

Hazzard Zone

Barring an ingenious plot twist capable of converting tragedy to comedy, by the end of the week a dispute between friends of twenty years will destroy the most charming development in the Lake Merritt area since the little ol' Ladies of the Lake took to its waters in their whaleboats. As in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, racial tension is forcing its way in among folks who should know better, setting events on a sickeningly predictable downhill course.

For the last six months or so, people have been gathering daily in front of Gene Hazzard's thrift shop on Grand Avenue to play chess. According to Hazzard (you may recognize him as a perennial candidate for political office in Oakland), the whole thing started with a chess set and grew from there. Now up to eight tables are regularly filled with players, lending a continental ambience to an area more commonly associated with rowdy cruisers and rioting youth. Most of the players are African Americans; many are young kids learning the ropes from their elders. "When I look at the transformation on an individual's face as a result of learning the game of chess," says Hazzard, "It's amazing. It's something where people of all ethnic and political persuasions can sit down and do the same thing." None of his neighbors in the little commercial strip that runs down the 500 block from Gold's Gym has publicly complained about the scene that has developed on the sidewalk in front of Hazzard's shop, and many are full of praise for the positive atmosphere it has brought the neighborhood.

Yet at the beginning of August, Hazzard was served a notice from Joe Howard, his landlord and friend of twenty years, that his lease would be terminated as of yesterday. Howard, a rather crotchety 78-year-old who owns much of the block, now says he

never contemplated taking on Hazzard as a long-term tenant: "Because he was a friend—even though I never voted for him I gave him \$100 each time he ran—I let him go in there, and said, 'Let's try it for a year.'"

Now the year's up and Howard refuses to give a reason for not renewing the lease: "The only reason why he is being put out is because his lease expired and I'm not renewing it." When pressed, however, he hints at complaints from (unnamed) other tenants, and his own offended sense of decorum. "I wanted the place to look neat," he says. Is chess the problem? "The idea is good—not there though! It has nothing to do with his business. But my attorney says that there is only one reason, and that reason is that his lease has expired."

At this point one is obliged to note that Hazzard is African American and Howard white, albeit of Hawaiian extraction. It is also sadly necessary to note that some visitors to the area are evidently intimidated by the sight of a gathering of people of color, even if they are doing nothing more fearful than checkmating their opponents.

Hazzard compares his sidewalk scene to the neighboring sidewalk scene at Zza's Pizzeria. "I have probably sixty percent African Americans," he says. "They have 95 percent whites. Why should the visibility of African Americans who are peacefully assembling be more or less [intimidating] than anyone else assembling for dinner? Why should there be intimidation because of the color of one's skin? That's really sick." Check.

Howard, in turn, hotly denies any racial aspect to the dispute, recalling his own Hawaiian extraction. "Damn it, I know I'm not a racist," he says. "He's trying to create a racial problem where nothing exists." Check.

"If it requires a legal battle, there will be a legal battle," says Hazzard. Check.

"I would like for him to leave at the end of the week," says Howard. "I will not let him stay there." Mate.