

"EXUBERANT!" — *The New York Times*

" F R E S H

and funny . . . sex is the
central issue." — *NY Post*



" L O O S E

and spontaneous."
— *NY Newsday*



"A disarmingly
FAST-TALKING
comedy." — *Village Voice*



"VIBRANT . . .
recalls Cassavetes & the early
French new wave." — *Variety*

Directed by
**GORDON ERIKSEN
& JOHN O'BRIEN**
A FIRST RUN FEATURES RELEASE

THE BIG DIS

"America's first interracial sex comedy." — *The Boston Globe*

"A BREAKTHROUGH!"

The Big Dis — Presskit (1990)

Critical Reaction to The Big Dis

EXUBERANT. The filmmakers have constructed a very funny, engaging, congenial movie...the hip-hop soundtrack has a tough talking but light hearted humor that mirrors its middle class characters. - The New York Times

HILARIOUS YET THOUGHTFUL - The Big Dis puts bigger films to shame. - Los Angeles Times

REVOLUTIONARY...Gritty, bright, and very funny. My pick of the week. - LA Weekly

A DISARMINGLY FAST-TALKING COMEDY WITH THE BUZZ OF AUTHENTICITY. The only unreconstructed film about adolescent sensibilities I've ever seen. - The Village Voice

ONE OF THE YEAR'S TEN BEST. - The Village Voice

YOUNG, FRESH, SMART, AND GUTSY. I'm already looking forward to their next film. - The Nation

A BREAKTHROUGH FILM: America's first matter-of-factly inter-racial sex comedy. - The Boston Globe

Mix the hip humor of Spike Lee, the can-do resourcefulness of a young John Cassavetes, and the pulse of a rap video and you'll have The Big Dis. - SF Chronicle

THE MOST PLEASANT SURPRISE OF 1990 - a dead on, wryly funny comedy. - Philadelphia Enquirer

LOOSE AND SPONTANEOUS. Contrary to movie stereotyping, there are people of color living in suburbia. - The New York Post

FRESH AND FUNNY...a refreshing immersion into the world and concerns of today's teenagers by filmmakers young enough to know. - NY Newsday

FRESH AND VIBRANT...one of the more fascinating presentations of the American melting pot in recent memory. - Variety

Directors Statement

The genesis of "The Big Dis" lies in two earlier projects that I began in 1986. One was a half hour documentary ("Manchild.") that I was shooting, about the coming of age of a fourteen year old boy of mixed Chinese and African-American parentage. Ankh, the main character, was, like all fourteen year olds, obsessed with getting some sex. He spoke frankly, amusingly, and sometimes shockingly about it to myself and my co-director, David Chan. Thus the beginning of my interest in "the war of the sexes" as subject matter. The second project was a narrative series of photographs that I made while in Florida ("Daytona"), the subject being a group of soldiers on their spring leave. One of them was James Haig, an old friend and the future star of "The Big Dis." He always showed up in the funniest and best pictures, and the root of the humor usually had something to do with his newly assumed persona as a rather macho military man. Thus, naturally, came the idea for a swaggering soldier on leave.

Combining these two ideas gave us the dramatic tension to build a film around: a young soldier tries to live out the macho fantasy the military has brainwashed him with, and experiences the diminishingly innocent frustration of a fourteen-year-old when reality refuses to comply. And what interested us was not so much making judgements as making an intimate, and understanding, document. Hopefully what is interesting in the film is the internal conflicts in J.D.'s character and in the characters of his women friends, not in any particular overriding moral. J.D. is trying to be the respectful, charming guy that his mother trained him to be, and simultaneously be a total dog; the various women characters are usually, moment by moment, alternately attracted to him and disgusted by him.

Fiction and reality overlap in an interesting way in "The Big Dis." James Haig really was in the military, but is certainly much more of a gentleman in real life; Heather Johnston really was my fiance, but in reality never worried about J.D. being a "bad influence" on me, his best friend. These are just minor details, however. What is very real, and integral to the film, is the neighborhood. Heather, J.D., and I grew up on the edges of the town of Hempstead and went to school in a very unique racial environment. Our social circle was mainly comprised of middle class Blacks and West Indians, with a number of whites, Hispanics, and Asians mixed in. This setting is not faked. This film is

not trying to be an "integrationist" statement. It is not about a white neighborhood with some token minorities; this setting is a different kind of suburb than usually seen in Hollywood films. Racism and racial tension do exist in my neighborhood, and had they emerged as a subject in our workshop rehearsals (as we half hoped, actually) they would have played a larger role in the film. But they didn't, and so "The Big Dis'' is a testament to a cooperative and relaxed relationship among an inter-racial group of young actors. We are very happy with that tone, and hope that other films will emerge where race exists as a powerful and realistic subtext but not as a central issue.

The music was created by bringing together a Long Island rap crew (Kevin Haig, J.D.'s brother in the movie, is one of the leaders in the mixed-sex crew) and a Long Island heavy metal band (featuring Rob Pilotte, the stoner guitarist in the film). We then asked these two groups to work together in making narrative music about the perspective of the main character, and about their hometown, always bearing in mind the sexual conflicts of the film. Recording the original tracks in a garage and rerecording them in a cheap music studio became two of the high points of making the film for me.

Finally, to briefly cite some films that greatly influenced the project: "Killer of Sheep," by Charles Burnett, is quite possibly my favorite film, and one that we watched several times in preproduction to learn about the importance of environment, and the eloquence of real people as characters. "Shadows," John Cassavetes first film, gave us renewed faith in the idea of just-take-a-camera-and-do-it! and influenced the editing of certain improvisational takes into a relentless rhythm. "She's Gotta Have It," by Spike Lee, made us realize that we could reach our audience, if we just were willing to do anything short of murder to get the film done. And "Purple Rain," by Albert Magnoli, encouraged us along the lines of using music to supply narrative information.

Gordon Eriksen 6/90

Story Synopsis

When we first meet J.D., the young, disaffected Black G.I. who's the focus of *The Big Dis*, he has just arrived home in Long Island on his much awaited first weekend pass.

J.D. has come with one goal, put explicitly in one of the booming rap numbers that pulsate through the film: He wants to "mix bodies with a female."

"I've got a new strategy," J.D. (James Haig) boasts to one of his homeboys. "Full frontal assault."

The next 48 hours, however, don't go quite the way J.D. plans. Instead of romancing Hempstead, J.D. strikes out with some dozen girls, his old running buddy Gordon has gotten engaged to a girl who views him with suspicion, the car his wild younger brother lends him breaks down, and for the final indignity, his strict West Indian mother recruits him to feed the dog, mow the lawn, and buy his grandfather lottery tickets. So much for military machismo.

The Big Dis may start out looking like a film for the guys, but in the end it appears the women hold the upper hand in J.D.'s world. Black, white, and Hispanic alike, they're smarter, tougher, and more ambitious than the men. While our unliberated hero probably deserves the misery he receives at the hands of his intended targets, eventually we cannot help but respond to J.D.'s self deprecating humor and optimism displayed in the face of frustrating adversity.

As J.D. progresses on his macho mission, we are gradually introduced to the unexpectedly charming, complex, and even vulnerable persona hidden behind his uniform. J.D. is a twenty year old working to make sense of his stint in the military, fumbling to understand conflicting rules of modern adulthood, and intuitively trying to navigate the unspoken class and racial lines of his mixed neighborhood.

J.D.'s neighborhood is one in which, in a Hollywood film, could only be populated by whites: a lovely, remote, middle class suburb of the Northeast. However, in *The Big Dis* it is mainly populated by Blacks, with a smattering of Hispanics, whites, and Asians, thus giving us a look at a different but very-real, often ignored face of the American dream.

To create a strong feeling of authenticity, *The Big Dis* mixes the hand held camera style of verite documentary with some of the chatty intimacy of Eric Rohmer and early John Cassavetes, and then updates it with a healthy dose of the street-smart sexual bravado of rap music. Intercut with military marching chants, the tunes from Salt N Pepa, LL Cool J, and Kev Ses & Harry B here provide an ironic commentary on J.D.'s great expectations.

Production Note

"The Big Dis" was produced under the auspices of the Harvard University film department, which has recently graduated young filmmakers such as Reggie Hudlin ("House Party") and Mira Nair ("Salaam Bombay"). Gordon Eriksen began the project in 1987 as his senior thesis, tentatively disguised as a docudrama about race relations among suburban teens. He recruited John O'Brien, a fellow film student, to shoot and direct the film with him; his wife, Heather Johnston, a history major with drama training, to produce the film; and James Haig to star in and cowrite it. Along with Kev Ses & Harry B, a pair of young rappers from Long Island, and Tony Silbert, their producer, these four individuals formed the creative basis for the film. The cast was put together from a mixture of acting students, semiprofessionals, and local people, with most of the sets being volunteered homes of family members. Shot over a two week period of June, 1987, and a week in December/January 1987/88, the film took almost six months to edit for a combined cost of about \$20,000, raised among the cast and crew and borrowed from grants for other projects. After several rough cut screenings for various audiences in Summer and Fall 1988, the filmmakers were encouraged to beg, borrow, and steal an additional \$80,000 to blow the film up to 35mm with a newly recorded original soundtrack.- The film debuted at the U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah, followed shortly thereafter by festival screenings in Berlin, Los Angeles, Montreal, Toronto, Tokyo, Boston, finally winning a Special Jury Prize at the Torino Film Festival. As a result of "The Big Dis"' success on the festival circuit, and a key Independent Feature Project/West screening, in Summer 1989 Home Box Office (HBO) bought and developed a weekly comedy series loosely based on the film. The pilot episode for this show goes into production on Long Island in late August 1990, to be directed by Gordon Eriksen and produced by Heather Johnston. Heather and Gordon also have another feature, "Gina and Isaiah," funded by the NEA and NYSCA, going into production in Winter 1990. John O'Brien has just completed principal photography on his own feature, "Vermont is for Lovers." Finally, "Manchild," the documentary by Gordon Eriksen and David Chan that inspired "The Big Dis," will be making its New York premiere at the Asian American International Film Festival also on June 29th.

The Big Dis Makes Several Breakthroughs
By Jay Carr, The Boston Globe
9.17.89

Cross John Cassavetes and Spike Lee, add a reminder that not all blacks and whites are trying to kill each other in New York, and you'll be on your way to drawing a bead on "The Big Dis, a gritty black and white verite outing that may be America's first matter-of-factly interracial sex comedy.

Nominally, it deals with the spectacularly futile efforts of a young black GI (James Haig) trying to score while back home on a weekend pass. The comedy of sexual misadventure, however, isn't as freshly winning as the context in which Eriksen and O'Brien place it. Eriksen, who grew up near Hempstead, L.I., where the Big Dis was filmed, says that the free and easy exchanges between blacks and whites really represent the reality there, at least so far.

The word "dis" short for disrespect, has been enlarged to mean any sort of putdown. It applies often here, as Haig, a naturally gifted actor, starts out on the sexist high road, but keeps striking out with women who have no patience with his quick booty policy nor with the clumsiness with which he tries to put it into effect. He's dissed alot, mostly by women, as the rap soundtrack, mostly by L.I. rappers Kev Ses and Harry B, narrates. In it's modest way, The Big Dis is a breakthrough film in several respects, one being the smooth integration of action and rap track. There are times when slack and amateurishness intrude, but an easy spontaniety informs The Big Dis. It's a good humoured black-white "He's Gotta Have It" in which He Never Gets It. Young interracial audiences will take a lot of pleasure in The Big Dis.