

Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* is a Rollercoaster You Might Not Want to Ride

By: Ashi Kamra

I consider Spike Lee to be a good representation of the American celebrity: creative, eccentric, a little infuriating, but never uninteresting. To that end, his films never lack his political passion and fervor for tackling the behemoth of American racism. Lee's *Chi-raq* is no exception to this trend. But, rather than developing narratives based on his personal experiences or contemporary black figures, Lee goes all the way back to the 5th century B.C.E, to the height of (what is thought to be) ancient white civilization: Athens. *Chi-raq* makes clear that it is a satirical adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a comedy centered around a communal sex tease organized by the women of Athens to end the Peloponnesian War. Lee, however, puts this play in the backdrop of Chicago and the rampant gang violence plaguing black households and discusses larger American institutions that perpetuate gang violence, turning the activism into a global movement. The combination of these tasks results in a dizzying film that leaves you unsure of whether you should be offended or inspired.

There's no secret that *Chi-raq* is an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. From the character's ancient Greek names to the use of rhyming and poetic language in AAVE as the film's dialogue to the narrator (Samuel L. Jackson) telling us as much, it is clear where Spike Lee got his inspiration. Fans of the ancient comedy will appreciate Lee's translation of Aristophanes' plot points to the contemporary imagination. The storming of the Acropolis clearly inspires the raiding of the armory; the oath of the Athenian and Spartan women is mimicked by the wine-drunk oath between the women of the rivaled Trojan and Spartan gangs; and the numerous sexual innuendos would probably get a thumbs-up from Aristophanes himself. But, when it comes to focusing on the women of the film, it seems Spike Lee forgot who he was.

Whereas his past films welcome change in the representation of black women in American cinema, not as pimps and whores, but as intelligent, upscale urbanites, he did not do that here. I wonder now whether Lee intended to stay true to the misogyny starkly apparent in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Yes, both works are comedies but the ancient Greek text is not in the slightest intended to be a form of activism. Women in Athenian society were considered irrational and held no political or economic influence in the polis. Using women as a driving force in stopping the Peloponnesian War highlights the foolishness of the war itself, as "foolish" creatures must tell the "all-knowing" men what to do. Lee doesn't seem to understand this historical context, and defines the women in the movie solely by their relationships to the men around them. During the oath scene, Trojan and Spartan women only mention men they've lost: little brothers, nephews, and uncles. The pain of gang violence manifests from their roles as mothers, wives, prostitutes, and girlfriends and the harm committed against their men.

The power they have over the surrounding paternalist institutions comes not from their intellect or work but from their vaginas, as if cock-blocking is the only way we can end suffering. Lee also forgets the nuances of the hypermasculinity seen in gang violence and promptly pushes aside the possibility of sexual violence being committed against the women who protest. It's a topic *Chi-Raq* doesn't even touch, whereas the Athenian play makes at least some mention of it. Rape and sexual assault are all too real byproducts of the hypermasculinity that Lee attempts to critique, especially for black women. *Chi-Raq* even uses Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee as a source of inspiration for Lysistrata's movement. Did Lee know that Gbowee, herself, was all too aware of the sexual assault that Liberian protestors faced and continued with the sex strike because there was nothing left to lose? I can only imagine what Gbowee, or a Chicagoan adjacent, would think of this film. Spike Lee may be trying to inspire

black men to end gang violence, but it's also an indirect silencing of survivors of domestic assault. It's as Mychal Denzel Smith Tillet writes (The Nation), the time when we focus solely on the narrative of the "endangered black man" ought to be over.

Spike Lee is more successful at adapting the ancient comedy by integrating the larger institutions and systemic issues of 21st century America into his adaptation of *Lysistrata*. He even portrays Lysistrata's Chicago-based activism growing into a global movement, spreading to countries like India and Brazil. I question, though, whether this is deserving of praise. Would it even be considered a contemporary adaptation if it doesn't tackle the larger institutions at play? Luis Alfaro's contemporary adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*, puts Medea's family in the *barrio* of Los Angeles and integrates struggles with the immigration system into the storyline. I consider this to be a more successful adaptation as it delves deep into how the system impacts everyone in the story, not just the men. I argue that in order for a text to call itself an adaptation, it must use the workings of contemporary society to retain its relevance. It seems as though Lee was not able to achieve this to the degree he intended with many critics claiming he misrepresents the nature of violence present in Chicago by copy and pasting the dynamics of Los Angeles gangs.

I must admit though, for all its flaws in tackling gender and race politics, *Chi-Raq* had me thoroughly entertained. It's one of those movies that glues your eyes to the screen. Perhaps it's because of moving performances from Jennifer Hudson as a grieving mother and John Cusack as a determined priest/activist; or because of the sheer absurdity in scenes like Lysistrata's seduction of a blatantly Confederatist elderly general. Regardless, it's clear that Spike Lee has and will never fail to capture your attention and keep it on whatever rollercoaster of controversy he decides to ride.