

Selah and the Spades (2019)



Paloma, Selah, & Maxxie run the Spades faction at their prep school. (c) Amazon Studios

High school has certainly changed since I was a student, if writer/director Tayarisha Poe's Haldwell boarding school in her new film truly reflects present day high schools—or even compared to the school in Alexander Payne's 1998 *Election*. Haldwell's Queen Bee, whom we know only as Selah, makes Reese Witherspoon's ambitious Tracy Flick seem like a kindergartener, so sophisticated and ruthless is her rule over the social life of the prestigious boarding school. We might well call this a campus version of *Game of Thrones*. And unlike most similar films, such as [The Hate You Give](#), Haldwell's enrollment is overwhelmingly black and brown, so we're not dealing with a girl trying to cope in an alien culture here.

At Haldwell there is an unofficial council of five factions, secret societies that run things outside the classroom. At the head of the most powerful one, the Spades, sits Selah Summers (Lovie Simone). She can be friendly, winning friends by her charm; and she can be cruel and vengeful when crossed. Her faction's power rests on her control of illegal drugs and alcohol at the school. The other factions are in charge of clandestine parties, underground gambling, and soliciting classmates to do homework—all under the nose of the

paternalistic Headmaster Banton (Jesse Williams). Bobby (Ana Mulvoy-Ten), the head of a rival faction, seeks to undermine Selah.

Selah is a senior, so she is concerned about passing on her leadership. Her almost-boyfriend and right-hand man Maxxie (Jharrel Jerome) is interested in wooing another girl, so she befriends Paloma (Celeste O'Connor) a sophomore transfer student as his replacement and possibly her successor. While Paloma is shooting pictures of Selah and her cheerleading teammates during a practice she asks, "Can I buy your eye for an hour?" The young newcomer becomes her protegee, at first accepting whole-heartedly her mentor's guidance.

For a teen movie there is a conspicuous absence of sex. Selah is much more concerned with control, as she says addresses the camera, "When you're 17 and when you're a girl, you've got the whole world telling you what to do with your body." She even goes into why the "Spirit Squad" cheerleaders design their own uniforms, "Your mom tells you, 'Change your dress...' School tells you, 'Cover your shoulders, cover your legs'... 'Cos they can't tell boys to keep it in their pants?" In a telephone scene we see that, aside from a fellow teen who is head of a competing faction, Selah is under intense pressure from her mother concerned about her school performance.

Selah is more like a teenage crime don than a college student—more than one reviewer has compared her story to *The Godfather*—when an investigation of the Spades record book suggests that Maxxie was responsible for questionable entries. Look closely at the most reproduced photo of Selah, the one on the movie's poster, and you see her sitting on a throne-like chair. The original is wicker, but for the poster there is an ornate gold frame around the backrest! She is dressed in her cheerleader's uniform, her head tilted, her ace devoid of the painted smile associated with cheerleaders.

When Maxxie is beaten up for his transgressions, Paloma

becomes upset that her ruthless mentor had ordered it. The gap between the two girls widens with subsequent events that follow the headmaster's cancellation of the senior prom when the factions' rackets are exposed. One revelation comes when Paloma is informed of the fate of the girl who had previously been close to Selah. Paloma figures prominently in the students' setting up an alternative prom, and thus becomes a threat to Selah's long-time dominance. The latter does something that could result in tragedy, and certainly will affect their relationship.

Tayarisha Poe renders no judgement on the girls' illicit drug activities. Nor does she hint that any of them might have come from a church background. These characters are completely secularized, accepting the trappings that too often surround those seeking power—deceit, manipulation of others, callous ruthlessness toward anyone who gets in the way. Even Selah's abstinence from the most frequently dealt with vice in college movies—sex—is not a matter of virtue but of her intention of not being vulnerable to anyone. Parents of teenagers should be ready to discuss this film and the values of its attractive-looking characters. Are their looks deceiving? Is Selah a giver or a taker? Could one depend upon such deceptive and ruthless girls were one in some kind of trouble? What lies ahead for such persons, if they have already forsaken the values cherished by those who have worked to make the world a better place?

This review will be in the May 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.