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Hip-Hop Romeo, Hasidic Juliet

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BODY:

"**Brooklyn Babylon**" begins with some pointed intercutting between a Jamaican rap band in rehearsal and a Hasidic wedding in ecstatic progress. The director, Marc **Levin**, is establishing images of two cultures on a collision course -- the setting is the divided Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn -- but he is also suggesting how much the two groups have in common.

Not only do the keening rhythms of the wedding cantor find an echo in the emphatic phrasing of the rap vocalist (played by Tariq Trotter, backed by the Grammy-winning band the Roots), but they also share a common subject matter. The Rastafarian rappers and the Hasidic celebrators find inspiration in the same biblical tale: that of the love of King Solomon for the Queen of Sheba.

It's that very tale, reinforced by references to "Romeo and Juliet" and "West Side Story," that shapes all of "Brooklyn Babylon." Mr. Trotter, playing a character named Sol, soon meets a Sheba he can call his own, in the willowy form of a young Hasidic woman named Sara (the newcomer Karen Goberman). They meet when a car being driven by Sol's hustling, intemperate manager, Scratch (Bonz Malone), collides with the car carrying Sara and her impatient, family-designated fiance, Judah (David Vadim), at the borderline separating the black and Jewish sections of the neighborhood.

An argument explodes between the two hotheads, Scratch and Judah, while Sol and Sara exchange moist, wide-eyed looks in the sort of extreme close-ups that can mean only one thing. Mr. Levin, whose "Slam" won the Grand Jury Prize for best dramatic film at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival and the Camera d'Or at Cannes, remains a divided talent, capable at once of the graceful, unforced associations of the opening scene and the sentimental overkill of Sol and Sara's swooning first encounter.

A veteran documentary filmmaker ("Brooklyn Babylon" is only his third fictional feature), Mr. Levin often has problems reconciling his observational talents with his addiction to exaggerated dramatic situations. Just as the understated authenticity of the opening sequences of "Slam" eventually gave way to a mindless triumphalism apparently inspired by the "Rocky" films, so does "Brooklyn Babylon" leave its sociological realism behind as it takes off for the airless upper atmosphere of teenage romance.

Drawn together when they meet again in a flowering park, Sol and Sara begin a clandestine relationship. Though, as Sara says with marvelous understatement, "at home we listen mainly to old stuff," she immediately warms to Sol's music, which combines Rastafarian mysticism with hip-hop rhythms. Lyrics like "Sheba was black and Solomon was white/Their hearts saw no color, only love at first sight" may lack biblical cadence, but they do get to the point.

Sol invites Sara to his apartment, where, after Mr. Levin makes a bit too much of her lustily devouring the forbidden fruit represented by a grape, they make love with a passionate intensity distilled from the Song of Songs.

When word of their relationship spreads through their respective communities, the two young people find themselves standing at a flashpoint. Continuing their relationship will mean tightening the racial tensions that already grip the neighborhood: Scratch has firebombed Judah's car; Judah has tossed a Molotov cocktail into a Rasta club.

Mr. Levin and his screenwriters -- Mr. Malone, who plays Scratch,

and Pam Widener -- have set up a classical dilemma. Do Sol and Sara end their relationship for the good of the community, or do they refuse to break it off, fighting for the higher good of racial harmony that will come much later, if at all?

It is a question without a simple, satisfying answer, and Mr. Levin does not offer one. Instead, the film dissolves into a series of diminishing anticlimaxes, ending on a note of portentous ambiguity. To the last, Mr. Levin maintains his uneasy balance of reportage and melodrama. The biblical Solomon, at least, knew how to make a decision.

"Brooklyn Babylon" is rated R (Under 17 years requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes street profanity, some violence, a sexy love scene and drug use.

BROOKLYN BABYLON

Directed by Marc Levin; written by Mr. Levin, Bonz Malone and Pam Widener; director of photography, Mark Benjamin; music by the Roots; produced by Henri M. Kessler and Ezra Swerdlow. At the BAMcinematek, BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Tariq Trotter (Sol), Karen Goberman (Sara), Bonz Malone (Scratch), David Vadim (Judah), Rahzel (Narrator), Earl Contasti (Ras Don), Carol Woods (Cislyn) and the Roots (the Lions).

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