

Luce (2019)



Star pupil Luce with his black teacher and his adoptive white mother. (c) Neon

Julius Onah's drama offers a very different perspective from the usual social justice film on interracial relations in post-Obama America. The two main black characters, 17-year-old student Luce (Kelvin Harrison, Jr.) and dedicated teacher Mrs. Wilson (Octavia Spencer), normally would be allied, but in this murky tale they become staunch adversaries. J.C. Lee's script, based on his 2016 off-Broadway play, will leave you never certain as to who is right in their conflict.

The well-off white couple, Amy and Peter (Naomi Watts, Tim Roth), adopted the Eritrean boy, whom they symbolically named Luce (because they could not pronounce his African name), derived from the Latin for "light," and saw him through years of therapy to overcome the trauma of having been forced to be a boy soldier during that unhappy nation's civil war. Luce has emerged as a strong, hard working teenager looked up to by virtually every faction of his suburban Virginia high school. Captain of his debate team and sports hero, he is slated to be class valedictorian.

However, one of his teachers, Harriet Wilson (Octavia Spencer), is upset when she reads his essay in which he praises the Pan-Africanist writer Frantz Fanon, who advocated violence to defeat colonization. Her unease turns to alarm when she searches his locker and finds a bag of outlawed

fireworks, suggesting that he might be on the verge of attacking the school. (Later we learn that she had invaded another student's locker, that of a teammate of Lucas. Finding marijuana, this had led to the boy's ejection from the basketball team and the end of his promised college scholarship. The boy has dropped out of school and seems fated for a dismal future.)

Instead of confronting Luce, she meets with the parents without telling the boy. She turns the bag over to the parents in the expectation that they will deal with the situation. They do not inform Luce of the meeting with his teacher, but talk about other matters with him.

There follows a lot of back and forth debate over adoptions of a minority child, the irrational punishment of drug race and racial expectations and relations, as well as trust between parents and children, and teachers and students. For most of the film we are not sure whom to root for. There is even the issue of jock rape with Luce's ex-girlfriend Stephanie Kim (Andrea Bang), possibly having been assaulted by Luce's teammates—Miss Wilson had even used her plight in a class session as an example in which women needed to stand up for their rights.

Because it is Octavia Spencer playing Ms. Wilson, we think of the long line of noble teacher films, going back to those played by Sidney Poitier. Is she such a teacher, or a woman under pressure, striking out at others because of her drug-addicted sister (Marsha Stephanie Blake)?

In a culture paying lip service to Dr. King's non-violence, why would Luce advocate violence to overcome oppression? Were those fireworks, capable of inflicting considerable damage were they to be set off indoors, really stashed in Luce's locker as a favor to his friends, as he claims? And if Luce did not smear racist epithets on the front of Ms. Wilson's house out of spite, who did?

Luce himself shows signs of struggle behind his façade of the perfect overachieving student, an inspirational role model for other black males. No doubt he winces when other students call him “Obama” and “Mandela.” Is this sincere admiration, or does it mask his peers’ envy and resentment? Several times he chafes over the way he is regarded, declaring, “I’m not going to be somebody’s symbol.” And yet that is who he is in eyes of everyone. Ms. Wilson being the exception. And because we are not shown his past trauma and its effects, it is basically a symbol in the film as well.

Some of the plot is hard to accept—that in an upper class school where parents are well aware of their rights, a teacher can get away with searching a student’s locker on her own authority! And a defensive parent not calling her on it? And why would the teacher turn over the evidence of the boy’s potential violence to those likely to discard it, leaving her with no evidence should the affair come before the school authorities? Also, one might wonder why Luce’s past trauma as a child soldier is just mentioned, with there seeming to be no trace of it in his present, no hint of a bad dream or a reaction to loud a noise? Those therapists must have been miracle workers! Had this been written into the script the boy would have come much more fully alive for us.

The cast is so good that it is easy to miss such plot flaws. We have been treated with so many social justice films the past few years that we might too easily welcome another one promising to probe deeply into racism. This one can indeed lead to a great discussion of race and expectations, but the depth will have to come from the participants, not this film.

This review will be in the October issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.

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