

Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 135 minutes

Over the years, director Spike Lee has given us a varied and fascinating collection of films that include titles like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), *He Got Game* (1996), *Summer of Sam* (1999), *The 25th Hour* (2002), *Inside Man* (2006), *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), *Old Boy* (2013) and many others. His latest, *BlacKkKlansman*, is a true story based on an autobiography of a black detective who attempted to infiltrate a Colorado chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. Like many adaptations of real events, it's a little messy and overstuffed. Regardless, it makes its point effectively and memorably.

The story is set in the late 1970s and involves new Colorado Springs Police Department recruit Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) and the troubles he faces joining the squad. In addition to irritating treatment from Chief Bridges (Robert John Burke) and a few others in the force, he feels compelled to hide his job from activist and new girlfriend Patrice Dumas (Laura Herrier). Things improve when Stallworth is assigned to a special unit, partnering with

detectives Zimmerman (Adam Driver) and Creek (Michael Buscemi). He begins looking into the activities of a KKK unit and decides to call them up on the phone. To his surprise, chapter president Walter Breachway (Ryan Eggold) is friendly, offering him a place in their organization.

It's an excellent lead for the investigation, but one that complicates Stallworth's work tremendously as he is asked to meet with the group face to face. This task includes greeting the chapter's most overtly violent and intimidating member, Felix Kendrickson (Jasper Pääkkönen). Zimmerman is forced to take over the role in person, a dangerous task given that injury or death could result if the men don't keep their stories straight. The bulk of the middle of the movie deals with Stallworth rising through the ranks via phone conversations with Breachway, while Zimmerman attempts to pass himself off as the same person at meetings.

These scenes are the highpoints of the movie, deftly mixing tension with humor. When the group are listening in on the various phone calls, their amusement at fooling, manipulating and mocking high ranking Klan member's eyes is highly enjoyable. In person with the criminals, it's incredibly anxiety-provoking for the Jewish Zimmerman and for those observing from a distance as the infiltrator is grilled and threatened by Felix. Things become even more remarkable as the operation takes Stallworth up the chain of command to Grand Wizard and Senate candidate David Duke (Topher Grace).

Naturally, this is a biopic filled with dozens of characters, so it does feel a bit loose and shaggy at points. Dumas's activist work mostly falls by the wayside and in general there is too much going on in the story (between the lead's troubles with office co-workers, the many layers of his investigation, his personal relationship and those with his partners), leading to some choppy sections. Still, this is the difficulty that emerges when portraying true events... they can't always be depicted in a perfect, straight-forward narrative. The bulk of the film is still incredibly engaging and captivating to watch.

And while roundly ridiculed, the ideas spun by Duke to Stallworth are extremely disturbing and prophetic. The Grand Wizard imagines a nuanced path for the Klan that will legitimize and bring the organization into the mainstream. Lee finishes his film relating these concepts to recent events and the horrifying things that have occurred under the newest administration. It is blunt, but if you're making a protest then one shouldn't be subtle about it. The feature ends with images of an America that has lost the plot and Duke's vision becoming reality, with fear-ridden individuals accepting falsehoods and coming under the control of powerful manipulators. Even though *BlacKkKlansman* isn't perfect, it will still provide a meaningful lesson to those willing to listen.

***Visit: CinemaStance.com***

By Glenn Kay
For the Sun