



Big Screen Classics

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.

Directed by: Leslie Harris
Production Company: Truth 24 F.P.S.
Presented by: Miramax Films
Produced by: Erwin Wilson, Leslie Harris
Associate Producer: Nelson George
Production Co-ordinator: Gregory Harris
Location Manager: Eric Klein
Assistant Location Manager: Jean Sassine
Continuity: Duana Butler
Casting: Tracey Moore
Written by: Leslie Harris
Director of Photography: Richard Connors
Additional Cameramen: Erwin Wilson, Nicholas Hoffman
1st Assistant Camera: Fred Nielson
2nd Assistant Camera: Xiomara Comrie
Gaffer: Beverly Cable
Editor: Jack Haigis
Assistant Editor: Alex Varunok
Production Designer: Mike Green
Set Decorator: Robin Chase
Costume Designer: Bruce Brickus
Make-up: Karen Robinson
Hairstylist: Larry Cherry
Laboratory: DuArt Film Laboratories
Music by: Street Element
Street Element: Eric 'Vietnam' Sadler, Chris Champion, Epitome of Scratch
Additional Music by: Street Element 2nd Division
Street Element 2nd Division: Al 'Purple' Hayes, Jimi Foxx
Music Supervisor: Eric Sadler
Music Producer: Eric Sadler
Recorded/Mixed at: Greene Street Studios
Sound Mixer: Harrison Williams
Boom Operator: Mark Jones
Consultant: Lenne Roseman
The Producers Wish to Thank: ASTRAEA National Lesbian Action Foundation, Brooklyn Arts Cultural Association, New York State Council on the Arts, Jerome Foundation, Foundation for Independent Video Film Donor Advise, American Film Institute, National Endowment for the Arts, Inc. Arts Matters
Cast:

Ariyan Johnson (*Chantel Mitchell*)
Kevin Thigpen (*Tyrone*)
Ebony Jerido (*Natete*)
Chequita Jackson (*Paula*)
William Badget (*Cedrick*)
Jerard Washington (*Gerard*)
Karen Robinson (*Debra Mitchell*)
Tony Wilkes (*Owen Mitchell*)
Johnny Roses (*Mr Weinberg*)
Shawn King (*Andre*)
Kisha Richardson (*Lavonica*)
Monet Dunham (*Denisha*)
Wendall Moore (*Mr Moore*)
Laura Ross (*woman customer*)
Rashmella (*woman in welfare office*)
Ron L. Cox (*clinic doctor*)
Richie Carter (*Rashawn*)
Mwata Carter (*Amiri*)
Gary Perez (*store manager*)
Lynn Franklin (*social worker*)
Erwin Wilson (*policeman #1*)
Louis Thomas Jr (*policeman #2*)
Nicholas B. Carter (*child who opens bag*)
Jasmine Thomas (*Chantel's and Ty's baby*)
Moise Dominique (*new born baby*)
USA 1992
98 mins
Digital 4K

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Leslie Harris' ultra-low-budget *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, a cautionary comedy about teenage pregnancy, opened in the US in February [1993]. Miramax, its distributor, is expert at getting free publicity and *I.R.T.* had an even better talk-show hook than *The Crying Game*. There's an epidemic of 'babies having babies' in the US: reports of newborns found dead or barely alive in the garbage are featured regularly on local New York television news. In most of these stories, the mother is written off as a drug addict or mentally impaired. Harris wanted to show that even the best and brightest kids can be pushed over the edge by an unwanted pregnancy.

Harris worked hard to get the audience she wanted – 'teenagers, mothers and feminists'. The week the film opened she was appearing on television (national and local, broadcast and cable) a couple of times a day. *I.R.T.* got mixed reviews: the *Times* was supportive, the *Voice* enthusiastic, the *New Yorker* vitriolic. The film played in about 50 theatres, hovered near the bottom of the *Variety* box-office chart, and disappeared after about a month.

It had been three years in production. Harris, who had made a couple of short films in college and then worked for some New York advertising agencies, started to look for the money to make *I.R.T.* in 1990. 'I hadn't seen realistic images of myself in film,' she explained. 'There have been films made from an African-American male perspective about African-American males coming of age. The women in those films are just hanging off some guy's arm. I wanted to make a film from the perspective of a 17-year-old girl at the crossroads. I'd see these teenage women on the subway and I'd want to follow them home and show them as they are – with all their energy and all their faults and flaws.' The film, which cost less than \$500,000, was shot with arts council grants and private money from relatives and friends. Shooting took 17 days; editing about a year. Miramax saw the rough-cut and put up the money for post-production.

'The film Hollywood would never make' reads the title over the final fade. You'd better believe it. Thoroughly subversive in form and content, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* is intentionally didactic – like a rap video crossed with Godard. Its adolescent hero, Chantel, tells her story in the first person with frequent direct-to camera asides.

'Tomorrow you might be reading about this in the paper, or you might even see it on television. You might shake your head and say "that girl must have been bummed out on crack..." But I'm going to tell you the real deal,' she confides over the opening image. Although we don't know it, the first thing we see – a night-time exterior with a young, worried Black man carrying a plastic garbage bag – is a flash forward to the end of the narrative. Chantel tells her story in a mix of past and present, pointing out things as they happen but also explaining her actions from a position of hindsight. It's this first-person narration – the ironic view Chantel has of herself and events – that distinguishes *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* from American after-school television specials or from British social-realist drama of the early 60s.

Smart, sassy and ambitious, Chantel lives in a crowded Brooklyn apartment 'in the projects', with her mother, father and two brothers. A working-class family, they're barely getting by on two full-time salaries. Chantel wants out; she's got her route mapped – she's going to become a doctor. A straight-A student, she knows she's 'not just any girl from the neighbourhood.' But just because she reads biology books doesn't mean she's all mat clear about birth control. Or that in a compelling moment, she won't be persuaded to do without. Chantel gets pregnant, a situation so disruptive to the plans she's made for her life mat she can't deal with it. She goes into deep denial.

Harris shows us how Chantel's reaction to her pregnancy, which might seem implausible if outlined on paper, is, if anything, overdetermined, both

Big Screen Classics

A Silent Voice Koe no Katachi

Mon 1 Sep 18:00; Sat 13 Sep 20:30; Fri 3 Oct 20:30

Être et avoir

Mon 1 Sep 18:10; Thu 11 Sep 20:30

Rebel without a Cause

Tue 2 Sep 20:50; Sun 14 Sep 12:30; Wed 17 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Sarah Cleary, curator of Funeral Parade presents); Sun 5 Oct 12:30

Girlhood Bande de filles

Wed 3 Sep 18:10 (+ intro); Fri 3 Oct 20:45

Fame

Thu 4 Sep 18:00; Fri 26 Sep 20:25;

Wed 8 Oct 20:25

To Sir, With Love

Fri 5 Sep 18:15; Mon 15 Sep 20:50

Good Morning, Boys!

Sat 6 Sep 15:40; Tue 16 Sep 20:45

Wild Strawberries Smultronstället

Sat 6 Sep 17:20; Sat 4 Oct 12:00; Tue 7 Oct 21:00

Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom Lunana

Sun 7 Sep 12:00; Sat 4 Oct 12:40

Rushmore

Mon 8 Sep 20:45; Wed 17 Sep 20:55;

Sat 27 Sep 18:30; Wed 1 Oct 21:05

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.

Tue 9 Sep 20:40; Mon 22 Sep 14:50;

Sun 5 Oct 18:20

The Breakfast Club

Wed 10 Sep 18:15 (+ intro); Sat 20 Sep 20:45;

Mon 29 Sep 20:50

Bad Education La Mala Educación

Fri 12 Sep 20:30; Thu 18 Sep 20:50;

Thu 2 Oct 20:45; Tue 7 Oct 18:15

I Flunked, But... Rakudai wa shitakeredo

Sun 14 Sep 15:55; Wed 1 Oct 18:30 (+ intro by

Professor Jinhee Choi, King's College London);

Tue 7 Oct 20:45

If....

Sun 14 Sep 18:15; Sun 21 Sep 11:50;

Wed 24 Sep 14:40; Mon 6 Oct 20:45

Full Metal Jacket

Fri 19 Sep 18:00; Thu 25 Sep 20:45;

Tue 30 Sep 20:45

School Daze

Wed 24 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by film critic

Kambole Campbell); Sat 4 Oct 20:35

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psychologically and socially. Chantel knows what her choices are: to have an abortion; to have the baby and give it up for adoption; or to have it and keep it. In fact, she insists that the choice is hers alone to make. When her boyfriend gives her \$500 for an abortion, she rebels against his 'pressure', spending the money on a clothes buying spree.

Because all the options are terrifying, she refuses to do anything. Instead, she tells her friends that she's OK, takes elaborate measures to disguise her thickening body and acts as if she hasn't a care in the world. Sometimes she even convinces herself. While visiting her boyfriend. Chantel goes into premature labour. The scene is physiologically so inaccurate that it nearly tips the film into farce. Emotionally, however, it's right on the mark, a rollercoaster ride into hysteria. Harris manages to convince us that childbirth, especially when no one knows what they're doing, is painful and frightening enough to cause a derangement of the senses. In a state of what's sometimes called temporary insanity, Chantel tells her boyfriend to throw the baby she still refuses to believe she's carried into the garbage.

It's the film's most transgressive move – to suggest that the fabled maternal instinct is not infallible, that denial as desperate as Chantel's does not evaporate with the infant's first cry. Since *I.R.T.* is a comedy, however, it resolves in its hero's favour – in the nick of time, Chantel manages to do the right thing.

I.R.T. is engaging and moving only if you're thoroughly on Chantel's side. Harris could have cast an actor who looked young but was professionally adept at smoothing the edges of 17-year-old behaviour – making the voice less sing-song, the laughter less abrasive, the defences less impenetrable, the need for attention less irritating. Instead, she chose the relatively inexperienced but quite remarkable Ariyan Johnson. Johnson refuses to make Chantel merely likeable or to shy away from her contradictions. She can play mixed emotions; she's quick witted; her exuberance is irresistible. While the cinematography is merely serviceable, Harris' editing is lively, as surprising in its juxtapositions as her script. She cuts the film to Chantel's hip-hop rhythms (female rappers Nikki D. and Cee Asia back her on the track).

I have a couple of political differences with the film. There's a moment of knee-jerk antisemitism that panders to the worst in the current relationship between African-Americans and Jews in New York City. And beneath Chantel's pro-choice insistence is an anti-abortion bias that Harris never confronts. The implication of *I.R.T.*'s decidedly 'up' ending is that Chantel's inability to make a choice was not such a bad thing, that although she winds up in community college rather than in medical school, it's only by having the baby that she 'got her shit together'.

These quarrels aside, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* is as intelligent, moving and engaging as its hero. As the first African-American pop film about female subjectivity, it deserves, at the very least, the attention afforded Spike Lee's 1986 groundbreaking – though thoroughly misogynist – *She's Gotta Have It*. Instead (with few exceptions) it was dismissed by critics (almost all of them white and male) as 'inconsistent', 'didactic' and 'unbelievable'. Needless to say, these same critics would have had no problem with Harris' mix of realism and theatricality had it come from Godard or even Woody Allen. The reaction to Chantel as a character suggests the kind of unconscious racism that refuses to acknowledge that a girl from the hood could be intelligent, ambitious and vulnerable, let alone intelligent, ambitious, vulnerable, and, though painfully confused, capable of saving her life.

In terms of audience appeal, *I.R.T.* falls between the cracks. It is too much of a teen film to attract the Black middle-class female audience identified by Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. On the other hand, it lacks the coding of the Black teen genre: its violence has nothing to do with guns; its rap track is anything but hard; and, most problematic of all, it puts women, not men, front and centre.

Amy Taubin, *Sight and Sound*, August 1993