

## **“IF YOU’RE NOT ALLOWED TO BE WHO YOU ARE, THEN THAT MESSES YOU UP.” SPIKE LEE SHARES INSIGHTS FROM A MASTER STORYTELLER**

### **Binger Spotlight: Spike Lee**

*14 December 2010 by Binger Reporter Matthew Curlewis*

There’s an electric feeling walking up the Binger stairs. John Legend’s voice is booming down. Enter the lounge and there he is, performing on two plasma screens flanking a purpose-built stage. For backdrop, a huge portrait of the day’s very special guest: world famous director Spike Lee. The John Legend clip ends and the titles tell us ‘Directed by Spike Lee’.

The 70-plus invited guests settle and the man himself appears. NY Knicks baseball cap, jeans and crisp white hi-tops. His bright orange jacket a token of Dutch support? Doubtful. More likely Knicks-related – but then again this is Spike Lee. Jump to conclusions? Then prepare to eat your words. This man is walking proof of the power of story and of doing the right thing.

To get things started, Binger Artistic Director Marten Rabarts acknowledges the rockstar-style entrance as being only fitting, given the guest at hand. And since everyone knows who this is and why they are here, the event can simply begin. Questions and fields of enquiry have been invited from far and wide. Some come via email from South Africa, some come from the seated guests, and some from Marten as he expertly moderates a two hour conversation with Spike Lee.

A few threads tend to reverberate, with a slightly different cadence each time. Interwoven relationships clearly support and strengthen much of Spike Lee’s work.

*SL: I grew up in a jazz household, surrounded by music. My father William Lee was a well-known bass player and did the soundtracks for many of my films. When musicians Branford and Wynton Marsalis and Terence Blanchard all moved from New Orleans to my neighbourhood in Brooklyn at around the same time, we all got to know each other. They played on those early soundtracks, and we still work together to this day.*

*The plan with 40 Acres [Lee’s production company, 40 Acres and a Mule] was, if it worked, to bring in more people like me, to give us work. The plan was never for it to be only about me.*

*MR: And how do you build and maintain those relationships from the smaller jobs, to the superstar actors the likes of Denzel Washington and John Turturro?*

*SL: Trust, respect and love. One goal for instance, was to create roles for actors that would really show their talents. That makes it interesting for audiences as well, so they’re not seeing the same old faces doing the same things again and again.*

And when asked from the floor about his working process...

*SL: I'm a collaborator. If an idea – from an actor, a writer, cinematographer, whomever – works, then I make the change.*

Another thread that comes keeps returning, whether Lee is making features, documentaries or advertisements, or coaching his students in NYU's Graduate Film Programme, is that he places the importance of story above everything else.

*SL: You have so many ways you can tell your story. Use everything. Whether that's a building, or a street location, or music, or the way the actor's say their lines – use it all. And there is no right way to do it. There are no Ten Commandments for film. If a film is good, people aren't going to know what you shot it on. It's about the content.*

And on the subject of minorities...

*SL: It's simply about whether you're allowed to be who you are. Whether that's about being Surinamese Dutch, or black, if you're not allowed to be who you are, then that messes you up. Getting hit with a ruler in a Catholic school, for being left-handed, messes you up! People have all kinds of different reactions to those experiences. For myself, yes I would call myself a black filmmaker, as opposed to simply a filmmaker.*

Some clips are shown from Lee's films that powerfully underscore many of his points, questions criss-cross the room again, and then suddenly time is up. Responsibility for Spike Lee's visit to Amsterdam is being shared by both Binger and the John Adams Institute. 70 people in the lounge of the Binger? This was the fortunate crowd to have such an intimate audience with the director. Now he's off to speak to another 650 in the evening at the Stadsschouwburg. Ushered by a minder through the Binger crowd, the man in orange heads down the Binger stairs, another event, another story tucked in his belt.

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