



Unknown Soldier
(USA, 2003, 78 Minutes)
Director: Ferenc Toth
Study Guide

Synopsis

Bright, friendly and bubbling with hormones, Ellison is a typical Harlem teenager. He gets into good-natured mischief with his pals, stealing dogs and sneaking into amusement parks, and has a playful sexual tug-of-war with his girlfriend Tande. But when his father dies of a sudden heart attack, Ellison is evicted from their apartment and forced to grow up far too soon. Without relatives, he quickly runs out of friends' houses to stay in and finds himself homeless and desperate. He declines a job with local drug dealer and longtime acquaintance Zee, but after being refused by the Army (asthma) and victimized in a homeless shelter, Ellison is out of options. As Zee's personal assistant, he's entrusted with harmless tasks which slowly give way to dangerous assignments that leave him desperate for a way out. Ferenc Toth's astounding debut won Best Narrative Feature at the Los Angeles Film Festival.

Themes of the film

Homelessness

Personal ethics/morality

Transition into adulthood/adolescence

Study Questions

- Have you heard the expression “..one paycheck away from the streets/poorhouse/etc.” ? What does it refer to? Why do you think this saying has entered our vernacular?
- When you see a homeless person, do you wonder how that person came to be in that situation?
- Have you had ideas or assumptions about the homeless in the past? Did you ever think that homeless person's situation was primarily due to some failing on their part, such as a drug or alcohol dependency?
- According to the latest statistics, an estimated 3.5 million people are likely to experience homelessness in a given year. Why is homelessness on the rise?
- Do you know of anyone who has been homeless for a time? Where did they go?

Discussion Questions

- Would you have done any of the things that Ellison did when faced with that situation, such as: Worked for Zee, knowing about his gangster background? Applied for military service? Stayed in a shelter? What would you have done differently?
- Do you think this scenario could happen in reality? Was there anything in the film that you felt was not realistic? If not, why not?
- Why do you think the director chose to end the film the way he did?
- Why do you think the film is called Unknown Soldier?
- What do you imagine will happen to Ellison?
- What do you think the film cost to make?
- Do you think you could make a film like this? Why or why not?
- At the website for the film, there is the following quote: "...to measure up to our own standards was the only way of affirming our notion of manhood." - Ralph Ellison, "Shadow and Act" How does that quote relate to the story?