

*He Got Game*. Touchstone Pictures. 1998. Writer/Director: Spike Lee. 131 minutes.

Spike Lee's *He Got Game* is riveting at times in portraying the dilemmas facing Jesus Shuttlesworth (played well by NBA and former UConn star Ray Allen) in trying to choose whether to sign with a major college basketball program or to jump straight into the NBA. Lee focuses on the recruit and his immediate friends (with and without quotes) and family rather than on the recruiting process (no in-home visits here, for example), focuses on the hours spent practicing, the years of pushing himself and especially, in the case of his father, Jake Shuttlesworth (Denzel Washington) of being pushed, and not just metaphorically. Lee shoots for big game in this movie, with a wonderful musical mix of Aaron Copland with Public Enemy, which seems to fit perfectly the tone and imagery of this important sports film. In spite of some overdone subplots (does Jake really have to "save" a hooker from *her* game?), this film far outshines other basketball movies (*Blue Chips*, *White Men Can't Jump*, *Space Jam*, etc.) in addressing important sports themes. *He Got Game* ranks with the documentary *Hoop Dreams* and *Boyz N the Hood* in showing the fine line between making it out of the projects through sports and being forever stuck without hope, if you haven't died already, like Ricky, the football prospect in *Boyz N the Hood*.

Everyone is pulling at Jesus' robes trying to gain influence, favors, future money, and most importantly, trying to connive out of him a decision he, like so many players projected #1, wants to have over with *now*. He also doesn't want to be told again that "it's the most important decision in [his] life." The sequence of legendary coaches such as Dean Smith, Roy Williams, and John Thompson repeating this phrase like a liturgical response is hilarious, and sad. Every coach preaches family, preaches that he only wants what's best for his/her "kids." The irony, as Lee sees, it is these coaches don't want

Jesus the Son, they want Jesus the Savior to “save” their programs (the headline when his Lincoln High School teams wins state is “Jesus Saves”). Tech U’s head coach, Billy Sunday, even claims he “got down on [his] knees and prayed to God, please deliver Jesus to us.” But it’s his dysfunctional family that eventually determines his choice of schools, not some coach’s version of a family. A letter from his mother shapes Jesus’ attitudes, telling him that “big brothers have to protect their little sisters,” and that while “your father drives you too hard,” Jesus should “use basketball as a tool.” His father, out on a ridiculously plot-forwarded “work release” a la *48 Hours* and hoping for time remission for signing Jesus with the right team, also helps Jesus decide his future by facing his family’s past: his father enraged at his son for throwing dad’s basketball over the fence and the playground and saying “I quit” because dad is drunk and pushing way too hard; his father going to prison for the accidental death of his mother when he pushed her away; his father desperately playing Jesus one-on-one for his signature on a letter of intent to Big State. Even though Jake loses at one-on-one, he still sways Jesus in the end to sign with Big State, for Jesus declares, “My family and I send our prayers out to our father. May God bless him.”

Not his girlfriend LaLa, who uses sex and sassiness on the Wonder Wheel at Coney Island and elsewhere to try to get Jesus to jump to the pros on the wings of sports agent Pagnotti, whom Jesus refuses with “I can’t bring you to the Promised Land.” Not the local Big Time, a Puerto Rican who tries to influence with muscle (“The reason nobody fucks with you is because Big Time Willy put the word out.”) and apocalyptic warnings (“All those lips, all those hips, all those honey-dips ... That shit will fuck a nigger up quick”). Not his high school coach, the mysterious source of the cash that helped Jesus move himself and his sister, Mary (what else?), to an apartment away from their grasping Uncle Bubba, who doesn’t want to be “cut out of the deal,” who just wants “to wet [his] beak a little bit,” which means live on Long Island with a big swimming pool, among other dreams. The kids at school, at the bus stop, the sexy white women at Tech U, all “want a piece of Jesus” and will give him no peace. No wonder his cousin carries a sign in the halls at school declaring “He doesn’t know yet”!

Jesus wants no part of his father, saying to his sister when he first see Jake in the kids’ apartment, “I thought I told you never to talk to strangers,” and to his father, “It’s time for you to get to steppin’.” But blood is blood, and he has questions to ask eventually when he meets Jake in order to get rid of him, especially, “Has God forgiven you for killin’ my mother?” And “Why the hell you named me Jesus anyway?” Remembering his mother always calling him from the courts, crying Jesus, Jesus, appearing to the neighborhood kids like “a religious freak or somethin’ ... catchin’ the Holy Ghost.” Jesus is coming to face himself, who he is, who his parents are, what the game means to him, who taught him the game. It’s that core of the movie that makes me think of *Bang the Drum Slowly*, of *Bull Durham*, the “contenders” (hear Marlon Brando) not the pretenders that are trotted out for us so often by the movie studios with their pat formulas and their eyes on the sequel. Even the ending image, the ball thrown by Jake over the prison wall at Attica and falling into the hands of Jesus as he shoots hoops by himself in the gym at Big State, which bothered me the first time I saw the movie, is the right one for this film. Jesus’ father taught him the game, his mother reminded him to “use the game” to find his way out. He doesn’t have to repeat his father’s mistake, doesn’t have to, as Jake points out to him, “end up just another nigger like your father.” Jake tells Jesus, “Your grandfather used to tell me that you keep trying on shoes, sooner or later

you gonna find a pair that fits you ... I found a pair. It hurts like hell, son." Jesus has the ball, he has the chance, and in another daring move away from cliches, Lee has the camera move away, past the basket, while Jesus still holds the ball, still ponders it, doesn't shoot it up.

*Phil Wedge*