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In 'BlacKkKlansman,' Spike Lee's opposite of a post-racial America

Far from director's "Do The Right Thing," latest movie is timely, retro think piece

On a slow day in 1979, Ron Stallworth, the first African-American police detective in the Colorado Springs (Colo.) Police Department, perused classified listings in the local newspaper. He noticed an ad seeking recruits to the region's Ku Klux Klan chapter.

Stallworth, in an exploratory mood, signed right up.

A good-natured guy, this Jackie Robinson of the detective department devoted considerable time and energy to warding off subtle and not-so-subtle racism on his day job. He was surprised that the white alter ego he created on the telephone was so enthusiastically received by Colorado Klan leadership and David Duke, then the 20-something Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Stallworth couldn't pull off the subterfuge alone, of course, and enlisted the assistance of a white detective in his department to stand in as the in-person face of the covert personality he created to plot and strategize with Klan members over the telephone.

The real Stallworth — who also was wired up to infiltrate a black-empowerment rally featuring Kwame Toure (nee Stokely

Carmichael) was able to collect enough intelligence on the Klan to alert police of several planned cross-burnings.

The cops would flood the intended conflagration venues with cruisers, compelling the would-be domestic terrorists to pack up their sheets for another day.

The Colorado Springs Police Department ultimately terminated

these politically sensitive interventions and ordered Stallworth to dispose of related evidence.

In 2014, Stallworth published a book about his experience, "Black Klansman," which came to the attention of Jordan Peele, director of 2017's hit race-relations horror comedy "Get Out."

The newly overextended Peele passed the book along to veteran director Spike Lee, who wrote (with Kevin Willmott) and directed this summer's "BlacKkKlansman."

Lee spiced up Stallworth's by-the-book memoir with fiery ex-



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plussions contrived for commercial consumption, a hint of romance and resonate object lessons about being true to one's self.

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a timely, retro think piece decorated with period-friendly Afros and white, cone-hood caftans.

Lee deliberately scheduled release of the film to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the Aug. 12 neo-Nazi and white-supremacist Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, Va., where anti-racist protester Heather Heyer was killed.

The director draws a straight line linking past to present through David Duke, played by Topher Grace. He bookends Grace's portrayal of the young

Klan leader with footage of the middle-aged, country club-presentable Duke of Charlottesville, who declared that the rally represented a "turning point" for people to "take our country back" and "fulfill the promises of Donald Trump."

Grace as Duke delivers the Klan leader as an aspiring brand-conscious executive whose efforts to grow his organization are hampered by the internecine fighting and cartoonish antics of his earnest followers who, like any joiners, are essentially searching for purpose and belonging.

Adam Driver plays Flip Zimmerman, Stallworth's close-to-the-vest undercover counterpart. Zimmerman thinks of himself only as white. But among the Klansmen, he is forced to consider for the first time what it means to deny his heritage.

In the movie, Flip is Jewish. In real life, Stallworth's partner on this assignment was not.

More than anything, "BlacKkKlansman" is a vehicle for the charming and talented John David Washington ("Ballers"), son of Denzel, who can collect his bona fides as a lead actor with this film.

Washington presents Stallworth as an unapologetic black man with a job to do (who must also take a stand for his commitment to police work), lending the detective an irresistible magnetism that isn't apparent in the book.

With "BlacKkKlansman," Lee, who has been at the business of movie-making for more than 30 years, spins a compelling personal essay by a racial pioneer into a solid, timely and amusing reflection on the opposite of a post-racial America — an America that is still vulnerable to what Lee described to Time magazine as "homegrown, red, white and blue, cherry-pie terrorism."