

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Friday, August 10, 2007

Subject: Black Film Festival

Location: Adam Clayton Powell Building, 2nd floor

Time: 2:30-6:00 pm

This excursion was not particularly useful, but a way for me to explore another building and low-cost event in Harlem. If I went later or during the weekend perhaps it would have yielded more.

On my way to the Adam Clayton Powell Building two white people were walking in front of me: a middle-aged man in a shirt and slacks talking loudly into a cell phone, and a smaller person walking hunched over, hooded, in a black jacket and loose-fitting jeans. Two very different ways for a white person to operate in Harlem. I also passed a white couple who seemed like tourists, dressed in casual clothing, tall and slender, pointing across the street with a multicolored umbrella.

At the Adam Clayton Powell Building workers were nailing 2x4s to hold a huge blue tarp onto a stage. [I believe this is the Harlem SummerStage stage, with shows on Thursday nights.] Today was 59 degrees with the threat of rain, very cold compared to the past few weeks of mugginess.

I approached the doors on the west side of the building, but there was a sign that read instructed visitors to enter from the other doors. I pushed through a revolving door, which was hard to turn. A woman sat at a lectern, wearing a dark blue blazer and gray slacks. Behind her two posters for the Black Film Festival were propped on easels. I told her I was there for the film festival, and she asked for ID. I showed her my driver's license, and she copied something from it onto a ledger. She handed me a sticker which read, "TEMPORARY VISITOR PASS," with the name of the building, and space to write the date, time, and name. Next a tall, bald-headed man in a similar uniform stood behind a table. I opened my purse for him. He asked if I had any change in my pockets and I said no, shaking my head. He motioned me through a gray structure that looked like a metal detector, although much more decorative than the usual airport machine. As I stood waiting for the elevator to arrive, another man in a uniform told me that there was an elevator waiting for me, using some sort of endearment such as "sweetheart." I thanked him and went into the elevator.

I walked the wrong way off the elevators, but saw some offices for "community outreach." [Community outreach for the state government?] I turned around and made it to the Art Gallery, where the movies were showing. It was dark; I had arrived after the movie started. There were three other people in the large room, set up to seat about 135 people. A man got up to greet me. He wore the kind of hat that contains dreadlocks, a short-sleeve button-down shirt and pants (couldn't see b/c it was dark). He charged me \$3 instead of \$5, I suppose for a matinee. I asked for a program. He sat back down behind two tables set up with ice chests and other items, which I would later see included an

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advertisement for soft serve ice cream and other snacks. I took a seat in the fifth row, behind a woman in the first row and a couple in the third row.

A screen was set up in the front of the room. There were large potted plants on the left side of the room (facing the screen). Chairs were arranged in three sections, the middle section with about six rows of fifteen facing the front, and smaller sections on either side angled toward the screen. The snack/drink tables were to the right at the rear of the room.

The movie was not what I expected; I came to see *For Us the Living*, a feature on civil rights activist Medgar Evers. Instead, I would later find out that the movie I saw was *Just an Old Sweet Song*, 1973. A Detroit family goes to the South to take care of their sick grandmother (the mother's mother). At first they apprehensively imagine the horrors of the South. When the father goes to town to buy pipes to install a toilet, he warily checks out the white men standing around. After some ominous music and quick shots cutting between his wary expression and the men talking, spitting, and joking, he walks by without incident. At the hardware store the owner gives him lip, but serves him. The family grows more comfortable at the farm: the smallest boy gets a job, the daughter seems happy, and the father gets into the worm business with a neighbor (possibly brother-in-law?). Only the mother and oldest son want to return to Detroit, where she has a "career" and he wants to make it on his own, if not with his family. When a heavy rainstorm destroys the worm farm, the father decides to stay for a bit longer. The oldest son runs away after a confrontation with his father, saying that his grandmother is not really sick and is tricking the family into staying longer. The father goes after his son the next day, after his son has figured out that making it on his own is not so easy. When they return to the farm, the grandmother has died. Her lawyer, who is also the real estate agent, informs the mother that she has inherited the farm, and that he'd be happy to sell it for her. Eventually the family decides to stay, for now.

During the movie, a man in a wheelchair entered the room and went behind the snack table. Another woman entered and sat in the row in front of me, after hesitating to block my view by passing by. An older woman also entered and joined the woman sitting in the front row. After the movie ended, the man in the wheelchair went to the projection equipment and put on a video of a male singing group. The songs sounded familiar but I could not name them, and the grainy footage could have been from the 60s or earlier.

The couple got up to leave, and the man in the hat chased after them. It looked like he was giving them a pen and paper. The man handed something back to the man in the hat. The young woman sitting near me asked me the name of the movie. I told her I didn't know. The woman in the front got up and left the room. After a couple minutes, I also got up to go to the bathroom.

The couple was still outside, talking to the man in the hat. The man had a bald head and appeared African American. The woman was slender and wore a skirt with hardware on it (looked like giant rhinestones, but I could be wrong), and appeared Asian. Her accent sounded Vietnamese.

The woman from the front row was in the restroom. She was quite old, and very light-skinned. We made small talk, I can't remember about what.

When I returned to the art gallery I asked Hat Man the name of the movie. He motioned me to the projector table and told me they had to change the program. The paper read "Just an Old Sweet Song," and had a short synopsis. I told him it wasn't what I was expecting but I enjoyed it, and he replied that it was one of his favorite movies. I returned to my seat and reported this information to the woman in the row in front of me. She asked if it was my first time at the festival, and I said yes, I just moved to New York. She said it was her first time as well, she is from South Africa and comes to New York for the summer. [What social class can do that?] She said that a friend of hers told her about the festival. She asked me where I moved from, and I told her as the next movie started.

All God's Children (1980) dramatized the fracas over mandatory busing for desegregation in the 70s through an accidental death. Two boys, one black and one white, best friends and football athletes, went missing the same night that someone stole a bus, ran it off the road, and died in the ensuing crash and fire. With only one body in the bus, both sets of parents wait anxiously for the news of which boy may still be alive. Through this event the movie traces how a town deals with the impending ruling of a judge that has come to replace a beloved judge. The boys' parents, in particular, must confront their differences of opinion after years of amiability around their boys' friendships. While the white father insists that his opposition to busing is not racial, the black father wears his disagreement on his face and responds "I don't know" when the white father asks him if he thinks he is prejudiced. Other dramatic moments come at a public hearing, between the two mothers as they wait for news. The movie takes apart public arguments against busing (too far from home, I want my child to go to the same school as me) to examine closely the fears associated with desegregation: losing the chance to play as quarterback at a black school, and thus losing a chance for a football scholarship; sending delicate white children into rough schools, particularly where they may suffer payback for the nation's sins, etc.

During the movie the Hat Man also fetched a table from the left side of the art gallery to serve as a display table near the open door. He set it up with brochures, envelopes, and pens. When I got up, he asked if I wanted to get on the mailing list. I wrote my address on an envelope and at his gesture, dropped it into a box on the table.

Afterwards the South African woman and I chatted again. She felt that the film festival should charge more than \$5. She said she was meeting friends. I asked if she would return to the festival and she said no, she was returning to South Africa soon, heading to DC later and trying to return for a show at Central Park.