

All Day and a Night: Life in prison to look forward to

By Kevin Martinez
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Written and directed by Joe Robert Cole

Last month saw the release of the film *All Day and a Night* on Netflix. Created by Joe Robert Cole, a co-writer of the film *Black Panther*, it tells the story of a young man growing up in present-day Oakland, California, as he tries to avoid a life of crime and punishment.

Jahkor Lincoln (Ashton Sanders) is shown in the film's opening about to shoot an individual inside his home. Even though the man is with his girlfriend and child, Jahkor does not spare him. The rest of *All Day and a Night* is then told primarily through a series of flashbacks.

Jahkor arrives in prison to serve a life sentence and ponders the circumstances that led to many of his crucial choices, and his sad lot. His father, JD (Jeffrey Wright), a drug addict and a criminal, beats him as a child to make him "tough." Jahkor's mother Delanda (Kelly Jenrette) and his father argue and fight constantly throughout his childhood.

We later learn that JD is serving time in the same prison as his son, Jahkor. A cynic might say the apple seems not to have fallen far from the tree ... but this is not a "natural" process, so trees and apples have nothing to do with it and the social conditions of life *everything*.

As a grown man, Jahkor wants to be a rapper, but he also becomes involved with his friend TQ (Isaiah John) in small-time crimes. He is romantically involved with a woman named Shantaye (Shakira Ja'nai Paye) who reveals she is expecting his child, whom they name Zion.

Needing money to start a family, Jahkor works a demeaning job at a shoe store, but is enticed into selling drugs with TQ and his boss, a gangster named Big Stunna (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II). Whether or not

Jahkor can escape his "fate" and avoid jail is the question of the film, which has already been answered for us by the opening.

Unhappily, *All Day and a Night* is permeated with racial politics as it deals with the poor African-American population of the United States, one of the most oppressed sections of the working class. Jahkor's narration, which lasts throughout the film, includes this line, "Slavery taught us how to survive, but not how to live." This actually explains very little concretely about present-day life. The current circumstances of many black Americans are not the direct product of slavery, although there is undoubtedly an enduring legacy, but primarily the result of the development of modern capitalism in America, which exploits and oppresses every section of the working class.

The conditions depicted in the film are all too real. This is how millions of people live in America: dead-end jobs, violence at home, violence at school, violence from the authorities, broken families and relationships, with drugs or crime the only apparently available "way out."

Need things be this way? Is there an alternative for Jahkor or all the Jahkors of the world? The film does not say.

All Day and a Night is gritty and realistic, or at least more so than most studio productions at the moment. It also has a certain liveliness one is not accustomed to from such films. The scenes where Jahkor and Shantaye are together alone, or at a street party with friends, suggest not everything is hellish 24/7 in America's inner cities.

Despite these more intriguing hints and possibilities, the film takes as a given many things about present-day life. Jahkor's brother is in a wheelchair from serving in

the “war,” presumably Iraq or Afghanistan. He tells Jahkor how he fought to defend their way of life. Later in the film, the brother is shown in the hospital recovering from yet another surgery. Their sister says, “I hate the army.” But the moment is not dwelled on or explored adequately by the filmmakers.

In another scene, Jahkor is hunted down by elements from the local police department dressed in army camouflage with assault rifles, who burst into his girlfriend’s residence. Is this Baghdad or Kabul? No, it’s Oakland, California.

Despite some genuinely visceral sounds and images and well-acted performances throughout, *All Day and a Night* fails to leave a lasting impression on the viewer. Perhaps in part because we have seen similar films before and the new work does not add that much.

Films like John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes brothers’ *Menace II Society* (1993) were among the first to portray life as experienced by African-American teens in the ghettos. Not without their faults and serious limitations, they can be recommended for showing a side of the Bush-Clinton years that some audiences did not want to see or be reminded of.

A good deal of water has flowed under the bridge since then. To still suggest that mass incarceration, police violence, inner-city poverty and drug abuse are merely part of a never-ending generational cycle seems woefully inadequate. Such terrible realities, and the general lowering of the living standards of tens of millions in the US over the past several decades, black and white, require more serious analysis and thought.

The filmmakers would possibly have us believe that Jahkor just needs to “do the right thing” in order to escape his predicament, but the conditions of life that make such a choice nearly impossible for large numbers of people are never really explored.

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