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Film Reviews

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New Int'l. Release

Ghett'a Life

(Jamaica)

By GUY LODGE

A Jamrock Films production. (International sales: Jinga Films, London.) Produced, directed, written by Chris Browne.

With: Kevo Burton, Carl Davis, Chris McFarlane, Winston Bell, Karen Robinson, Kadeem Wilson, Lisa Williams, O'Daine Clarke, Lenford Salmon.

The worlds of international boxing and gang-ruled Jamaican politics are twinned to initially eye-opening but ultimately welterweight effect in "Ghett'a Life," a sophomore feature from writer-helmer Chris Browne that reps little advance on his appealingly scrappy 1999 debut, "Third World Cop." This by-the-numbers tale of a pure-hearted youth whose pugilistic talent offers him a way out of the gunshot-ridden Kingston ghetto relies on ample local color to enliven its creaky story beats. A smash in its home country, pic should find fans in minority markets; associate producer credit for British former boxing champ Lennox Lewis might add interest.

A pre-credits title card offers a rough explanation of Jamaica's garrison culture, whereby inner-city communities are violently divided along political lines. Each of the country's two leading parties is unofficially represented by an armed posse of local thugs quick to mete out street justice to anyone seen crossing party lines. It's a fascinatingly fraught context for an urban sports drama, but Browne's naive script has little time for political intricacies. "How come Daddy can't see that politics is wickedness?" wails young protagonist Derrick (robust newcomer Kevo Burton), a typical example of the level of insight throughout.

It transpires that daddy Lenford (Carl Davis) is a local politico himself, who doesn't take kindly to the news that his son has crossed party lines to train secretly at the nearest boxing gym, thereby angering the ominously named garrison don Sin (Chris McFarlane). Tensions build in tandem with Derrick's own boxing career, as he looks toward an international title fight. As Lenford previously lost Derrick's older brother to gang warfare, his objections are understandable, though the youngster at least has female support in the shape of proud mom Dawn (Karen Robinson) and utterly incidental love interest Camelle (Lisa Williams).

The able actors play these join-the-dots characters precisely as written, as Browne's own storytelling register switches cheerfully between hopped-up urban grit in a sub-"City of God" vein and earnest Afterschool Special. Lewis helpfully pops up onscreen at one point to offer the golden words: "Believe in yourself." Altogether, the pic is peppy and well-meaning enough, although the narrative starts to feel stretched and repetitive past the 90-minute mark.

Technically, "Ghett'a Life" punches well above its weight by placing experienced American d.p. Bobby Bukowski (recently a standout on Oren Moverman's films) behind the camera. Saturating each frame with vivid primary hues, he brings visual zip to a production otherwise lacking in finesse; editing, particularly in the fight scenes, is predictable in its rhythms.

Musically, the film is all over the place, with tinny scoring breaking abruptly into bursts of rock guitar and lively cuts from major dance-hall artists like Bounty Killa and Shaggy, further indicative of Browne's crossover ambitions.


Camera (color, HD), Bobby Bukowski; editor, Joel Burke; music, Jon Williams; production designer, Simone Clarke; costume designer, Michelle Haynes; sound, David Lazarus, Rupert Bent; associate producers, P.K. Asher, Lennox Lewis; line producer, Natalie Thompson. Reviewed on DVD, London, Dec. 4, 2011. Running time: 104 MIN.

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