

Guess Who (2005)

Rated PG-13 Our Content Rating: V-1 ; L-1 ; S/N-4

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:34

Director Kevin Rodney Sullivan's Guess Who?

film bears more than a passing resemblance to Stanley Kramer's 1967 *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* However, the changing times greatly decreases the relevance and bite of the satirical comedy. Today we have Halle Berry, Denzil Washington, and Don Cheadle and Will Smith—then, if asked to name the outstanding black movie stars, the list would have been restricted to Sidney Poitier and the singer/actor Harry Belafonte. And in 1967 kissing across racial lines would have been a major concern for fear of the film being excluded or banned in a major region of the country.

The races/sexes are reversed this time, Simon Green (Ashton Kutcher) being white, and Theresa Jones (Zoe Saldana) white. He is a rising star on Wall Street who has met and fallen in love with a beautiful black woman. On the occasion of her parents' 25th wedding anniversary Theresa is taking him home not only to introduce him to her parents and family, but to

announce their engagement. Only in the cab on the way to her former home does she mention that she has not told them of her intended's race. When Simon voices a concern over this, she says, "It doesn't matter." Serving as prophet/Greek chorus, the cabbie up front says, "It will matter." And it does.

In a brief moment of comedy of errors her father Percy Jones (Bernie Mac) mistakes the handsome cab driver as his daughter's boy friend because Simon has gone to the cab's trunk to retrieve their luggage. When apprised of the truth, there is no mistaking the disapproving expression on his face. Theresa's Marilyn (Judith Scott), far more gracious than her blunt-speaking husband, tries to make Simon feel welcome, but this doesn't go far after Percy walks into the guest bedroom and finds the pair frolicking on the bed, Simon playfully having donned Theresa's new red lace night gown. He promptly grabs Simon's bag and tries to check him into a motel. No luck because of a convention in town, so it's back to his basement, where he not only beds down his guest, but also becomes his bedmate in order to prevent any hanky panky.

Some of the humor is forced, with Bernie Mack as the successful bank loan officer, certain that he can size up a person's true character at first meeting, sometimes going over the top, much like TV's George Jefferson. One telling scene, however, is well done: the family, including Theresa's feisty grandfather, have gathered at the table, and during the stiff conversation Simon mentions that he expresses his disapproval whenever he hears a racial or ethnic joke. Percy asks him to give an example, but Simon shyly declines. Percy presses him, and so Simon, despite the warning glance from his fiancé, agrees. "How do we know Adam and Eve weren't black? Ever try to get a rib away from a black man?" All but Theresa laugh, and Percy asks for another. Theresa's warning glance is more urgent, but Simon continues with another, and another, until the joke casting aspersion on black males falls flat, Percy and his father especially being upset.

The theme of racial division and misunderstanding is played for laughs in this film, and yet it does offer an opportunity for youth and adults to engage in a meaningful discussion. (Sometimes humor is a good means to explore a delicate topic, as witness Frank Oz's delightful 1997 *In and Out* in which homosexuality and people's attitude toward a gay man are central.)

For reflection/discussion 1) It would be fun to watch and compare the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* With this film. How have times changed since then? How is this reflected in the two films?

2) Despite changes (including the often touted "progress" in racial relations), how do we see old attitudes persisting—in the comment of the cabbie; in Percy? In Simon also—such as his use of "you people"? What is the reaction of virtually all of the Jones to this slip of the tongue?

3) How does Theresa's talk with her father show that old attitudes linger: "I'm scared. I know times have changed, but you should hear things people say...I need you behind me..." 4) What seems to be the role of "sisterhood" in the lives of the women? What do you think of some of their advice to Theresa?

5) Which do you think is strongest in Percy: his old prejudice against whites, or his love for his daughter? How does Simon's statement about his love and need for Theresa tip the balance in Percy's soul?

6) What forms of prejudice do you see in the Bible? What was Christ's attitude toward it? How did Peter, in the story of his encounter with Cornelius, emerge from his prejudice? (See Acts 10.) Is racism something you still struggle with? What has your church done to combat it? What can it do?