

## BlackKkKlansman [15] 2018|USA|135 min

UK release date **24<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

Director **Spike Lee**

Screenplay **Charlie Wachtel, David Rabinowitz, Kevin Willmott, Spike Lee**

Cinematographer **Chayse Irvin**

Cast **John David Washington** (Ron Stallworth); **Adam Driver** (Flip Zimmerman); **Topher Grace** (David Duke); **Laura Harrier** (Patrice Dumas); **Alec Baldwin** (Dr Kennebrew Beauregard); **Ryan Eggold** (Walter Breachway)

Spike Lee's Cannes grand prix winner is the director's best work since his Oscar-nominated 1997 documentary 4 Little Girls. It's a stranger-than-fiction tale of an African American cop infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1970s. Produced by the team behind Get Out (it was Jordan Peele who brought the story to Lee), BlackKkKlansman slips seamlessly from borderline-absurdist humour to all-too-real horror, conjuring an urgent blend of sociopolitical period satire and contemporary wake-up call.

John David Washington gives a wonderfully wry and nuanced central performance as Ron Stallworth, an afro-sporting idealist who becomes "the Jackie Robinson" of the formerly all-white Colorado Springs police force. Graduating swiftly from records to intelligence, Stallworth answers a newspaper ad for the KKK, posing on the telephone as a budding white supremacist. When face-to-face meetings are required, Stallworth's Jewish colleague Flip Zimmerman (a brooding Adam Driver) is drafted in to press the flesh at meetings where homemade terrorism is served up with cheese and crackers, the tension heightened by the weird domesticity.

Soon, a relationship is being built with grand wizard David Duke (Topher Grace), the "smiling future" of "the organisation", who plans to lead it from cross burnings into politics under the banner of putting "America First!" and making it "great again". "The United States would never elect somebody like David Duke," says Ron, prompting an accusation of naivety from his boss and a ripple of ghoulish guffaws from an audience who know how this cruel joke ends.

With its long-lensed, long-take shots, captured on 35mm by cinematographer Chayse Irvin, and note-perfect production and costume design, *BlackKlansman* elegantly evokes the cinema of its setting (Lee has cited *The French Connection*, *Serpico* and *Dog Day Afternoon* as tonal touchstones). Yet there's nothing nostalgic about this evocation of a (not so) bygone age as it juxtaposes historical racial hatred with shocking news footage of Charlottesville in 2017, and Trump's astonishing "blame on both sides" response to neo-Nazi attacks. As with his use of the Rodney King footage in *Malcolm X*, Lee efficiently conflates the struggles of the past and present into a powerful cinematic continuum.

What's most remarkable is how well Lee balances the tonal shifts, provoking both laughs and gasps with a film built upon dualities: fact and fiction (*Stallworth's* story is heavily fictionalised, yet rings "true"); past and present; inside and outside. Just as our central figure becomes two characters folded into one, so *BlackKlansman* revels in mirror images. Ron's relationship with student activist Patrice (Laura Harrier) is shadowed by creepily affectionate scenes in which a white supremacist couple cuddle while conspiring to kill. A declaration that police officers are "family" who "stick together, right or wrong" chimes with the Klan's own twisted code, echoing a central debate about whether change can be effected from within or without the system. Angry cries of "white power" and "black power" are pointedly intercut, ricocheting around the film's mediating message of "all power to all the people". It's great to see this admirably unruly film-maker back at the height of his provocative powers.

After: **Mark Kermode, The Observer, 26 August 18**

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Monday 4<sup>th</sup> February: **Nae Pasaran! (12)**

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