

Wayans: Turning Blaxploitation Upside Down

BY HILLEL ITALIE
Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) --- In 1980, 50 stand-up comics tried their luck on "Audition Night" at New York's Improv. Two were Robert Townsend and Keenan Ivory Wayans. They quickly became friends and ended up co-writing "Hollywood Shuffle," a film largely financed by Townsend's credit cards that turned into one of last season's surprise movie hits.

Now Wayans is showcasing his own talents by writing, directing and starring in "I'm Gonna Get You Sucka," a takeoff on the "blaxploitation" films of the 1970s.

"A few years ago, me and some friends were sitting around and talking about the movies we used to go see," Wayans said in a recent interview. "The conversation went from 'remember this movie' to 'remember this scene.' We started laughing and that was when 'Airplane' was coming out and that was kind of a blueprint for me."

Starting with the death of Junebug Spade from an overdose of gold chains ("He was ready to die!" the preacher boomed), "I'm Gonna Get You Sucka" takes on such movies as "Superfly" and "Shaft" and turns them upside down.

Wayans, who also co-wrote and co-produced the Eddie Murphy concert film, "Raw," plays Jack

Spade, who helps capture those responsible for his brother Junebug's death. Assisting Spade are an aging band of tough guys played by ex-football stars Jim Brown and Bernie Casey and musician Isaac Hayes, who wrote the theme to "Shaft."

"That was the coolest thing," Wayans said. "To be able to work with those guys and then to watch them get up there and be totally uninhibited. That's because they got it. They didn't take themselves seriously. They were having a good time. In respect, they could see where the humor was."

Fans of "National Lampoon's Animal House" will recognize John Vernon, the dreaded Dean Wermer of Faber College. Vernon is the villain again in "I'm Gonna Get You Sucka." He plays Mr. Big, the man behind the proliferation of gold chains.

"My first choice was Shelly Winters," Wayans said. "Initially, it was still going to be 'Mr. Big but you wouldn't have ever seen her face.'"

Wayans' project took a long time to get to the screen. When the film was conceived in the early 1980s, he was a relatively unknown stand-up comic and actor. It was a time when Hollywood studios were not interested in financing an all black film. They were, however, willing to reconsider if Wynans would agree to make a few "minor

changes.

"I went to Vestron and they kept coming up with the most bizarre ways to integrate the cast they could think of. How about if I get Anthony Michael Hall ('The Breakfast Club,' 'Sixteen Candles') to be my younger brother --- a kid that was left on the doorstep of my house and act black for the entire film?" "And how about if we make one of the guys like Charles Bronson." They wanted so desperately to integrate it they didn't care if they undermined the picture."

But the success of "Hollywood Shuffle" and Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It" made the studios more receptive to Wayans' project and he ended up getting United Artists to distribute the film.

"It was a lot easier to go in and sit down and really talk. Before we did 'Hollywood Shuffle,' if it was an all black act, no one wanted to touch it."

Wayans grew up in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, one of 10 children. He was trying to make people laugh as far back as he could remember and had plenty of time to display his talents at the family dinner table.

"There was always an audience and we were always competing," he said. "Dinner time was sitting at a long table with my parents at each end. The objective was making the person across from

you spit food."

His early heroes were Richard Pryor and the late Freddie Prinze, who also grew up in Washington Heights. But while those comedians had traumatic and tragic lives (Prinze committed suicide just as he became a star), Wayans has no interest in being a "tortured artist."

"It wasn't a psychological thing where I had a horrible family life and I wanted the audience to love me," he said. "There are those who just find humor in almost anything, who have warped senses of humor, which I'm a victim of. I just find everything funny and I like being funny."

Although Mr. Big mutters ominously at the end of the movie that "there will be no sequel," Wayans is anxious to continue making films and also to help other blacks break into the business.

"The recognized pool of talent is so small that the opportunity is tremendous," said Wayans, who found roles for Antonio Fargas, Steve James and his brother Damon among others. "There's a building pool of talent right now."

But Wayans couldn't help adding, "I used them all in the movie."

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"Tap": A Drawing Card To The Dance

BY MARION LANEY
Special To The Post

The answer to whether tap dancing is growing in popularity can be found, at least partially, in the message of the movie "Tap."

Starring Gregory Hines, Sammy Davis Jr. and Suzanne Douglas, this film with its simple but dramatic story line dazzles viewers with its fancy footwork.

"Tap" centers on Max Washington (Hines). The film opens with Max's release from prison. The son of a famous tap dancer, he had lost his direction.

Upon returning to his New York City home, Max is faced with choosing between continuing along the wrong path with Nicky (Joe Morton) or reconciling with a lost love (Douglas). It is the ageless tale of good versus evil.

Davis plays the pivotal role of Little Moe, a godfather-like patron of tap dancing. He has some idea of a tap dancing comeback but he needs a younger man "with legs" to do a routine. The trick is to convince his daughter Amy (Douglas), Max's former love, who guards against the dreams of her father and the nightmares of Max's mistakes.

In their respective roles, the stars of "Tap" all give solid performances. But the movie's choreographer, Henry Le Tang, should also receive star billing since the main point of "Tap" is its dancing antics.

With this film as his vehicle, Tang exemplifies the resurgence of tap dancing with eloquent artistry. The energy of "Tap" comes from the talents of the stars/dancers: Hines, Douglas, Davis, Sandman Sims, the Nicholas Brothers and the young Savion Glover, who shows impressive skill at 15 years of age.

One of the film's finest scenes is when Hines and Douglas take to the rooftop. Their personal and debonair treatment makes the dancing look deceptively easy. In another scene, the streets of New York are transformed into a tap dance extravaganza. Hines demonstrates how to find the city's beat as a host of dancers involve themselves with the street sounds of jack hammers and night noises.

Critically, the plot of "Tap"



Hines

skirts some questions about social values. However, the overt sensationalism that typifies Hollywood products is conspicuously absent here. Considering its setting in a grimy environment of New York, there is hardly any violence in this movie. Moreover, the tender scenes between Hines and Douglas should please those who've noticed that not many Hollywood movies present opportunities for this type of relationship.

Overall "Tap" re-kindles an interest in tap dancing. Hubert Jefferson is a local tap dancer and a fan of the movie. Jefferson, who teaches tap classes, says the film shows the real tap masters doing some of the

toughest routines around. He is optimistic the movie will help bring tap dancing back in style among young black people.

The combination of good dramatic performances and the joy of tap dancing ultimately makes "Tap" a very good movie.

Marion LaNey is a freelance entertainment writer living in Charlotte.

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