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Poetry in Prison Opens Cell Doors and Minds

BYLINE: BY STEPHEN HOLDEN

BODY:

Until very recently, the pitch for a contemporary movie celebrating the life-saving power of poetry would have been laughed out of every Hollywood studio. Hail, hail, the conquering poet? Please, you must be kidding. But the rising popularity of competitive "slams," in which poetry, rap, performance art and stand-up comedy converge and ignite has redefined a literary form traditionally associated with bearded bohemians and nebbishy bookworms.

And in much the same way that "Saturday Night Fever" created a boom by conferring a macho glamour on disco, Marc Levin's stirring pop fable "Slam" elevates rhythmically charged, fervently incantatory street poetry into a redemptive sport.

Especially for young disenfranchised blacks, the movie suggests, catching the slam spirit can be as life-transforming as success on the basketball court or in the recording studio. Disgorging your inner life in rhapsodic spoken dream-songs that set audiences cheering may be the secular equivalent of the gospel experience. At least that's the way "Slam" portrays it.

Ray Joshua (Saul Williams), the charismatic young hero of "Slam," is the Washington inner-city equivalent of working-class screen heroes like Tony Manero or Rocky Balboa. As played by Mr. Williams, one of the stars of the slam movement, Ray exudes a sanctified fervor reminiscent of the reggae legend Bob Marley, along

with a mild-mannered almost academic politesse. Wiry, sad-eyed and soft-spoken, Ray stands out from his tough-talking peers in his neighborhood housing project, which has acquired the nickname Dodge City. He is such a mythic being that the movie doesn't bother to give him a past or a family or even a best friend. When Ray is arrested for possession of a quarter pound of marijuana, jailed and told his best hope is to cop a plea that will yield him a two-to-three-year (instead of an 8-to-10-year) sentence, you shudder at how brutally the justice system has slammed the door on his future.

While in prison, Ray keeps himself sane by writing verses on a yellow legal pad and reciting them to himself. One day in the prison yard, he explodes into poetry so incendiary that his fellow prisoners stand back in awe of his verbal magic. Fortunately, an attractive young woman named Lauren Bell (Sonja Sohn), who runs the prison writing program, watches Ray's performance and invites him to her writing class. Once Ray makes bail, he visits her, and they begin an affair. Lauren, he learns, has been through her own hell and emerged whole, with the help of poetry. One night, at the end of a poetry slam, she invites Ray onstage to perform. In the language of stand-up comedy, he "kills."

"Slam" arrives at the New York Film Festival (with screenings today at 6 P.M. and tomorrow at 7:15 P.M) already decorated with the grand prize at the Sundance Film Festival and the award for best first film at Cannes. The director, who has made a number of documentaries about prison life, filmed a number of scenes inside a Washington prison using its population as extras. And these pungent prison sequences lend parts of the movie a scary credibility.

But in many other ways, "Slam" is as much a rose-colored up-from-the-streets Hollywood fantasy as "Saturday Night Fever" or "Rocky." Mr. Williams's cultivated, beautifully spoken Ray is certainly charismatic. But the notion that this saintly mild-mannered esthete could have sprung full-blown from Washington's meanest streets seems far-fetched. He simply doesn't share the same language (either verbal or body) with his peers. And the idea that his impromptu prison yard rap, which is fairly lofty and not easy to follow, would command instant respect in the prison yard is also questionable.

What "Slam" possesses is real passion, and that is in short supply in movies these days. The movie may be a crude Hollywood fable, but the director and Richard Stratton, his collaborator on the story, obviously care a lot about their characters, the slam scene and the self-transcendence that it can offer performing poets who have the gift.

Like any enjoyable pop fable, "Slam" relentlessly hammers home an uplifting, if simplistic message. Our toughest prisons aren't outside ourselves but inside, it insists. The only meaningful real freedom we can achieve is to be found inside.

"Slam" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has scenes of violence and abundant profanity.

SLAM

Directed by Marc Levin; written by Mr. Levin, Richard Stratton, Bonz Malone, Sonja Sohn and Saul Williams, based on a story by Mr. Levin and Mr. Stratton; director of photography, Mark Benjamin; edited by Emir Luis; music by DJ Spooky; produced by Henri M. Kessler, Mr. Levin and Mr. Stratton; released by Trimark Pictures. Saturday at 6 P.M. and Sunday at 7:15 P.M. at Alice Tully Hall as part of the 36th New York Film Festival. Running time: 92 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Saul Williams (Ray Joshua), Sonja Sohn (Lauren Bell), Bonz Malone (Hopha), Lawrence Wilson (Big Mike), Beau Sia (Jimmy Huang), Andre Taylor (China), Momolu Stewart (Bay/Jail Rapper), Ron Jones and Reamer Shedrick (Do Wop Cops), Allan E. Lucas (Chief C.O.), Dominic Chianese Jr. (Officer Dom) and Mayor Marion Barry Jr. (Judge).

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