Why We Need Comedy
Chris Rock and Top Five make glorious sense in a city gone mad

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Whatever it is New Yorkers want out of life — and it’s not even something we can precisely define ourselves — it was nowhere in evidence on December 3, when a grand jury failed to indict the police officer whose chokehold killed Eric Garner in July. We all know we live in a fractured city; none of us wants to think of it as a truly broken one, though as it turns out, our country seems genuinely broken too. We live in a place where the name “Ferguson” has come to stand for a million brutal inequities that can seem impossible to change or correct.

Chris Rock couldn’t have planned it this way, but his exuberant and wondrous comedy Top Five, opening at just the right time, is like an air-drop of candy over the city, if not the country. That’s not to say Rock glosses over serious issues, or, for that matter, that he hits them hard. But somehow Top Five has its finger on the pulse of right now, not just in terms of race in America — the movie is less about race than about just plain people — but in terms of how we’re all trying to do the best we can, with no money, no jobs, a buttload of creeps in Congress, and dashed hopes of anything coming close to equality or fairness. The story of a hugely successful comedian and actor — played by Rock himself — who turns away from comedy because he just doesn’t “feel funny anymore,” Top Five is a reminder that as often as comedy fails us, sometimes it’s our best hope for resuscitation. Seeing it at the end of a crap week, I suddenly felt I could breathe again.

Rock’s Andre Allen has made a ton of money, and risen to great fame, playing a crime-fighting furball known as Hammy the Bear. But something in his life is cracked, and comedy doesn’t fill the gaps anymore. He’s just released a more-serious-than-thou historical drama about the Haitian Revolution (it’s called Uprise), and he’s about to tie the knot with a reality-TV star, Gabrielle Union’s Erica, a woman he seemingly loves, though he’s not quite comfortable with the fact that she’s turning their wedding into a media circus. On his movie’s opening day, he’s set to be interviewed by a New York Times reporter, Rosario Dawson’s Chelsea Brown. The two wander the city, walking and talking, laughing and bickering, trying to suss out which elements of their conversation are typical star-vs.-journalist BS and which might actually be some kind of truth.

Andre and Chelsea swing by to see some of Andre’s old friends and relatives, among them Leslie Jones’s combative — and hilarious — Lisa, who has her doubts about the direction Andre’s personal life is taking, and Tracy Morgan’s crazy-marvelous Fred, who appears to have been beamed from Planet Zontar just to sprawl on a couch and make totally out-there observations about Andre’s prosperous present and his rougher, rowdier past in the ‘hood. As Andre and Chelsea pass a public housing project, Andre makes a surprise reconnection with another figure from his past (Ben Vereen) — the sequence ends with both a wisp of bitterness and a wistful curlicue, the sort of complicated moment that even a more seasoned star-director-writer might not be able to pull off.

Top Five moves fast and almost never lets up. It’s both
lighter on its feet and more piercing than either of the two movies Rock has previously directed, the clumsy 2003 black-president fantasy *Head of State* and the more graceful 2007 *I Think I Love My Wife* (a sort-of remake of Eric Rohmer’s *Love in the Afternoon*). Its jokes unfold in complex layers: They’re rarely just race-related, or political, or connected to the universal needs and wants of human beings — often they’re all three at once, and catching every nuance can be a challenge. Rock has packed the movie not so much with “black” humor as with humor, period, though you might enjoy the madness more if you can instantly recognize, say, DMX, just one of the constellation of superb cameos. (Then again, even if you don’t, you’ll still get a charge out of his heartfelt rendition of “Smile,” from behind the bars of a jail cell, no less.) And one of the high points of my moviegoing month, if not my year, was hearing Cedric the Entertainer’s magnificent pronunciation of *duvet* — he stretches out the first syllable, ensuring that the word sounds like something at once both deeply luxurious and dirty as hell.

There’s a smattering of crude humor in *Top Five*, most of it extremely funny and good-natured. (One homophobic gag hits a sour note.) But its greatest joy comes from watching Dawson and Rock together, mapping out the city on foot and by hired car, claiming it, block by block, as their own. As shot by Manuel Alberto Claro, modern New York — a place where the small mom’n’pop stores and restaurants we love seem to be closing by the day — looks strangely and comfortingly timeless. At one point Andre’s bodyguard, played by the delightful J.B. Smoove, warns him sternly about the dangers of the streets even as they stand at Sixth and Greenwich, one of the prettiest, liveliest, and whitest intersections of the city.

Dawson and Rock, the central figures in this wily wonderland, are a terrific match: Dawson, her eyes as large and expressive as a doe’s, is a screwball Nefertiti. And Rock has barely aged a whit in the past 10 years. He still has the goofy gangliness of a teenager, though his jokes are purely adult in their sharpness. At one point, Andre and his pals wonder aloud if Tupac, had he lived, would be a senator today. Andre offers the suggestion that he might just be “playing the bad, dark-skinned boyfriend in a Tyler Perry movie.”

In the world we live in — sometimes remarkable, sometimes so depressing we wonder if it’s even worth it to get out of bed — either is possible. Rock knows the truth of that as well as anyone. There are two scenes in *Top Five* in which Andre is grabbed and beaten by cops — these are brief, fleeting sequences, edited to be fast and funny, and though you may not believe it until you see them, they actually are. Their honesty is cutting. This is Rock saying, “Here’s the reality of being a black man in America.” These two scenes, wedged casually into a comedy, are more effective than any earnest, straight-faced statement Rock could make. That his movie is mostly a work of joy makes them even more potent. Sometimes there’s no choice but to laugh till it hurts.