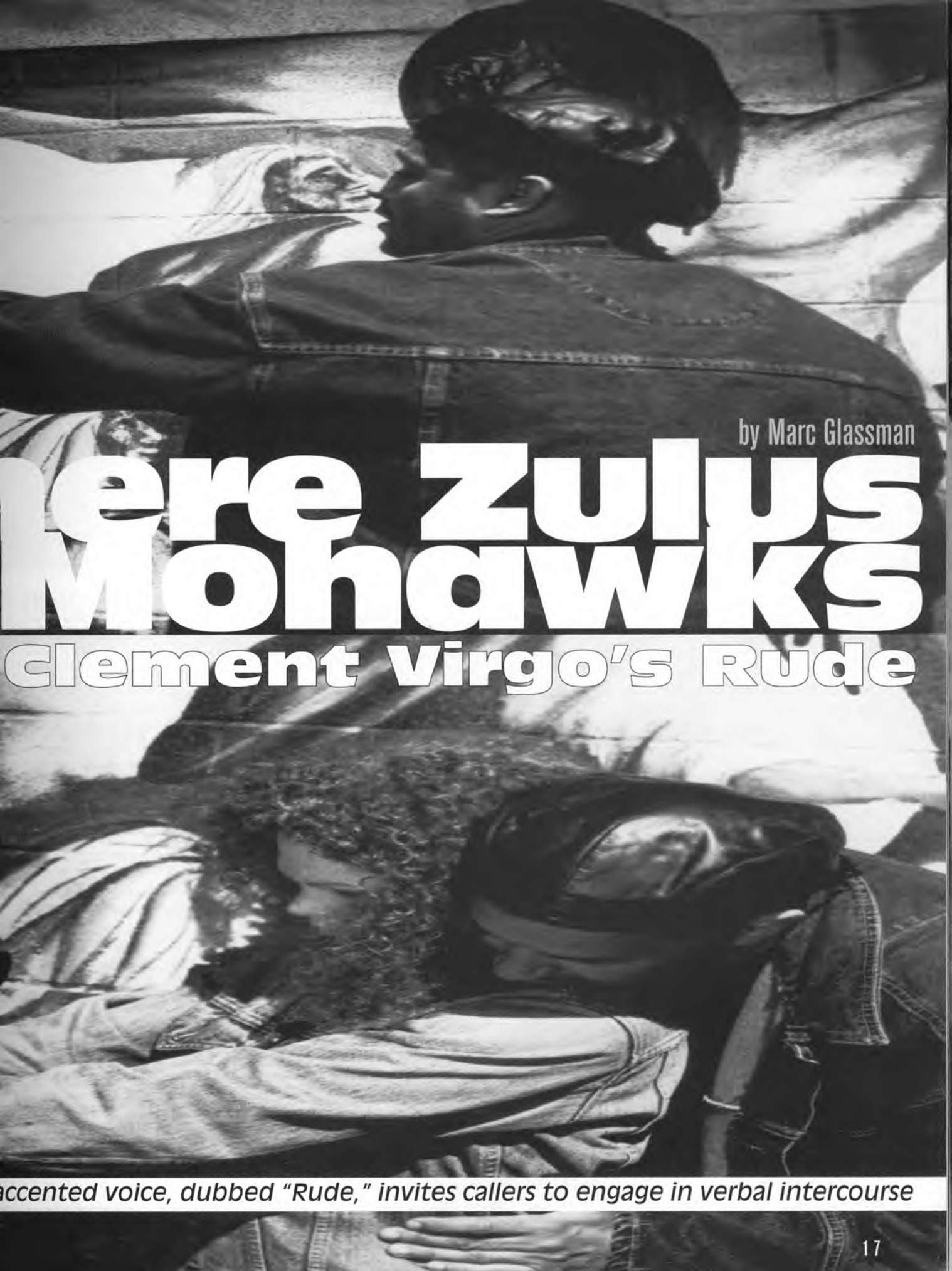


TOP (L TO R) :
MAURICE DEAN
WINT AS "THE
GENERAL" AND
CLARK JOHNSON
AS "REECE";
BOTTOM (L TO R):
ANDY MARSHALL,
XUAN FRASER,
NICOLE PARKER
AND CLARK
JOHNSON

WI Meet

It's Good Friday. A honeyed, Jamaican



by Marc Glassman

Here Zulu's Mohawks

Clement Virgo's Rude

Accented voice, dubbed "Rude," invites callers to engage in verbal intercourse

A layered and complex film, *Rude* drives relentlessly forward towards inevitable conclusions



with her during the holiday weekend. As she speaks, the lion of Judea is seen, let loose on the streets. A spirit dancer dressed in Native American garb gracefully moves through a dense landscape of highrises, playgrounds and murals transformed into a set fit for a fable through pixilation and front-screen projection. *Rude*'s pirate radio broadcast is, she assures us, for those who live where "the land of the Zulu nation and the Mohawk nation meet...while the rest of Babylon gets to ponder its immigration policy." Her trickster utterances act as a chorus while three tales of love and retribution are recounted.

Maxine is a window designer, abandoned by her lover. Caught in doubt, anger and despair, alone in her loft, her story is recalled through home videos, telephone calls and the intervention of a spirit child. Jordan is a boxer, training for major bouts, when he discovers an essential truth about himself after he engages in a round of gay-bashing with his pugilist friends. The General is an artist, just released from prison, having served time for dealing drugs. His wife is a cop; his brother, a dealer. How can he share the responsibility for raising his son when he has never been able to earn a living legally?

A layered and complex film, *Rude* drives relentlessly forward towards

inevitable conclusions on Easter Sunday. The furies unleashed during the weekend are linked through the moods of joy, sensuality, rebellion and anarchical violence evoked by the voice of the pirate radio dee jay. With a soundtrack weaving elements of gospel, reggae, psychedelic rock, radio and sonic effects and a narrative comprising three stories told in brief, sequential bursts, the film is almost unnaturally rich. The writer and director of *Rude*, Clement Virgo, unabashedly admits that, "I wanted to hit the ground running. I wanted to jump off the speakers with my fist pumping...[for much of *Rude*] I want people to feel claustrophobic and nerve-wracking and tense." That he has done. *Rude* is a powerful work, astonishingly well crafted for a first feature film. With it, Virgo has dramatically claimed his turf in the Canadian film scene.

I have seen the future of Canadian film and it is rude—the language of Mike Hoolboom's *Frank's Cock*; the rough mélange of sexuality, violence and passion in Srinivas Krishna's *Masala*; the harsh generational split that exists, subversively, at the core of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*; the gay-positive propagandizing in John Greyson's musical-historical-drama, *Zero Patience*. These artists and their contemporaries—Bruce McDonald, Charles Binamé, Ann Marie

Fleming, Judith Doyle and others—are redefining Canadian cinema.

No longer is Canadian film content limited to bathetic explorations of downbeat characters. Drab existence in the Great Grey Canadian North is nowhere in evidence in this new generation's vivid depictions of rock 'n' rollers, hustlers, Gen-X rebels and their ilk animating life in today's urban (and, occasionally rural) scenes. Virgo's ensemble—Rachael Crawford's anguished Maxine, Maurice Dean Wint's taciturn General and, above all, Clark Johnson's morally split Reece—add new names and lustre to a growing pantheon of actors, whose roles have made a difference in our perceptions of the Canadian psyche, and body politic. Like Callum Rennie in *Frank's Cock*, Tracy Wright in Judith Doyle's *Wasaga* and Sandra Oh in *Double Happiness*, these performers mirror their directors in being risk-takers on the edge.

Free in spirit, unconstrained in content choices, these *cinéastes* are creating work that ranks with the best of new filmmakers from around the world. As independent filmmaking has become hip in the past few years, with such "indies" as Quentin Tarantino and Spike Lee commanding those big Hollywood dollars, it seems that the non-mainstream has become clogged with bogus, hyped



TOP LEFT: FALCONER ABRAHAM AND RICHARD CHEVOLLEAU AS "JORDAN"; TOP RIGHT: RACHAEL CRAWFORD AS "MAXINE"; RIGHT: MAURICE DEAN WINT AND ASHLEY BROWN



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: BY AMIR GAVRIELLY

commodity-merchants eager to sell themselves to the nearest bidder. The Sundance Film Festival's Canadian section of screenings showed once again that this country is producing fine direc-

tors who are creating innovative and challenging work.

Into the ranks of these in-your-face talents comes Clement Virgo. His fresh and irreverent voice and vision is a prod-

uct of Jamaican roots, a skewed upbringing in Toronto's inner city where artistically oriented black men are trained to be carpenters, a much-needed period of professional nurturing at the Canadian

Film Centre and, above all, a complicated and fierce pride in black culture.

Rude takes place in Regent Park, a Toronto housing project where Virgo spent part of his childhood. Arriving from Jamaica with his mother and four siblings at the age of 11, Virgo and his family frequently moved around Toronto's inner core. Although he taciturnly recalls his life as being "quite normal in terms of an immigrant experience," Virgo also observes that, "I'm not sure if some immigrants ever find their roots in a foreign country. I think they move and always feel displaced...[for many of them, there is] a longing for home, for the old country." Asked about himself, he admits, "I have the same kind of feelings. I'm not sure if this is home, yet, or if it will ever be."

Virgo never comments directly about his educational experience in the Toronto system, which culminated in the creation of a fine table which his mother still has; "she's very proud of it," comments Virgo. Clearly no one was looking for artistic aspirations in the young Jamaican-Canadian. Immediately after high school, Virgo got into fashion because "it seemed glamorous and something that I could get into. Filmmaking didn't seem to be within my reach." While designing window displays for major retail fashion sites, Virgo took a night course in film at Ryerson, then a technical college. There he met Virginia Rankin, an independent filmmaker noted for her quirky documentaries and dramas.

When Rankin was accepted into the Canadian Film Centre the following year, she asked Virgo to collaborate with her on a film in which a couple in bed fight with each other about their body parts. The result, *A Small Dick Fleshy Ass Thang*, became a film festival favourite. It gave Virgo access to the Centre. A resident in the first Summer Lab in 1991, he was accepted into the full-time program the following year. Finally given the tools to practise the filmmaking trade, Virgo confidently seized his opportunity. *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, a contemporary reworking of the Cain and Abel story, met with justifiable critical and popular acclaim. This short drama won awards at the Toronto and Chicago International Film Festivals and the Pan African Film and Video Festival.

In the wake of the success of *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, Virgo was able to approach Damon d'Oliveira and Karen King to co-produce a script he had been working on since his days as a window

display designer. *Rude* became one of the first three films green-lighted by the Centre's Feature Film Project. With Virgo's, Holly Dale's and Laurie Lynd's films all premiering this fall, and three further features in the works, one can tentatively call the Centre's Project a stunning success. And if Clement Virgo's progress over the past few years has proven anything, it is that the system for creating filmmakers in this country has been working well. Despite the OFDC and the Ontario Arts Council being threatened with heavy cuts in the near future, one can only hope that future talents will be given opportunities to make their films in Ontario.

Rude is clearly more than the product of its political, cinematic and emotional environments. Like all good artists, Virgo has taken what he can use from the Centre, and from his life, in order to make a film that is more fable than fact. Highly stylized, *Rude* evidences its own proudly distinct personality. Ignoring the expectations raised in some quarters by being one of the first black filmmakers to make a feature in Canada, Virgo has opted to create a film that is neither directly political nor overtly commercial. Like its intemperate namesake, *Rude* passionately comments on life in the projects "before the *coup d'état*." By committing himself to depicting an ensemble of varying characters, Virgo is able to personify a number of different aspects of contemporary black life.

Take the boxer episode. Jordan (Richard Chevolleau) is a sensitive and good-looking fighter whose participation in the "lynching" (bashing) of a gay man only temporarily conceals his own homoerotic tendencies. Virgo deliberately created this story in response to "what I saw and heard in black music: a lot of homophobia in the music and a lot of homophobia in the culture. I wanted to talk about this; I wanted to write a character that had this duality. When we think of young black men, we think that they are the ultimate symbols of machismo, of masculinity. I wanted to explore the idea of a young black man who is strong and a boxer, but the duality is that he is also gay."

Virgo and Chevolleau make the character's dilemma apparent through judicious use of anguished close-ups during several macho-styled locker room-oriented set-pieces. Jordan can only fit in by betraying what he knows he is feeling. Virgo implicates the viewers in the boxer's impulse to come out, "because I assume that the audience is homophobic

and I have to take them along to the point where they discover that I love this character who's gay and they have to say to themselves 'hmm, wait a minute, I've got to think about this.'"

Although one can applaud Virgo's reasons for writing this episode, he has to battle the trap of making Jordan's story too pedantic. As a writer-director, his visual style is put into service to breathe life into some of the boxer's scenes. It is only through Virgo's sensitive direction that many potentially predictable scenes are rendered in an interesting and impressive manner. Visual elements like a stylized shower scene and the use of repeated images of the boxer falling down in terror after attacking a gay man lend an air of abstraction to the proceedings. The relationship between Jordan and his friend, Curtis, is well depicted. Nothing can shake the schematic nature of this story but Virgo does manage to make something vivid in this most "politically correct" of all of his stories.

The character of *Rude* poses another dilemma for Virgo. The sole operator of a pirate radio station, *Rude*'s sultry, angry voice is meant to hold three disparate stories together. Like Anansi, the spider who weaves tales in African folklore, *Rude* is a hypnotic figure. Possessed of spiritual and sensual qualities, she also resembles a demi-goddess from classic Western myth. Sharon M. Lewis imbues this metaphorical figure with passion, but she is unable to make the over-the-



top monologues feel right. As riveting as Lewis's performance is, her speeches are too macho, too male. The poetics of rap, of Rastafarian monologues, of street speech are played out through *Rude*. Worthy of the celebration that Virgo intended, these spectacular verbal pyrotechnics only lack one thing—psychological verisimilitude. Virgo is still too much of a “guy's guy” to get *Rude*'s rap right.

In Maxine's story, Virgo depicts a hip, modern woman's life in a time of extreme duress. Her man, Andre, has left her and, for a long time, we don't know what caused the breakup. Seen in isolation in her loft, Maxine is slowly stripped of her possessions by Andre and his friends. Home video footage of sexy, funny times together are interspersed with images of a beautiful, silent black girl and telephone calls answered by Maxine or recorded by her machine. Reduced to destroying her mannequins in despair, Maxine's redemption occurs when she recognizes the spirit child that has been haunting her lair.

An obsessive post-modernist construction, Maxine's tale is played out through communication tools, both ancient (the child) and modern (the video and telephone). Rarely speaking, except to defend herself, Maxine is a proud and lonely figure. Captured in glances, and brief revelatory scenes, she is given depth through a fine portrayal by Rachael Crawford. Her look of utter defeat after a long night of devastation

and anger is a highpoint in this generally well-acted film.

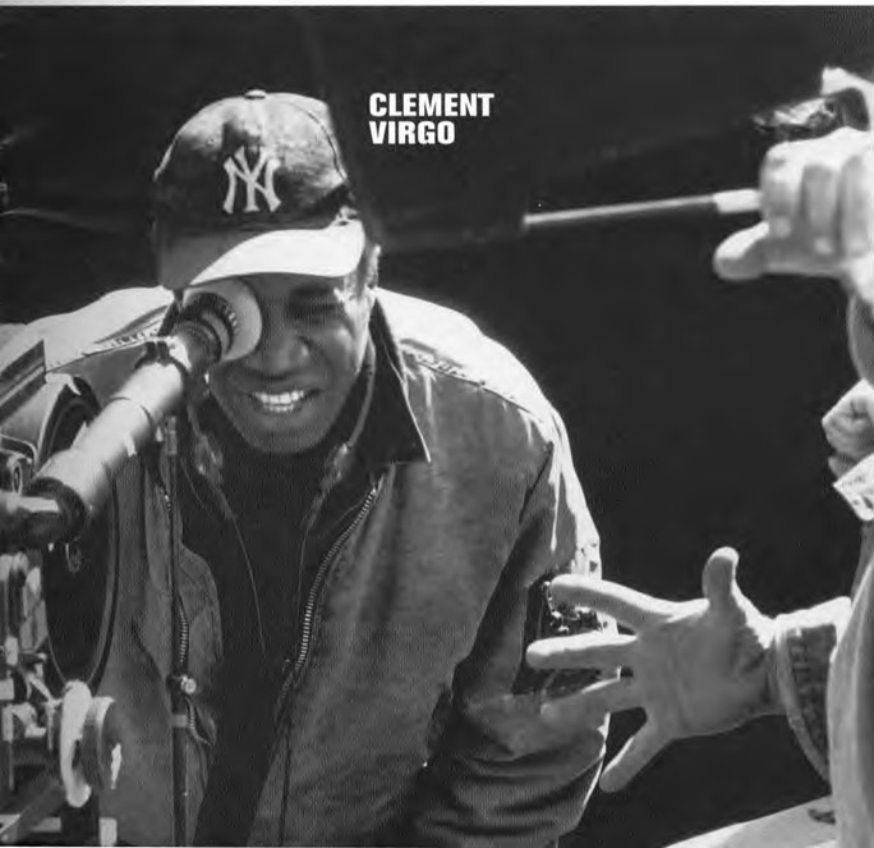
Although *Rude* is intended to be an ensemble endeavour, the story of the General's return home is privileged above the rest. Far more screen time is given to this tale of an ex-drug dealer's temptation and attempted reclamation than to any of the other parts of *Rude*'s triptych of urban fables. The General is an artist who wants nothing more than to return to his family after a year in prison. His wife and school-age son warily accept him back but they, like his drug dealing brother Reece, wonder how he is going to make a living. The true snake, Reece's boss Yankee, appears soon enough to offer the General a new job, as an underworld Canadian branch plant manager to his expanding American-based drug operations.

Sure to inspire controversy, the duplicitous Yankee is the only white character to play a major role in the film. As played by Stephen Shellen, Yankee is sufficiently slimy to be cast in a Dickensian melodrama.

Far more interesting are Clark Johnson's Reece and Maurice Dean Wint's General. Cast as brothers, the two play off each other marvelously well. Reece is emotional, needy and a clown; the General is proud, taciturn and kind. Reece has been the bulwark of the General's family while he was away. His feelings of displacement and anger are compounded by Yankee's higher regard for his brother than for him.

Clark Johnson's performance as Reece is wonderfully judged. We see his sadness and impotence most feelingly in a scene with the General's wife, Jessica. She wakes up the morning after making love to her husband for the first time in a year to see someone in the doorway. It isn't the General, of course, but Reece. Jessica sits with him, in bed; they talk with the frank intimacy of good friends. Reece asks her if she will take his brother back and she admits, “I never did let him go.” As Reece reaches to kiss her, she offers her cheek to him. Without saying anything, Johnson signals to the audience his love for Jessica.

Later, when that love nearly turns to rape, and drugs are dominating his mind and body, Reece is asked, in despair, by the General, “When will we become men?” That question haunts this film. Virgo has said “I don't think that young black men are given their humanity. Black culture thinks of masculinity as a pose, a stance; masculinity is never about tenderness, or feeling afraid, or lost. I want to allow black men to feel those things, the things I feel.” In the midst of *Rude*'s visual and verbal virtuosity, Virgo's assertion rings true. At the heart of this film is Johnson's Reece whose human impulses have been cleft and discarded and Wint's General, proudly hanging on to himself and his family. It may not be the happiest of endings but, hey, Easter Sunday should always be bitter-sweet.



CLEMENT VIRGO

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