

Spike Lee's 'Chiraq' may be 'Lysistrata' remake. You know, 'Lysistrata.'



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Humor is one of the best ways ever devised to get an audience to pay attention to what's serious.

Spike Lee didn't invent that trick, but if the rumors are true, he plans to use it in his new movie about Chicago.

By now you probably know about the movie, the one that may or may not be called "Chiraq."

What you may have missed in all the shouting over "Chiraq" is that the movie may be based on "Lysistrata."

"Have you read 'Lysistrata?'" I asked an intelligent guy I know the other day.

"What?" he said.

Of course he said, "what?" because, honestly, who has read "Lysistrata?"

"Lysistrata," I repeated, and again he gave me a look that said, "That's Greek to me."

Exactly.

Once upon a time, when I was trying to fake my way through a college class on ancient Greek drama, I skimmed "Lysistrata." That

time was so very long ago, and skim is such a generous word for the time I spent on the play, that when reports of Lee's literary inspiration made the news, I couldn't even remember the plot.

With a little research, however, I've tapped into the synopsis vault in my memory bank:

Hoping to end the endless Peloponnesian War, a woman named Lysistrata persuades the women of Greece to go on a sex strike until the men make peace.

War? That's serious. Sex strike? That's funny. Potentially funny. Well, funny if it's done right.

Exactly how Lee might turn Aristophanes' "Lysistrata"—which made its theatrical debut in 411 B.C.—into a modern Chicago comedy is as murky as everything else about Lee's movie, which he defended at a media conference this week.

"Wait 'til the movie comes out," he said, trying to defuse worries that he plans to exploit Chicago's violence, mischaracterize it or get it too right for comfort. "You don't like it, you don't like it. But see it first!"

A fair point, but his decision not to supply details only fuels the speculation.

So let's continue to speculate.

Basing a Chicago movie on "Lysistrata" isn't as outlandish as it might seem. In modern Chicago, as in ancient Greece, too many men are lost in battles that lead nowhere, cycle after cycle of husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, needlessly, violently gone.

In "Lysistrata," it's Greeks warring against Greeks: the Athens gang vs. the Sparta gang. In Chicago, rival gangs, too, are as much alike as they are different.

Some people might object to the idea of making Chicago's violence funny, but the comedies of Aristophanes aren't comic in the way of, say, "2 Broke Girls."

"Aristophanes' plays are all deeply political," says Robert Wallace, Professor of Classics at Northwestern University, "and they have serious undercurrents as well as lots of jokes."

It's those political undercurrents that have helped keep "Lysistrata" alive. It had a renaissance during the Vietnam War and again during the Iraq War.

"The sex strike is a very funny idea," says Sara Monoson, Professor of Political Science and Classics at Northwestern, "and today it seems to have feminist as well as anti-war resonances. But I suspect Spike Lee sees something contemporary in the way it links eros and violence."

By that, she means that ancient Greeks had a passionate attachment to war. War, in her word, was "valorized."

"Aristophanes' hilarious play exposes that," she says. "He confronts the attraction to violence. Only a stronger passion—lust—can curb it."

Will that be the theme of "Chiraq?" We're left to guess.

When I initially heard that Spike Lee planned a movie called "Chiraq"—a slang term that suggests that everyday Chicago violence is similar to war in Iraq—my first thought was, "And what swanky hotel will Spike be staying in while he makes a movie about Chicago's horrors? What award-winning restaurants will he be dining in? Will he take the architectural boat tour?"

The more I hear about the movie, though, the more I think he has the chance to do something powerful and meaningful, and that he might.

Humor is hard to pull off. Bad satire can backfire. But when done right, humor makes us see the serious more clearly, may even make us care more.

Spike, we're trusting you to understand that Chicago is far more than its violence but that we take the violence seriously—and that's why we've responded seriously to your movie.

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