



DREAM PALACE

David Byrne's American Utopia

Introduced by Tricia Tuttle, BFI Festivals Director (Friday 21 May only).

David Byrne on 'American Utopia'

Thirty-six years after Talking Heads and director Jonathan Demme changed the idea of what a live concert film could be, with the kinetic *Stop Making Sense* (1984), the band's former frontman and elder statesman of alternative rock, David Byrne, is back to do it all over again.

This time Spike Lee is in the director's chair, capturing the acclaimed Broadway stage show of Byrne's 2018 album *American Utopia*. In a captivating blast of positivity and creativity, Byrne and his 11-strong barefoot backing band race through 100 minutes of deftly choreographed set pieces, mixing Talking Heads classics – 'Road to Nowhere', 'This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)', 'Once in a Lifetime' – with Byrne's solo work.

Though filmed in late 2019, the show's themes are prescient: the treatment of Black Americans at the hands of US police and an impending election loom large – but so does hope for change.

Why did you want Spike Lee on this project?

We've never really worked together, but we've crossed paths a lot – so it was easy, I had his phone number! Also, because of a lot of the issues that are brought up in the show, I thought, 'He's gonna get this.'

When did you first meet?

It would have been in the 80s. In a sense we were coming up together on parallel paths, me in music, him in film and somehow I got invited to the premiere of *Do the Right Thing*... this was a really huge step in filmmaking; in the visual approach and the way he's talking about issues. I felt that there was a lot of nuance in it. It wasn't just a clear-cut didactic sermon.

Since filming are the two of you closer?

We've gone on bike rides together. He goes around Central Park; that's kind of his go-to thing, so we meet up and do that.

You recorded two shows for the film – where was Spike during the performances?

In the basement of the theatre there were a bunch of monitors set up so he could see what all the cameras were getting. He'd be down there with the editor and then if there was a song he loved, we'd see him suddenly pop up in the aisle.

Why revisit the concert film format?

Like *Stop Making Sense*, I think it has an arc. There's a beginning and a middle and an end. The lead character, that would be me, or whoever I'm playing, goes on a journey. You start in one place and you end up somewhere quite, quite different. I realised that this show, like that one, is not simply us just performing a series of songs, ending with our biggest hit. It's really constructed to take the audience somewhere.

Did you learn anything from Stop Making Sense that you put into action or avoided for this film?

Absolutely. Some of them were just really practical – if you put too much light on the audience, rather than capturing their Broadway babies: David Byrne and Spike Lee excitement, they'll clam up. Suddenly they'll stop dancing. That happened on one of the nights we were filming *Stop Making Sense* and I realised: 'OK, never do that again.'

In the show you cover ‘Hell You Talmbout’, a Janelle Monáe song about murdered Black Americans and police brutality. How do you feel knowing that things haven’t got any better since filming?

It’d be easy to get depressed about it, and say, ‘Why do we have to keep saying this over and over and over again.’ But since George Floyd and the demonstrations, I think there’s more of an awareness of injustices. It’s something people talk about and acknowledge more than they used to.

So, knock on wood, that might lead to action.

You also talk about asking people to register for the 2016 US election. Are you hoping your words will resonate for the 2020 race?

Exactly. There’s a lot of voter suppression and chicanery in this country, but if that can happen, I think we have a chance of people being heard and the concerns that they have being dealt with more than they have recently.

I notice you don’t tell people who to vote for.

I’m determined to be non-partisan about it. I never want to tell people how to think, but I want you to participate.

David Byrne’s favourite film scores

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964)

Composer: Michel Legrand

‘Everybody’s singing all the time, describing very mundane situations and actions. So rather than the typical Hollywood or Broadway thing where everyone comes together for a big musical number, the music is really woven in in a different way.’

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Composer: Various

‘I watched a documentary the other day on *2001* – of course, [Kubrick] just picked things that existed, but now it’s impossible to think of those scenes without that music.’

One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975)

Composer: Jack Nitzsche

‘There’s this beautiful theme – and it’s by a keyboard player and arranger who worked with The Rolling Stones and all these other groups. There was a musical saw that played the complete melody in one of the themes and the quavering sound was kind of perfect for the mental institution.’

Do the Right Thing (1989)

Composer: Bill Lee

‘That had a great score – and used some pop songs too. At that point Spike was working with his dad [double-bass player Bill Lee]. He used to play with all the folk musicians in the 1960s but when Dylan had them all go electric, he refused and said, “No, this is my sound.”’

Under the Skin (2013)

Composer: Mica Levi

‘Mica’s a young musician who’s done some really, really interesting scoring. It’s all about the mood and creating a very unsettling mood with sounds that you can’t readily identify. It’s not like, “Oh, here’s an orchestra or here’s a tinkling piano” – you don’t know what it is. It’s very ominous.’

Interview by Leonie Cooper, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

DAVID BYRNE'S AMERICAN UTOPIA

Directed by: Spike Lee
A Spike Lee joint
A Todomundo and Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks production
An HBO Special Event in partnership with Participant, River Road Entertainment and Warner Music Entertainment
Executive Producers: Jeff Skoll, David Linde, Diane Weyermann, Len Blavatnik, David Bither, Charlie Cohen, Kurt Deutsch, Bill Pohlad, Christa Zofcin Workman, Jon Kamen, Dave Sirulnick, Meredith Bennett, Kristin Caskey, Mike Isaacson, Patrick Catullo, RadicalMedia
Produced by: David Byrne, Spike Lee
Written by: David Byrne
Director of Photography: Ellen Kuras
Editor: Adam Gough
Choreography: Annie-B Parson
Sound Mixer: Michael Lonsdale

USA 2020
105 mins

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DREAM PALACE:
THE FILMS THAT CINEMAS WERE BUILT FOR

Blow Out

Mon 17 May 17:45 (+ intro by Ben Roberts, BFI CEO); Tue 1 Jun 20:40
Winner of the Dream Palace Audience Vote: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)
Mon 17 May 20:45; Sun 30 May 12:20

The General

Tue 18 May 18:10 (+ intro by Stuart Brown, BFI Head of Programme and Acquisitions);
Sat 29 May 12:45

The Shout + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin

Wed 19 May 21:00; Thu 3 Jun

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Thu 20 May 17:30 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, BFI Lead Programmer);
Thu 24 Jun 20:30

Footloose + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee

Thu 20 May 20:45; Sat 29 May 18:00

Car Wash

Fri 21 May 18:00 (+ intro by Gurinder Chadha);
Mon 31 May 18:50

David Byrne's American Utopia

Fri 21 May 20:45 (+ intro by Tricia Tuttle, BFI Festival Director); Mon 14 Jun 18:00

Beginning + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino

Sat 22 May 11:30; Tue 22 Jun 20:30

Black Narcissus

Sat 22 May 14:20 (+ intro by Edgar Wright);
Mon 7 Jun 17:50

The Wonders (Le meraviglie) + pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins

Sat 22 May 15:15; Thu 3 Jun 20:30

Hair + pre-recorded intro by

Kleber Mendonça Filho

Sat 22 May 20:30; Fri 28 May 17:45

Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Sun 23 May 15:45 (+ intro by Heather Stewart, BFI Creative Director);
Sun 6 Jun 18:40

Beau Travail + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson

Sun 23 May 18:40; Sun 30 May 18:20

Mirror (Zerkalo) + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska

Mon 24 May 17:50; Wed 9 Jun 14:30

Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat) + pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane

Mon 24 May 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:50

Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sànn)

Wed 26 May 18:10 (+ intro by Peter Strickland); Wed 2 Jun 20:50

The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)

+ pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze

Thu 27 May 18:15; Fri 26 Jun 14:30

The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)

+ pre-recorded intro by Mike Williams, Editor

Sight & Sound

Fri 28 May 20:50; Wed 30 Jun 14:30

Broadcast News

Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith);
Sat 19 Jun 20:20

The Elephant Man + pre-recorded intro by

Prano Bailey-Bond

Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00

The Warriors

Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia);
Mon 28 Jun 14:30