

So You Wanna Support Pop Life: Black Film?

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This column started out as a Black Film Preview, but a problem emerged. What is Black film? Clearly, movies like *Boyz n The Hood* are Black films. But what about *Sister Act* or even *The Color Purple*? They have more in common than the fact that they both star Whoopi Goldberg. Both *Sister Act* and *The Color Purple* are films that were written, produced and directed by white men.

That's too easy. Any film that stars Whoopi has to have at least one white man involved, you're thinking. But seriously, most of the films that we think of as Black, have white people at the creative helm—the equivalent of Vanilla Ice writing Method Man's lyrics.

Bad Boyz stars Martin Lawrence and Will Smith, but was produced by Donald Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, the same white team that brought us the oh-so-Black *Top Gun*. Even *The Show*, Russell Simmon's who's who of hip-hop rapumentary, was directed by Brian Robbins, the white kid with the afro from the '80s sitcom "Head of the Class"—you remember the one with Robin Givens.

My point is that just because it stars Black folk and Black folks flock to see it, doesn't mean that Black folks were in control of the film and that white folks are the ones who are making mad loot from it.

Since films don't come with a "Proud Lady" symbol like Black hair care products, each of us must determine for ourselves what Black film is. For me, Black films are those films with Black themes that are written, directed, or produced by Black talent. I don't care who starred in it. I don't care who produced that phat single on the soundtrack. If a black person didn't originate the idea or have creative control over the idea, it ain't Black film to me.

Writers, directors, and producers have creative and financial control in the film industry. Actors and musicians are pawns in the game to those who have the real power. And the \$5.50 you shelled out for a ticket, well, our actors get a mere percentage of a cent on the dollar, while the producers will be living large for years to come.

This doesn't mean that I won't go to see movies that simply star Black actors. It does mean I am not as eager to shell out five bones. It means that I'm always conscious of the white filmmakers hand, so to speak, in the mix. As you can tell, I'm real serious about Black film and Black filmmakers. In my effort to support them to the fullest extent I do 3 things:

Number One: Before I go to see a film, I find out who wrote, directed and produced it. No, I don't know every Black writer,

director, or producer, but guess what. Black Hollywood is a small town and many people don't have enough talent, guts, intelligence, or persistence to work even some of the time in the commercial film industry.

Number Two: I go see Black films opening weekend. One of the quickest ways a film maker loses credibility in Hollywood is for their film to bomb in its first weekend of release. In Hollywood terms a film has to "Open Big." You say—the sooner it will be at my local Blockbuster the better, but horrible for Black filmmakers with good films. Take for instance, Robert Townsend and *The Five Heartbeats*. That movie bombed opening weekend and was quick to hit the shelves at the video stores where Black folks discovered they loved *The Five Heartbeats*.

It became a family reunion centerpiece. Fifty Black folks of all ages engrossed in this film around a VCR. If only those fifty Black folks had seen *The Five Heartbeats* in a theater, Robert Townsend and other black filmmakers would not have had such a hard time securing funds for future films as white studio heads told them "There's no audience for Black films. Look at *The Five Heartbeats*."

Number Three: I am aware of other venues for Black films outside of mainstream commercial theaters. A lot of us are unaware of it, but there is an independent Black film making circuit. There are Black folk who make films that are purposefully not "Hollywood material." This does not mean they are bad, cheap, or wack. Films like *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sankofa* are Black independent films. To see black independent films, you may have to go to area campuses, including our very own Union, the Hayti Cultural Center, and Black Film Festival.

Black folks are always talking about keeping it real, paying respect to the Old School, and vibing to those underground sounds. Well folks, independent Black filmmakers, Black cinema's equivalent to hip-hop's Old School, create underground images that keep us real—maybe more real than Spike and Singleton can within the confines of commercial cinema.

So you wanna support Black film? Well I advise you to be a conscious viewer. Like my daddy used to always say, "You can't just talk the talk. You gotta walk the walk, too."

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