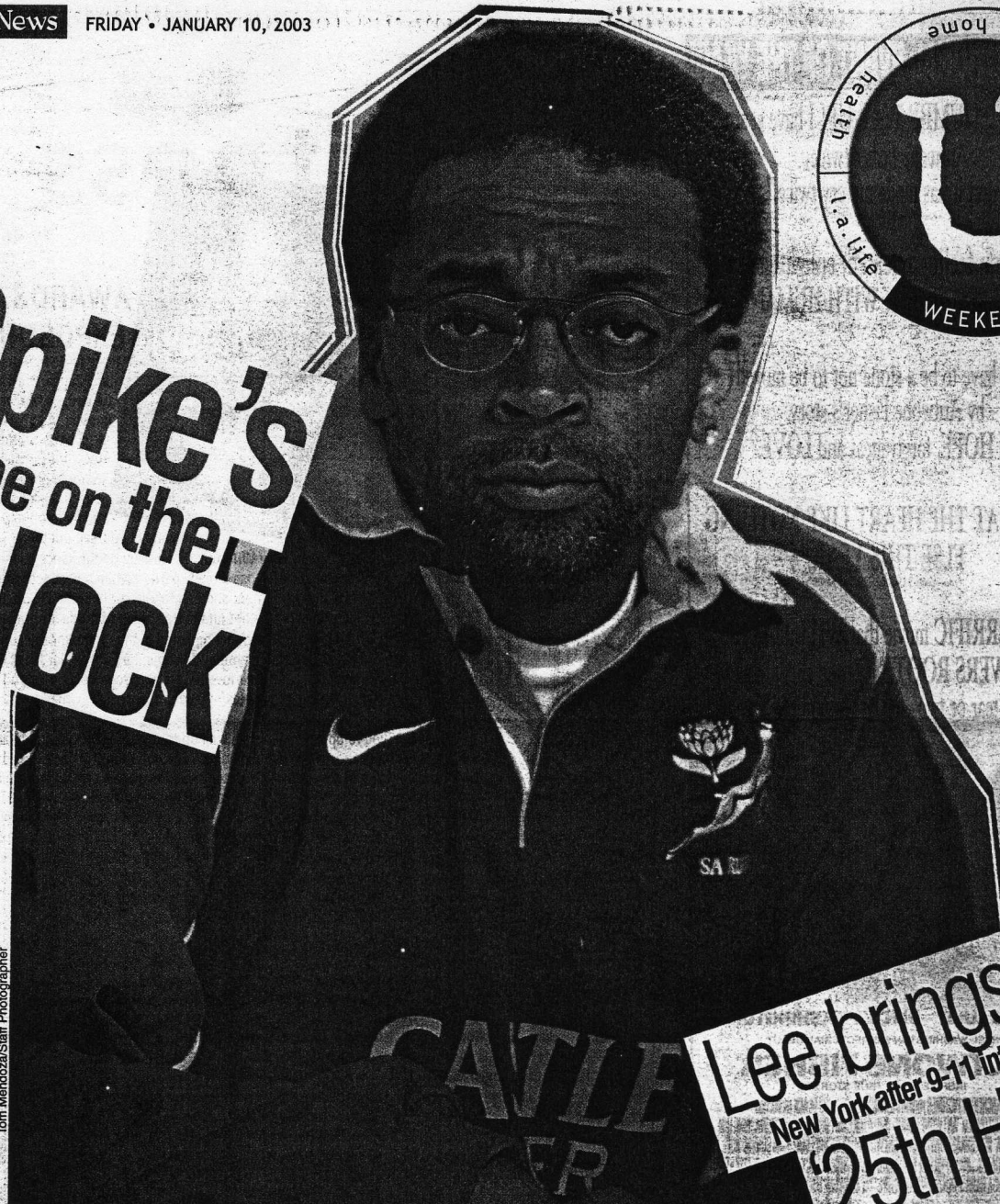




Spike's time on the clock

Tom Mendoza/Staff Photographer



Lee brings
New York after 9-11 into poignant
'25th Hour'
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Spike Lee's finest hour

By Evan Henerson
Staff Writer

Spike Lee is having a frustration flashback. The burr in his saddle is over, of all things, a view. A very specific view that the director believed was necessary for a scene in his latest film "25th Hour."

"The production designer kept bringing me pictures from location scouts where we were too far away," recalls Lee. "I said, 'Look (expletive), I want to look ... out of the window ... and see ... Ground Zero,' so he finally got the message, and we got that spot."

Lee pauses.

"Excuse my language," he says. "I was really frustrated because I knew what I wanted — and the production designer wasn't bringing me what I wanted."

Given the man's reputation as a cinematic and social agitator, it's too easy to assume that the director of "Do the Right Thing" and "Malcolm X" goes through life with steam perpetually rising from his ears.

True, the acclaimed writer/director has his pet peeves — including thick production designers bearing incorrect photographs — and he's accustomed to people thinking he hates the world.

But it's not entirely true, says Lee.

"I think the general assumption is that any outspoken African-American male is an angry black man," he says. "The idea that Spike Lee and people like myself walk around in a perpetual state of anger 24/7 is crazy."

The window memory has a context. "25th Hour," adapted from David Benioff's novel of the same name and going into wide release today, is the Atlanta-born Lee's first film since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Lee, who grew up in Brooklyn and sets all of his films in New York, was determined to make post 9-11 N.Y.C. a character in the film, even as he insists that "25th Hour" is not specifically an homage or a tribute.

"I think the way everything happens was very



organic. Nothing was forced," says Lee. "I didn't ask to do '25th Hour,' it was sent to me, and the fact that it was set in New York was great. We did not want to have the whole 9-11 thing be like it was some kind of an appendage that was just sewn on, but the way David Benioff wrote the script, the whole way it was sold, it was an organic piece of the process."

Restraining orders

The treatment of Sept. 11 in the arts hasn't always been so organic. Lee believes that film and TV artists gave themselves a one-year moratorium before tackling the subject. "Now you're starting to see some very cheap and cheesy TV movies and then the big-budget Jerry Bruckheimer 9-11 type films," Lee says. Did Lee give himself a hands-off period?

"No," he says. "I'm a filmmaker. I can just rush out and do it."

"25th Hour" chronicles the last day of freedom spent by drug dealer Monty Brogan (played by Edward

agreed, than to airbrush the terrorist attacks away and pretend they never happened.

"Monty's kind of obsessed with firemen. That's a motif throughout the book," says Benioff. "If you're going to make a movie a year following the attack, how can you ignore it? It's all everyone was talking about."

Lee shot the Tower Lights Memorial, which he ended up using over the opening credits. Scenes in the bar owned by Monty's father (Cox) contain photos of slain firefighters. Documentary footage of the wreckage is interspersed throughout the film.

"People try to make a big thing out of the decision," adds Lee. "The decision to include 9-11 in this film was made in a millisecond. The bigger question is, 'How were we going to do it?' We wanted to be tasteful. We did not want to disrespect the people who are no longer with us or their families."

But he did want that window.

"I was really trying. It's like, 'Am I not communi-

Norton) before he begins a seven-year prison sentence. The film also features Philip Seymour Hoffman, Barry Pepper, Rosario Dawson, Brian Cox and Anna Paquin. Lee, who frequently takes roles in his own films, stays behind the camera this time.

Benioff's novel, which the author adapted into a screenplay, was published in 2001. He began the story while still living in New York and finished it as his master of fine arts thesis for the University of California, Irvine's graduate fiction writing program. The author had no problem moving the action to post 9-11. Better such a change, he and Lee

Complexion of post 9-11 New York informs his latest film

cating what I want here?" says Lee. "I think I told him three or four times, 'This is not it.'"

Lee shakes his head. His laugh is a thin, ironic chuckle.

Clad in an olive sweat suit-like outfit and sitting poolside at a Hollywood-area hotel, Lee speaks quietly and sparingly, often using a strategic pause or stare to get a point across. In person, the now-45 year-old director seems a far cry from the establishment-baiting firebrand whose comments have been known to spice up print interviews. In fact, longtime collaborators say that Lee is actually fairly low-key.

Bittersweet 16

"25th Hour" is the 16th Spike Lee film — or "joints" as they're called on screen — since his feature debut, "She's Gotta Have It," in 1986. In the years since, films like "Malcolm X" "Do the Right Thing" and "Mo' Better Blues" have enabled Lee to single-handedly enhance the profile of African-American cinema. Often directing from his own scripts, Lee's films have given important leading roles to such actors as Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Laurence Fishburne, Angela Bassett and Samuel L. Jackson. Rosie Perez and Halle Berry both made their film debuts in Lee "joints."

Lee is a two-time Oscar nominee — for his script for "Do the Right Thing" and for the documentary "4 Little Girls." "25th Hour," released in late December to qualify for the Oscars, was bypassed by the Golden Globes (save a lone nomination for soundtrack composer Terence Blanchard). But if the failure of Oscar voters to acknowledge Lee's past work still rankles, the director is philosophical. He didn't get in this business to collect trophies or even, necessarily, to win friends.

"What we've made in this

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that it's very significant," he says. "Regardless of whoever wants to acknowledge it now, it's not going to diminish or tarnish what we did."

"25th Hour," which Lee says is "up there" with his best work, is a far more melancholy film. Accompanied by Blanchard's mournful soundtrack, a solitary Monty Brogan wanders the five boroughs, traversing a wounded city that he both loves and detests.

"I don't think we should feel sorry for him," says Blanchard, who has written the score to the majority of Lee's films. At the same time, there are some real aspects to the fallout based

"What we've made in this film is very significant," Lee says. "Regardless of whoever wants to acknowledge it now, it's not going to diminish or tarnish what we did."

on decisions he's made in his life."

There's even a scene that has both fans and detractors believing that Lee has pirated his own earlier work to give the audience a kind of cinematic déjà vu.

Midway through the film, Monty stares into a bathroom mirror and unleashes an expletive-laden rant against all of the subcultures of New York City — social and ethnic. Monty's tirade feels like the flip side to the purge from the multiple ethnic groups in Lee's "Do the Right Thing" 13 years earlier.

In fact, Monty's rant was in Benioff's book. The author thought it was unfilmable; Lee disagreed and insisted it get into the script and on screen.

"He gave me a good and eloquent argument of why it would work," says Benioff. "So I went in and put it back in. Norton does a great job with it. It's the favorite part of the movie for a lot of people."

"This is such a New York story, and there are only a few directors I can think of who are really fans of narrative," continues Benioff. "This isn't a Woody Allen movie."

"I can't speak to Spike's reputation, but a certain amount of anger is probably good for a moviemaker. I couldn't have