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In Spike Lee's new film *Chi-Raq*, the joke's on him

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Some critics are applauding Spike Lee's newest "joint," *Chi-Raq*. Justin Chang of *Variety* calls it Lee's "most vital, lived-in work in some time." David Edelstein over at *Vulture* heralds that it is "perhaps the greatest antigun movie ever."

But it has also provoked scathing criticism. And given the subject matter, it's hard to imagine that the provocation was unintended.

The film itself is a modern telling of Greek playwright Aristophanes' comedic work, *Lysistrata*. In the ancient play, an Athenian woman, who lends her name to the title, organizes all of the women of Greece with a plan to withhold sex from their husbands, in hopes that the men among the opposing factions of the Peloponnesian War (principally, Athens and Sparta) will sign a peace treaty.

Lee credits his wife for the epiphany about setting the story in Chicago. "Chicago," he says in an interview with the *Daily Beast*, "is the canary in the coal mine. It is the zenith of guns and gun violence – the Southwest Side of Chicago. If you're tackling a subject, you have to go after the big dog."

The problem some viewers have had is that, in terms of that setting and context, the film and its premise are wholly offensive. As Chicago rapper Chance explains his own boycott of the film via Twitter: "the idea that women abstaining from sex would stop murders is offensive and a slap in the face to any mother who lost a child here." Or as Neffer Kerr writes in *Chicago Now*, "Do women have a certain power? Of Course, [sic] but I STILL do not think the solution to the REAL ass problem that we have here in Chicago lies between the legs of women."

They're right, of course. Though one might be inclined to presume that maybe they just missed the joke, or they're taking the subject matter a little too seriously. After all, if the film is truly being made in the vein of *Lysistrata*, the whole thing is meant to be understood by audiences as a ridiculous farce that satirizes societal norms.

But what really seems to have happened here is that Lee has forgotten that the story he's modernizing is satire in the first place. In his public appearances to discuss the film, he appears to *actually* believe that sex-strikes like the one in the film will stop violent crime.

On the publicity circuit, Lee suggested to Stephen Colbert that (in reality, mind you) women withholding sex from men “could prevent sexual assault on college campuses.” And in efforts to make the subject of his film seem more plausible, he also “cited Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee, asserting that she’d won a Nobel Peace Prize for using a sex-strike to end violence in Liberia.” In *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates calls this presumption “manifestly false.” He writes:

It’s true that Gbowee won a Nobel Peace Prize and made incredible contributions to her country. It is also certainly false that sex strikes were the method by which she made those contributions. The sex strikes ‘had little or no practical effect,’ Gbowee has written.

The line dividing fiction and reality in Lee’s mind is clearly blurred. But the absurdity of Lee’s arguments for the real-world usefulness of sex-strikes is rivaled only by the absurdity of the overarching argument in his film, which is -- stop me if you’ve heard this one before -- that if only the federal government did more to regulate guns, fewer people would be murdered by guns.

I had mentioned earlier that, in an interview with the *Daily Beast*, Lee calls Chicago the “zenith of gun violence,” seemingly ignoring the irony that it holds that distinction while boasting among the most restrictive gun control laws in the nation.

His interviewer, however, has the good sense to later remind him that “the NRA argument would be that the gun laws are very strict in Chicago, and yet there’s this massive proliferation of firearms.”

Fair enough, Second Amendment supporters do regularly observe that. But it’s a good point, isn’t it? I mean, it is rather damning of the gun control argument, as this one simple fact affirms that laws, no matter how strict, simply don’t matter to lawbreakers who will invariably ignore or break them. So perhaps the reason for the violent crime in Chicago is the number of criminals there, and not the number of guns?

Lee, however, gave a response more suited to his purpose. “Chicago, Illinois,” he says, “has very strict gun laws. The same thing with New York. But if neighboring states’ laws aren’t on-point, then you’re at the mercy of them, where the guns are flowing from.”

He cites a scene from the film, which he claims is “really the manifesto for the whole film.” The scene in question takes place at the funeral of an 11 year-old child killed by stray bullets in a drive-by shooting, and John Cusack’s character, an allegorical figure meant to represent priest and activist Father Pfleger of Chicago, “holds up a gun for the stunned congregation of mourners, saying it came from an Indiana gun show where its buyers could bypass Chicago’s strict law.” This is, very predictably, followed by all the boilerplate stuff about politicians being in bed with the real villains of the tale -- who else but the evil NRA, and we, the bitter gun-clingers that they represent.

In the end, Lee’s satirical drama does indeed reveal a tragedy -- only it’s not at all the tragedy that the filmmakers meant to highlight.

You see, the real problem with Lee’s film isn’t that it is a seemingly forced and in-your-face reference to a Greek play that you’ve probably never heard about unless you’ve taken some (perhaps advanced) literature courses in college, or that its satirical efforts are entirely tone-deaf to the loss and suffering endured by real people in Chicago, or that it pilfers a gangsta rappers’ colloquialism for its exploitative title, or that it gives its lead characters culturally disjointed and

anachronistic names like Chi-raq (ostensibly to give the title some sort of usefulness in the story) and Lysistrata (just in case the audience doesn't know whence the film's idea had sprung).

No, the real tragedy on display is that Lee, like the flock that cheers on his gun control lunacy, is utterly incapable of accurately identifying the real problems plaguing cities like Chicago, much less identifying those guilty of bringing them about. The logic of the film's "manifesto" is irreparably broken.

Firstly, in the most basic sense, fault always lies with the criminals who use guns to murder, steal, and rape -- *not* with the NRA, and *not* with the politicians who work to protect the Second Amendment rights of Americans. The proprietors of legal gun shows in Indiana are likewise *not* responsible for the actions of the criminals who use guns on the streets in Chicago. That this simple truth even requires explanation is an absolute travesty, and indicates a stubborn sickness among those unwilling to recognize it.

Secondly, it's difficult to make the argument that more gun control is what is needed to stop murders in Chicago, when 2015 has provided a stark example about how *less gun control* prevented an unknown number of (but potentially many) murders in Chicago.

You see, back on March 22nd, before Spike Lee got busy filming *Chi-Raq*, a would-be mass murderer named Everardo Custudio "began firing into the crowd" of people on a Chicago street one evening. An Uber driver, having just dropped off his previous fare, witnessed the incident and "fired six shots at Custodio" with his concealed handgun, legally owned and carried, striking the attacker in the "shin, thigh, and lower back." Unlike so many similar stories, this one has a happy ending -- no one but the would-be murderer was injured that night, thanks to a concealed weapon in the hands of a brave, law-abiding citizen.

But it's an ending that almost wasn't. As Adam Bates at the *Cato Institute* writes:

Chicago was home to some of the most draconian gun laws in America until a 2010 Supreme Court ruling, *McDonald v. Chicago*, found Chicago's gun regulation regime unconstitutional. That ruling applied the Court's previous landmark 2nd Amendment ruling, *District of Columbia v. Heller*, to state governments. While those rulings dealt with the right to bear arms for self-defense in the home, some circuit courts (including the 7th Circuit, which governs in Chicago) have extended the Heller/McDonald logic to certain public places as well as the home.

Under the previous regime in Chicago, the driver would have had to choose between saving lives and avoiding a lengthy, potentially life-ruining prison sentence. It's safe to assume that both the hero in this case and the potential victims of Everardo Custodio are thankful that unconstitutional burden has been erased.

When asked by the magazine *The Root* what he hopes to accomplish with the film, Lee responded "The number 1 priority is to save lives." It's hard to imagine a manner in which reality could have given firmer rebuke to the fiction that he hopes will deliver that outcome.

What is happening in Southwest Chicago reflects a cultural problem, and it is neither due to a lack of gun laws, nor the presence of guns. Rather, it is the result of a moral and social decay in America that is particularly acute in some urban areas like Southwest Chicago.

Until people can recognize that one simple fact and begin honestly discussing the reasons for that moral and social decay in inner cities, you can make a thousand films blaming the NRA and Second Amendment advocates and pass a thousand gun laws, and it won't improve the horrible circumstances like those that we lament in Chicago.