

# Black women finding their voices through film

BY LORRAINE IANNELLO  
SPECIAL TO THE NNPA  
FROM WENEWS

**NEW YORK (NNPA)** — As a young black girl growing up in Oklahoma in the 1960s, Del Hunter-White loved to sing and dance, but she never thought she'd be able to channel her creative impulses into filmmaking. Now, she is a winner at a recent film festival.

"The idea of me becoming a filmmaker was just non-existent," said Hunter-White, whose 10-minute short film "Cornbread" documents a 6-year-old African-American girl's search for the missing ingredient in her life: her father. "What role models did you have? None."

Now a film festival featuring "Cornbread" and 24 other pieces by women of color offers aspiring filmmakers the possibilities Hunter-White had to create for herself. The Reel Sisters of the Diaspora Film Festival & Lecture Series, which ran last weekend at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus, is a showcase for a diverse array of perspectives, among them the experiences of African-Americans, American Indians, Arabs, Asians and Brazilians.

Hollywood studios "ghettoize us," said Hunter-White, who added she often received positive feedback on the screenplay for "Cornbread," only to be told producers didn't know how to market it. "They want us to do something like 'Booty Call,' a crude sex comedy," she said. "They are still locked into their small microcosm

of what we're about. And we are about so much."

Among the films shown last weekend was the documentary, "In My Own Skin: The Complexity of Living as an Arab in America," which explores the experiences of five women living in New York in a post-Sept. 11 world. "Standing at the Edge, We Dance," also a documentary, features candid interviews with Joan Myers Brown, the maverick artistic director and founder of PHILDANCO!, the Philadelphia Dance Co., a multicultural troupe known for performing the works of African-American choreographers. And the sudden death of a young funk bandleader, the Maestro, creates turmoil in the Manguera Samba School in the Afro-Brazilian comedy "Un Gurufim Na Manguera" (A Funeral at the Samba School).

"It's important for women to see women of color, to see images that represent them and their perspectives," said Carolyn Butts, who co-founded Reel Sisters five years ago to provide opportunities for women of color in the film industry. Butts is a member of the Women's Enews advisory board. "Women are half of the audience, yet we command just a small percentage of films. If you look at the history of women directors — doesn't matter if they're white, black or anything else — there are not too many that command a Hollywood presence."

Kim Brizzolaro, co-chair of Films of Conflict and Resolution, a section of the Hamptons International Film Festival, says film festivals that explore issues free

of Hollywood formula capture authentic stories "you'll never see anywhere else."

"It represents more of the realities from the standpoint of the person who is in it and not from observers, people on the outside looking in," said Brizzolaro, who looks for films from directors in war-torn regions such as Bosnia.

Once puzzled about how to tap into Hollywood's support, Butts and her co-founders now believe that if they build an audience for films with minority themes, Hollywood will come.

"If there's a demand, people are going to start doing it," said Butts. "People are tired of seeing the same old thing. There's a hunger for that now. Otherwise Hollywood wouldn't be picking up so many independent films."

It's not Hollywood, but schools often request "Beyond the Bars: No Extended Embraces," a 2000 documentary in the Reel Sisters festival about women trying to maintain relationships with jailed spouses, by Julia O'Farrow. Teachers frequently request permission to show it as an educational program.

Another success: Long Island University's Brooklyn campus each year purchases copies of all of the festival's films to archive in its permanent collection. Butts said. The university's events coordinator, Rodney K. Hurley, is the other co-founding member of Reel Sisters, and he believes that audience support of popular independent films is slowly influencing Hollywood.

After director Julie Dash's

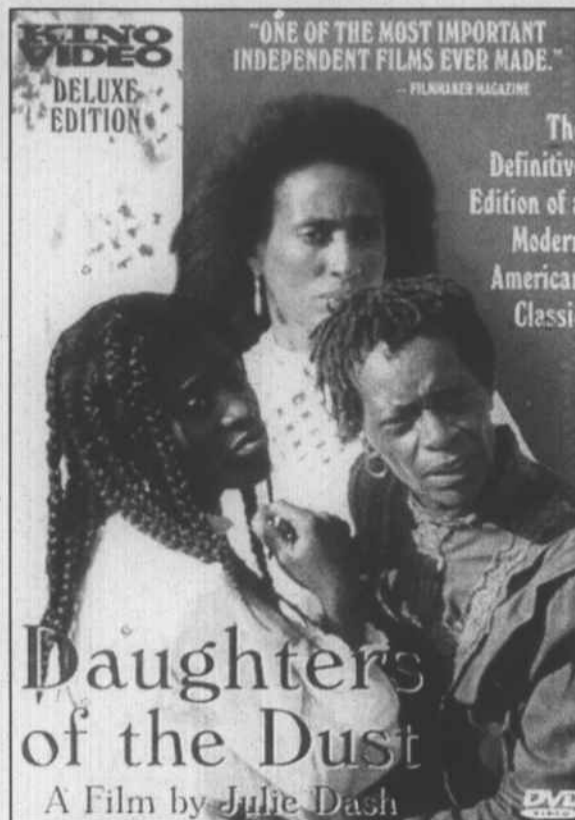
stunningly beautiful film "Daughters of the Dust" won first prize for cinematography at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival, it became the first full-length film by an African-American woman to receive national distribution in 1992. Patricia Cardoso's Latina film, "Real Women Have Curves," won the dramatic audience award and a special jury prize for acting at this year's Sundance.

Butts said that creating more opportunities at the top for minority directors and producers will also create more opportunity for actors and actresses of color. She added that that support for the Reel Sisters festival now includes director Spike Lee's 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks production company, the New York State Council on the Arts and The New York Times, among others.

Mainstream audiences "only get a stereotypical view of Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans and other groups," said Claesra Clay, the film festival's curator. "That's so disheartening."

When she saw "Daughters of the Dust," a film that celebrates a family's West African heritage and traditions, "that's when I knew that, besides behind the camera, also in front of the camera, we are beautiful," Clay said. "I was kissing my skin. It was an affirmation. It made me want to know more about my history. I wanted to find missing stories."

For Hunter-White, "Cornbread" represents the kind of hopeful films she wants to make. Before she completed it, her goal was to break through the gender



Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust" was the first feature length film directed by a black woman.

and race barriers in Hollywood. Reel Sisters.

"Now, I don't even care about getting into Hollywood," said Hunter-White, whose film has won the best director award at

Lorraine Iannello is a writer and editor in Brooklyn, N.Y., who loves movies.

## East Winston Primary School holds Severe Weather Awareness

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Gov. Mike Easley designated March 10-16 as Severe Weather Awareness Week in North Carolina. However, East Winston Primary School held Severe Weather Awareness during the week of March 18-22.

Lee Smith, an Emergency Management officer and fire investigator, visited the school to inform students about tornado drill procedures. A tornado is defined as a funnel-shaped downward

extension of a thundercloud and having a vortex several hundred yards in diameter whirling destructively at extremely high speeds.

Smith explained the difference between a watch and warning. A watch means that conditions are favorable for a severe weather event. A warning means that a tornado has been spotted, and you need to take immediate cover. Knowing the difference between the two will improve your chances of survival.

Residents of North Carolina should be fully aware of tornado procedures. Did you know that 12 tornadoes struck in North Carolina during 2001? As the old saying goes, "Better safe than sorry." East Winston Primary School encourages you to learn the procedures and participate in practice tornado drills.

For more information about tornado procedures, contact the Office of Emergency Management at 767-6161.

## A&T

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will be moved from laughter to tears as these men share their stories of trial and triumph.

The play will be directed by Frankie Day Greenlee, the director of last spring's critically acclaimed production of "Antigone" and two-time winner of a coveted invitation to appear at the Region IV of the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival. She

promises that this will be an evening of theater that you won't forget.

Appearing in the cast will be David Watkins, a sophomore from Richmond, Va.; Troy Whitehurst, a junior from Norfolk, Va.; Lelund Thompson and Michael Williams, both juniors from Richlands, N.C.; Jae Sims, a senior from Winston-Salem; Tomike Ogugua, a sophomore from Durham; and Sunshyne Gay, a senior from Fayetteville.

Performances will be held at 8 p.m., with the exception of a 3 p.m. matinee on Sunday. General admission is \$12; other area students, \$7; and A&T students, \$5. Tickets may be purchased in advance at the A&T ticket office, in Brown Hall on the campus. The ticket office is open Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. or you may call 334-7749 to charge by phone. For group rates or general information, call 334-7519.

## Success

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ever known; my mother, Margaret Hill; my two sons, Timothy, my keyboardist, orchestrator and instrumentalist, and my son Jamel, my funky drummer. Also, thanks go out to my 13 grandchildren and their moms. Thanks to all my teachers and mentors in music, from Miss Sheffy at Kimberley Park Elementary and Mr.

Bernard F. Foy, Dr. Tanner and Dr. Shepperd, whom I wanted to be like in life. My uncle, the late Rev. Joe Blair, a guitarist and preacher in Philadelphia, was a great inspiration. Dr. Faustina Holman was my voice instructor and will be when I return to Winston-Salem State University this fall.

My goal is to receive my doctorate in music, and I'm less than three years away from a doctor-

ate in divinity at Vintage Bible College. I'd like to thank all my friends and the people who prayed for me and even the people who criticized and laughed. Just remember, God is not through with me yet.

I thank my financial investor, A. T. Knight Photo, Sir Aaron Crotts, and Don's Music.

Thanks,  
Minister Steven Gaddy  
(Dr. Sunshine)

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Directed by Bernard Uzan and conducted by James Meena

Performances on Friday, April 12 at 8 pm, Sunday, April 14 at 2 pm, and Tuesday, April 16 at 7:30 pm at the Stevens Center. Sung in Italian with English surtitles.

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