

# Cutting up the neighborhood

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

Let me begin by saying that, yes, I had a big, fat Greek wedding. It was performed in the shadow of the dome of the church where my grandfather had once been priest. Our reception took place in the church basement, where I was surrounded by my extremely large and loving Greek family. So I bring a certain amount of expertise when I echo the words of my (non-Greek) wife, who said upon viewing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*: "I don't know any Greeks like this."

Caricature can be an effective comic tool, but it can cross easily over into ridicule or ridiculousness. I don't object in principle to the rampant use of caricature and stereotyping, except when their overuse makes a film inherently unfunny, which is certainly the case here.

Based on an autobiographical one-woman stage play by ex-Second City performer Nia Vardalos (who also wrote the script and plays the lead), *Greek Wedding* concerns a 30-year-old Greek girl named Toula, who still lives with her parents in Chicago (the film was actually shot in Toronto) and whose self-esteem is lower than the hem on her drab brown skirts. All that changes when this ugly Hellenic duckling meets Prince Charming, a handsome English teacher named Ian. They fall in love and decide to marry over the protestations of her family, who don't like the fact that Ian is a non-Greek vegetarian. This leads to a series of predictable scenes involving Ian's straitlaced, white bread, Protestant parents (you don't think they'll get drunk at a party, do you?) and a few lame gags such as a zit appearing on Toula's face on her wedding day.

It's not the concept that's the problem here, it's the writing. The jokes don't flow from wry observations but from lazy stereotypes that could be identified with any number of ethnic groups--the thick-headed father, the annoying but wise mother, the spinster aunt and the wacky grandma. When the film does get around to introducing a fresh idea--as when Toula's brother tries to impress their father that he is serious about art by constantly redesigning the cover of the menu at the family restaurant--the subplot is tossed aside in favor of a gaggle of shrieking bridesmaids.

So when is it kosher to grab hold of a specific group's identity markers and poke fun at them? When is it all right to wade in the waters of political incorrectness? Perhaps when the film is well crafted, funny and has something else to say--as in the case of Tim Story's *Barbershop*, set in a black Chicago neighborhood. Where *Greek Wedding's* set-up is flat and obvious, continually seeking the easy way into and out of each scene, *Barbershop* takes enough chances with its recognizable characters and story to make us care about its distinctive world.

The film revolves around Calvin Palmer (Ice Cube), who has inherited the barbershop from his late father. Like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Calvin doesn't want to spend the rest of his life cooped up in his father's business. In Calvin's case, he doesn't see the error of his ways until after he sells the shop to an evil loan shark. This shady financial transaction leads to a long talk with his pregnant wife in which Calvin finally realizes that the shop is more than a place to get your hair cut; it's a place where friends and neighbors meet and exchange ideas, which makes it a pretty important place after all. (At one point, the shop is referred to as a country club for poor black men.)

The subplots that surround the main story are standard-issue slapstick (one involves a stolen ATM machine being carted around the neighborhood), but the film takes off and achieves ethical force in the scenes that feature the various barbers, including a Nigerian refugee and a white kid who wants to be black.

The leader of this buzz-cut Greek chorus is Eddie (Cedric the Entertainer, from *The Original Kings of Comedy*), a barber who dates back to the early days with Calvin's father. Though he rarely cuts hair anymore, he has a chair of honor in the shop which he uses as a soapbox for his opinions on contemporary black culture. (In an inspired touch, Eddie wears his hair in the swept-up style of Frederick Douglass.) This argumentative use of interrogation and response allows us to get to know and appreciate the individual problems of the shop's denizens (like a student who thinks he's too good for his less-educated brothers, and a young woman with a cheating boyfriend).

*Barbershop* comes into its own when Eddie moves away from offering one-liners to making a few controversial observations about iconic moments and figures in black American history, including the beating of Rodney King, the trial of O. J. Simpson, and Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks.

The filmmakers have caught plenty of heat for these comments, most of them coming from prominent black leaders. But to remove the scenes would be to stop the great beating heart of the film, whose comic underpinnings rest on its willingness to go beyond caricature with clever, if sometimes harsh, lines of dialogue that ring true and take into consideration the various ideas and opinions that can thrive within the group. It's this sharp edge that makes *Barbershop* so cutttingingly funny, and it's the absence of such risk-taking that leaves *Greek Wedding* standing at the altar.