Last night out

reviewed by John Petrakis in the February 22, 2003 issue

Spike Lee's desire to explore the nuances of black life is admirable, though the scope of his ambition has often proved to be his artistic undoing. Each film not only tells a racially charged story that (he hopes) teaches a moral lesson, but insists on driving home the points again and again in superfluous scenes that drag on and on (one of the reasons his films tend to run well over two hours). This is an especially distressing problem in *Bamboozled*, his 2000 film about a black television producer who brazenly puts on a minstrel show. The valid points about hypocrisy and self-image are made early on, but then Lee continue to hash out the major themes, slowing the film down to a crawl.

I'm not certain why Lee feels the need to add these cinematic public service announcements, unless he believes that younger members of his audience should be told the specifics about the struggle for racial equality that older members already know. He's probably right about the generation gap, but it is the job of an accomplished filmmaker either to find a more effective way to address this problem or to trust his audiences a bit.

Given this approach, it's very striking that *25th Hour* has no major black characters. The tale (based on the 2001 novel by David Benioff, who also wrote the script) is about a convicted drug dealer's last night on the town, before he begins serving seven years in prison. The lead role could have been cast with a black man. Lee avoided that move, probably figuring that it would feed one of the stereotypes (black men deal drugs) that he has worked so hard to play down.

The character of Monty Brogan is played by Edward Norton, an intelligent actor who always brings a combination of subtlety and intensity to his work. (His performance as a Nazi skinhead in 1998's *American History X* is terrifying.) In *25th Hour* he is required to alternate between feigned cool and anticipatory terror.

Suddenly free of a political agenda, Lee is able to strut his stuff, zeroing in on a kid who was always a bit too smart for his own good, along with the few people he trusts who have looked up to or stood by him over the years. There's Jacob Elinsky (Philip

Seymour Hoffman), a chubby prep school English teacher who is sexually obsessed with one of his teenage students (Anna Paquin); Francis Slaughtery (Barry Pepper), a Wall Street stock trader who enjoys living on the brink of financial disaster; Naturelle Rivera (Rosario Dawson), Monty's live-in girlfriend, who may be the one who turned him in to the feds; and most poignantly, Monty's father, James (Brian Cox), a former fireman who runs a tavern and battles alcoholism.

To bring the stories together, Lee cruises through scenes with a confidence and bravado he hasn't exhibited in years, helped along by the gritty cinematography of first-time collaborator Rodrigo Prieto (Frida) and the best musical score in a very long time by Lee regular Terence Blanchard.

The economical script by Benioff trims away extraneous characters and some internal thoughts that would not play onscreen, but never loses what is important, including a gutsy opening scene that shows Monty rescuing an abandoned pit bull on a New York bridge. This short scene, which also introduces Monty's Ukrainian bodyguard, Kostya, tells us everything we need to know about Monty's surprising sensibility and lack of good sense.

The only major addition to the movie, which was shot in New York just months after the September 11 attack, is the inclusion of random cutaways that show how the city is coping with that disaster. It is poignant to watch Monty's hometown--the city he loves--trying to dig out from under its fear, even as Monty himself is about to be buried for seven years.

The film bounces back and forth between Monty, his lover, his buddies and the Russian mob, which gathers at a glitzy dance club for a farewell party. But it ultimately comes back to Monty, who remains bitter that he has been betrayed, while accepting the sad truth that he deserves what has happened to him.

This personal struggle leads to the film's two most effective sections, both presented as a series of shots. The first is an angry monologue that Monty delivers in his father's restaurant bathroom, where, like Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver*, he takes a swipe at the melting pot that is New York City. The second is the film's extraordinary ending, greatly expanded from the novel, in which Monty's father, as he drives Monty to prison, imagines what his son's life could be like if they were to escape into the western part of the country--a land of mountains and deserts instead of steel and concrete.

This final sequence shows Lee at his cinematic finest, combining drama and pathos to paint a picture of regret that may someday lead to redemption. Its uncanny strength lies in its singularity of vision, and the filmmaker's realization that messages are best sent in the service of a story, not laid on top of them.