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Do the Right Thing, Do Your Own Thing

Spike Lee: Say What?

By Lara Hastings,
Milton Fletcher

Everyone knows Spike Lee's story by now. A kid from Brooklyn barges into Hollywood through the back door to prove himself an ace filmmaker with critically acclaimed films making money for major studios. But besides being a hot property in Hollywood, Spike generates some fervor of another kind. Approaching controversial subject matter with insightful scripts and vivid images, Lee hits his audience with a directness that starts fires in peoples' minds and in the media.

Lee has paid his dues. With four films, thirteen music videos, nine commercials and three books to his name since 1986, throughout his career Lee has operated with irreverent disregard for any Hollywood conventions. *The Answer*, Lee's first film at NYU Film School, initialized his direction by redressing D.W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, a racist portrait of blacks that was also credited for reviving the Ku Klux Klan.

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads won Lee the student Academy Award at NYU, an honor he believed would spark Hollywood's interest in him. Confronted instead with disinterest, Lee ventured down the underdog avenue of

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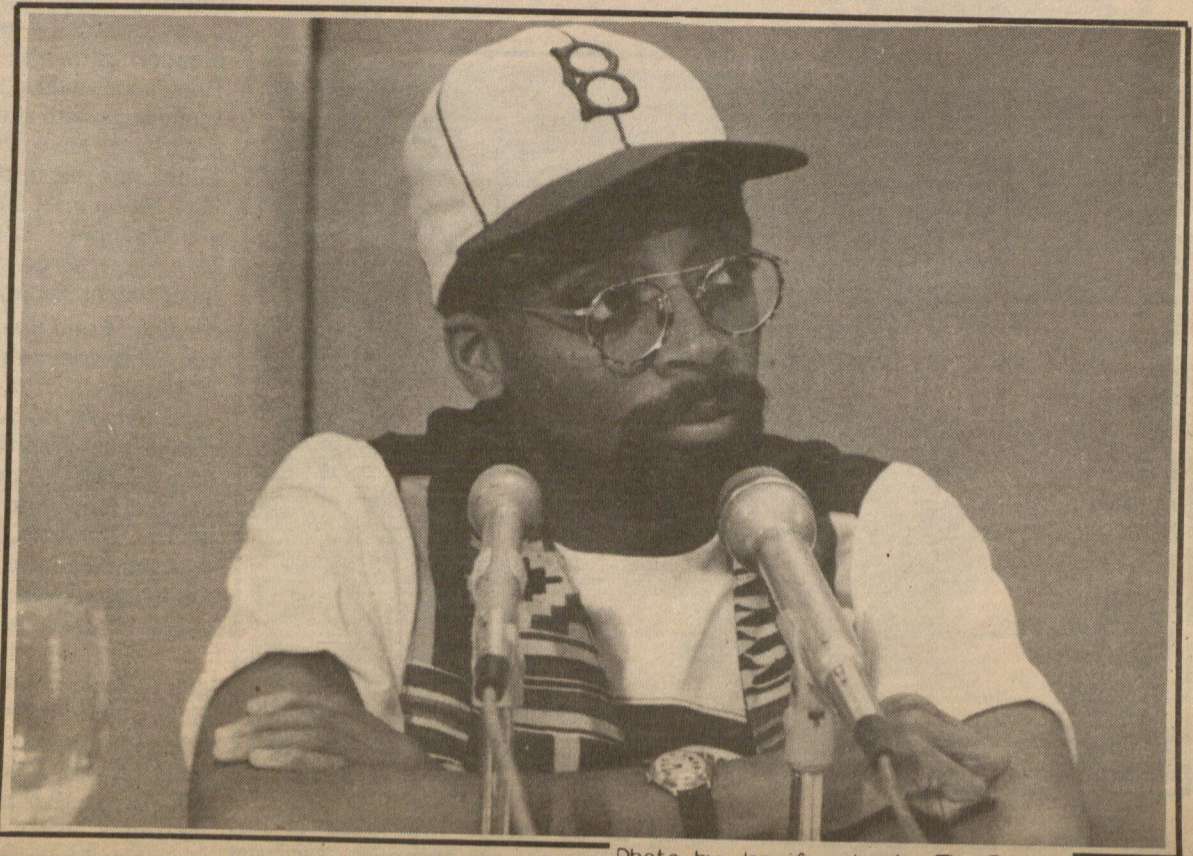


Photo by Jennifer Jacob, *The Review*

Spike Lee, director of *Do the Right Thing*, as himself at a recent conference

Interview

Rudolfo Anaya on the Filming of *Bless Me, Ultima*

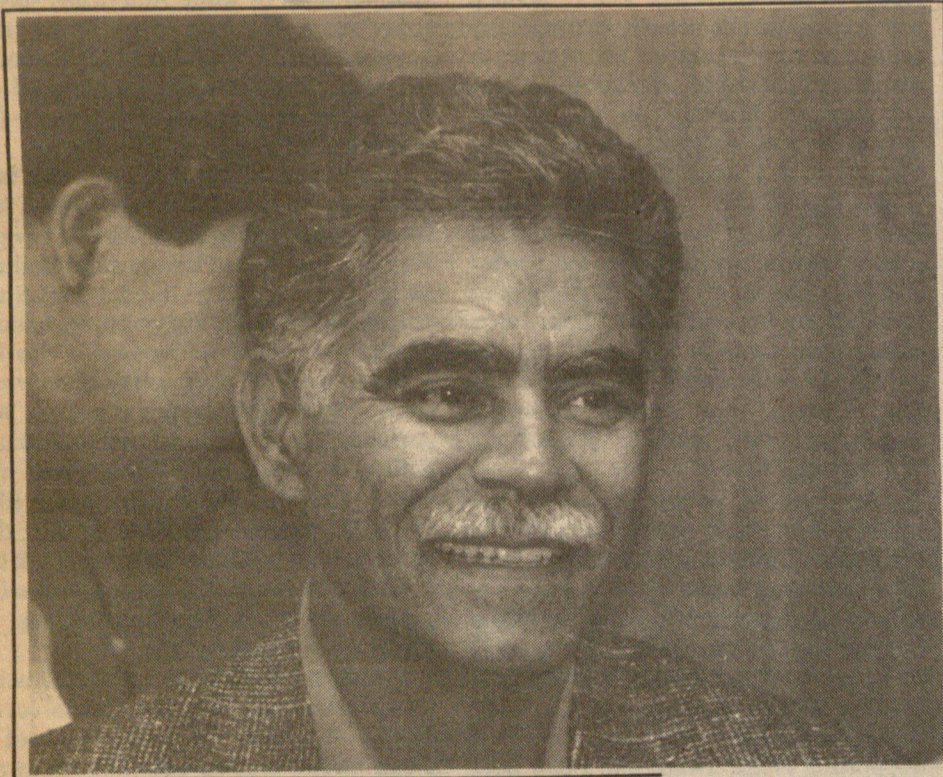


Photo by *The Review*

Rudolfo Anaya, the author of the classic Chicano work, *Bless Me, Ultima*, speaks of the planned filming of his novel with *The Review* interviewer, Mike Raul Ornelas.

By Mike Raul Ornelas

When Rudolfo A. Anaya launched his literary career nearly 20 years ago, little did he know that his relatively obscure first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, would become the classic work in the genre. Since then Anaya has produced an extensive body of literature, including additional novels, short stories, and folkloric literature of the New Mexican people. Anaya's works have been the focus of scores of critical articles and have

recently become the subject of a text on criticism, edited by Cesar A. Gonzalez.

Anaya was in San Diego recently to participate in Mesa College's Humanities Awareness Week activities and the occasion of the recently published Gonzalez text, *Rudolfo A. Anaya: Focus on Criticism*. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* is the first Chicano novel to be the subject of a movie.

SDR: Senor Anaya, welcome to San Diego and congratulations on the recent publication of the book of criticism on your works. I'm interested in finding out about the recent news about a film based on your book, *Bless Me, Ultima*. Please summarize for me, if you could, the *Ultima* story and how it relates to the Chicano and/or the universal human experience.

Anaya: It's a story about a young boy who is 7 years old when the novel opens. He is growing up in a Hispanic town in New Mexico, a small town. The novel opens when the *curandera*, Ultima, the healer, the woman who is the important character in the novel comes to stay with the family, with Antonio's family. She comes at the point where Antonio is about to change his life. He is about ready to go to school. He's never been to school before. He's ready to start catechism in the Catholic church. He doesn't speak English. He speaks only Spanish.

At the very beginning of the novel he meets Ultima and she helps open his eyes or bring him into an awareness, not only of the world that he's about to go into but the world of beauty and of nature itself. Thereafter, Antonio goes through his "rites of passage," meaning concepts of good and evil, and wrestling with what they mean in his life; the death of very favorite people in his community that he has known all his life that are like extended family members to him; and finally, going with Ultima to the healing ceremony when they lift the curse from an uncle who has been cursed by witches. This is the climax of the novel. Thereafter the focus is on the resolution of what those two years of training with Ultima have meant to Antonio and what

they mean to the family and the community.

SDR: I read your autobiography in Cesar Gonzalez's book and it sounds like many parallels in your life. Please comment.

Anaya: People ask me if *Ultima* is an autobiographical novel and I often say "yes." In a sense, all of my work is autobiographical. I have lived through the experiences or the emotions of the characters that I use. In the case of *Ultima*, because it was my first novel and I was looking a lot at my childhood, my hometown, my friends, it was, as a result, reflecting on how much I wrestled with philosophical questions. I think kids in a sense wrestle with these. What is good and what is evil? And who punishes? And is there punishment? So, yes, it is autobiographical.

SDR: I enjoyed reading that autobiography. *Ultima* is currently being made into a movie.

Anaya: *Ultima* is under option. They haven't started production yet, so it's under option by some producers in Los Angeles. They have the screenplay written.

SDR: Who wrote the screenplay?

Anaya: The screenplay was written principally by two people: Vincent Gutierrez and Ricardo Lopez. Gutierrez is a screen writer from the Los Angeles area and has, I believe, one movie to his credit and, I imagine, quite a few film scripts by now. Lopez is the co-producer of the film project and is also a writer. He's an actor, a playwright, and in this case co-producer of the *Ultima* film project. They are the ones that put the screenplay together and, of course, all along they've had input from me and, recently, from Luis Valdez,

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of the film.

SDR: These two individuals have been involved in screenwriting before. Do you feel confident that they will fairly represent the novel in the film?

Anaya: Yes, I do. When you ask the writer of the novel that question it's always with mixed feelings that he feels confident of qualified feelings. The one thing that I have found out is that the novel as I wrote it will not be on the screen. All the characters that I wrote will not be on the screen. Major symbols that I think in the novel are crucial will not be on the screen, so what goes on the screen is a sense of story that has to do with

what is visual and how you carry story on the screen. Now, never having written for the screen except in very small ways, one of the things that I have to ask myself is, "Who am I to judge the screenplay?" In a sense the screenplay becomes its own product. It becomes its own entity. That's a long way of getting to your question, but I guess in the end you have to do two things: you have to divorce yourself from the fact that your novel is not going to be on the screen, and then have confidence in these people who do this for a living, that they will do justice to the wholesomeness of the work. In my case, I've been working with this project with Ricardo Lopez for years. He's had the movie option for six years. As the work has evolved we've grown to understand the idea that the screen play is different.

SDR: In your autobiography you talked about how important the publication of the novel was in your career. You seemed to have reached some level of satisfaction in the fact that the book was published, and also that it received the Quinto Sol award.

Anaya: If it hadn't been published I would have no career. I would be a teacher but I would not be a writer. The publication of that novel was crucial. I think it was also crucial in a historical setting. The Chicano Movement was very alive and I think we were expecting of each other and the community was expecting us to produce that artistic work that we needed.

SDR: Are the movie plans as big a milestone? In fact, I think it's quite an honor to have your novel become the basis of a movie that's about to begin production.

Anaya: Of course it is when you think of the thousands of projects that line the offices of movie makers. And out of these one or two get selected. The odds are against you. I think it is historic in the sense that we have an all-Chicano cast. We have a Chicano novelist and the novel portrays a Hispanic community in New Mexico. That's the intent of it. That's the focus of it. With Chicano screenwriters, Chicano producers, and a Chicano director, it's going to be a very historical film.

SDR: Do you have any idea when production will begin?

Anaya: The dates that are given to me are this summer. They actually want to film this summer in New Mexico.

SDR: Do you have any idea who will be playing the lead roles? Do you have your personal favorites?

Anaya: No. I don't have any favorites because it gets back to casting is probably like the writing of the screenplay. The writer essentially has little voice in it. I might have favorites, but what difference would it make? I would imagine that in the case of Antonio it would be a young 9-10 year old child who is a very good actor but unknown. I suppose that in the case of Ultima you could have an actress who is known. Several names have been mentioned. I don't see any good reason to go into those because one never knows what's going to come up. It's very premature. But I do understand they are in casting now. So those names are being looked into.

SDR: In an interview you did with Cesar Gonzalez you said that you were very conscious of portraying women in powerful roles. You've done that in *Bless Me, Ultima*. You did it in *The Legend of La Llorona*. Are you hopeful that the image that is presented in this particular movie will be consistent with that?

Anaya: Yes, of course I am. I think in the case of *Ultima* it was natural that Ultima, who is a *curandera* (healer), is a woman that's powerful. She has the status of respect and awe in the community because she cures people. She heals. She can take on larger forces than just a *mal ojo* (evil eye) or a broken bone, as the novel tells you. So I saw that as nothing that I aimed for. It's just naturalness that come out of the setting. I think in the case of *The Legend of La Llorona*, when I looked at the legend of *La Malinche*, I thought of her as other people have said as possibly that first archetypal *llorona* (weeping woman) of the New World. I was conscious of that and of the bad reputation that she has, and I consciously worked with turning that around and showing a little bit more of the complexity of every person, including women. I think that's going to have to happen not only in literature but also in film. Each person and each character is a tremendously complex entity. You can't paint them all good or bad. We are all composites of both. So I think the crucial thing for me is to portray that reality.

SDR: Are you also hopeful that the film will reflect the narrative perspective of Antonio? You have two very pivotal characters in the novel. Will that be carried on?

Anaya: This comes to the adaptation of the novel to screenplay. What I'm afraid of is the focus that Antonio has in the novel will not be in the film. because, by and large, films about little Chicanos who are seven years old, growing up in a small town, don't have the mass appeal that Hollywood needs, and so the focus in the film will quite probably be different. For example, one of Antonio's brothers is returning from the war in 1945 and is young and can be seen in uniform. He will likely acquire a more important role in the movie. I think the relationship between Ultima and Antonio has to be kept. That learning process of the child from one of the *mayores* (elders) from *la cultura* (the culture) is very important. That is the way we learned, if we were lucky, to have someone that gave us

values. I don't think that can be lost. But I think as the screenplay develops, it will focus more on the historical context; what is happening in 1945 in New Mexico that the world, the audience, can focus on and relate to.

SDR: Then this is an attempt to appeal to the movie audience rather than remain consistent with the book?

Anaya: If you stay consistent with the book, the thinking over the years as the project has evolved is that you will have an art film that will play in art theaters on a very limited basis with a limited audience. Or you have a general-appeal movie for the general public., in which case you have to do something in the novel to create that appeal. Everybody's got a word in it. Everybody's got a say-so; the screen writer, the producers, the director, the people who fund the project, and on and on and on.



Rudolfo Anaya fielding questions at the recent Mesa College conference.

SDR: Are you anxious to see the movie? Will you watch it?

Anaya: I'll watch it. I'm anxious to see them set up on day one and begin to film. This project has been so long in coming that I'm still not excited about it because I don't want to be let down if anything negative happens.

SDR: So then there may be obstacles that may prevent it from being made?

Anaya: There always are. This world of movie making, you know more about it than I do, when it gets to funding, is incredibly complex, when it gets to the time that these people that are involved in it have. The most positive thing that we can say right now about the *Bless Me, Ultima* film project is that they have a screenplay they like, they've got a director that's got tremendous credentials and artistic ability. They've got producers who know the time is right for the film and it has to be done now. So there are a lot of positive things going for it. I just want to see Day One.

SDR: I'm looking forward to it very much. It's going to be a historic moment when it's completed and released. I think there are many people that are looking forward to it.

Please indulge my curiosity. I know

that you don't respond to critics. You really don't pay much attention to that. Be a critic for a minute and tell me how you felt about *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Did you see it?

Anaya: Yes, I saw it. There are mixed feelings. First of all, it was shot in a little town in New Mexico. And you know that New Mexico is famous for its natural beauty and for the old cultures that we have there: the Indian pueblos, the Hispanic villages. When we saw that on screen it was a very popular feeling. I felt like cheering. This is, in fact, what people did when I went to the show in Santa Fe. People cheered and they came out of the theater feeling good. This is the importance of literature. You see something that you have reflected on and it makes you feel good. But then we all have critical tendencies that, beyond feeling good, the screenplay had problems. So I understand the budget went way over. It had problems. Critically, I guess, I would say that they had difficulty transcribing the novel into screenplay story. And the casting was almost horrendous. It was not as good as it could have been. It was hard to identify with the man who played Joe Mondragon as being a Nuevo Mexicano, the type of character that we all know and would have loved to have seen up there. That's my criticism.

SDR: Do you agree with the criticism of the movie that the issue of land in New Mexico is trivialized. A lot of Chicanos are critical of the movie because it tended to trivialize this issue which is so important to many in New Mexico.

Anaya: When I saw the accidental opening of the *acequia* (irrigation ditch), and that is how it was portrayed, as accidental, I thought they lost a tremendous opportunity to give Joe Mondragon, the main character, stature. It's trivialized in the sense that it is made to look accidental. So, in those very brief scenes which set the conflict for the movie, from my point of view, they blew it.

SDR: Are there any movies that accurately reflect the Chicano experience?

Anaya: They're all accurate to some respect, to some degree. You're never going to get a movie that is accurate 100%. There's no such thing. We keep trying. That's what art is all about. I would suppose that the films that I have seen that made me feel the best about the representation, and the artistic integrity was good, are movies like *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and *Zoot Suit*. I thought that *Stand and Deliver* was excellent. It should be seen by all educators in this country. There are a few gems out there. I think we should probably look closer at the films by filmmakers that are not as well known: Jesus Trevino for example. We may have to take a re-look at *Seguin* and what it portrayed. I think the important thing is that we need a lot of films. As long as we have only a few that we can count on ten fingers, then the portrayal is not correct because it's so limited. Once we have twenty, thirty or forty, then we'll feel better about the total portrayal of what Chicano means.

SDR: Don't we also need more trained

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