

Spike Lee's 'Da 5 Bloods' is right for the moment



CHENNAI: Spike Lee — who was to have headed this year's jury at the Cannes Film Festival, and who got his long overdue Oscar victory with "BlacKKKlansman" — has given us a gripping drama on the Netflix platform: "Da 5 Bloods."



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About five African-American Vietnam war veterans, who call themselves Bloods, the work could not have appeared at a more appropriate time, when the merciless killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer has led to ongoing demonstrations worldwide.

Lee tells us that racism has never ceased. But although one can smell this evil in “Da 5 Bloods,” the plot is not quite about that. It is a treasure hunt by the veterans, who go back to Vietnam after many years to find a huge box of gold bars, from a crashed CIA plane, that they had buried in a forest during the war, in which one of them — Norman Earl (Chadwick Boseman) — was killed.



The film centers around five African-American Vietnam war veterans, who call themselves Bloods.
(Supplied)

For those not well-versed in what happened in the Vietnam war and in the US in the early 1960s, with white-black tension at its peak, Lee presents an engaging montage with soundbites from political activist Angela Davis, among others. She had said: “If the link-up is not made between what’s happening in Vietnam and what’s happening here, we may very well face a period of full-blown fascism very soon.”

It is after this background information that Lee gets down to the real story, with Eddie (Norm Lewis), Melvin (Isiah Whitlock Jr.), Otis (Clarke Peters) and Paul (Delroy Lindo) meeting up at a hotel in Ho Chi Minh City (once called Saigon). There is an intruder: David (Jonathan Majors), Paul's son, who had got wind of the Bloods' plan by hacking into his father's email account. "You really can't have such a simple password," the young man tells Paul.



BTS. (Supplied)

The war veterans and David trek into the jungle and find not only the buried treasure but also the remains of Norman, who had once kept the Bloods united and resolute in their fight against prejudice.

Like most of the plots about treasure hunts, Lee's movie touches upon greed, which takes the five men deep into a perilous jungle and later divides them, perhaps much to the anguish of Norman, who keeps appearing in flashbacks as Paul's conscience. There are other hurdles: A foreign land-mine-removal organization and contemporary Vietnamese soldiers, and all of them want a share of the gold.

At 155 minutes, there are moments when the film feels like it is dragging, but one cannot forget that beyond the treasure hunt, “Da 5 Bloods” is a very significant work on troubled race relations, and not just in America.

When Otis visits his old lover in Ho Chi Minh City, Tien (Le Y Lan), and finds out that he has had a daughter by her, the mother talks about the girl’s difficult life in Vietnam with racial abuse thrown at her. Tien quips: “The white GI taught us that word.”

Adding to the movie’s allure are uniformly excellent performances, most notably by Lindo, who is literally a dynamite, conveying with haunting intensity his avarice, his anger at being discriminated against, and his troubling conscience. In the end, we realize that Lee is underlining that Black Lives Matter. Indeed they do.
