

Director calls for broader scope of roles for black actors

By MICHAEL SPIRTAS
Staff Writer

"The first time I did a pimp I thought it was great, but by pimp number 29, I was a little nervous."

The above quote is not from a pimp, prostitute or any other such character. The source of this quote is none other than Robert Townsend, the up-and-coming director/producer/star/writer of "Hollywood Shuffle." Townsend spoke at the Student Union Film Auditorium Friday night as part of the Black Student Movement's Discovery '88

program. The talk was also sponsored by the Carolina Union Film Committee. The filmmaker, who spoke after each of two showings of his film, gave his opinions on a variety of subjects, including the present state of filmmaking, race relations in America, his optimistic approach to life, the unorthodox manner in which he created "Hollywood Shuffle" and his sudden, unexpected fame. The result of the film and talks was a humorous, introspective look at the way blacks have been treated by American filmmakers.

The plot of "Hollywood Shuffle" focuses on the life of a black actor who is forced to make the choice of whether to accept humiliating roles that run parallel to black stereotypes. The film takes a sarcastic view of the current situation in Hollywood through a series of hilarious skits. Some of these scenes are "Sneaking into the Movies" (a parody of Siskel and Ebert's "A Look at the Movies"), "The How to Act Black Acting School" ("You too can walk black"), "Death of a Breakdancer" (a black version of the classic private detective

movie) and "There's a Bat in My House" (a ridiculous sitcom centered around a black man who dresses like a bat and lives in a suburban home). Townsend went to great lengths and considerable risk to complete "Hollywood Shuffle." The production took over two and a half years to film and was financed by Townsend's personal credit cards. Before he sold the movie to Samuel Goldwyn Company, Townsend was more than \$40,000 in debt. In order to save money, most of the scenes in the movie were shot in one take. Friday

night Townsend stressed his confidence in the film: "I believed in the film . . . it always made me laugh." The filmmaker also mentioned his extraordinary ability to keep an objective view on a project that he wrote, produced, directed and starred in. "I'm a part of the audience," he said. "I step outside of myself . . . and see a lot of different things in the movie." The performer admitted that "this film has gone beyond my wildest dreams."

Townsend is an individual who truly believes in himself. "I don't

believe in obstacles. I don't believe in being scared." The comic admitted that before making the movie he had "never directed anything before, but I'd seen enough bad movies to know what I didn't like." Townsend believes that life is all about "accepting the challenge." He calmly noted, "If 'Hollywood Shuffle' didn't make it, I would be in jail." Townsend believed in himself to the point that he was able to take an extraordinary risk and produce a surprise hit at the same time.

As an actor in New York, Townsend grew frustrated with the way blacks were treated by the film industry. The majority of roles offered to blacks are pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers and gang members. As a result of this imbalance the public receives a distorted view of blacks that perpetuates harmful stereotypes that presently exist in society. The screen artist asked seriously, "Besides Eddie Murphy, tell me one black actor who saved the day and got the girl?"

Instead of merely cursing the situation Townsend responded with "Hollywood Shuffle." "I didn't want to be bitter, so I made a movie about it."

Townsend said he hopes the film will force other filmmakers to come out of the woodwork and give black actors better roles. "Doors are being opened," stressed the optimistic artist.

Townsend's ambition does not end at black actors getting better parts. He said that our culture should be a society where blacks, as well as other races, are seen as people, and not members of a certain group. Townsend said he yearns for the day when he will be seen as "just a director, not a black director."

Townsend said that only after society stops categorizing people as black, white, yellow, etc., will we be able to live in a world where there is equality in the true sense of the word. Townsend works toward this world in the medium of film and asks that everyone help him in whatever way he or she can: "People have to realize that they have a choice."

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master's degree program in reading and language arts was not very high.

"We have data that there were several other programs with similar characteristics as ours."

Spiegel said the members of the faculty were appalled that the School of Education would consider eliminating the reading program.

Out of the 54 top-ranked American schools of education, only one lacks a program emphasizing reading and language arts, Spiegel said. UNC should not become number two, she said.

Spiegel said faculty members wanted to form a new reading program in combination with the special education program. "We are very excited about it," she said.

Despite controversy surrounding the task force report, Spiegel said she thought it would be unrealistic to disregard it entirely.

"We're trying to move beyond that with attempts to reconceptualize," she said.

Rune Simeonsson, a professor and investigator for the school, said task force investigators did not entirely base their decision to eliminate the program on appropriate data.

Reductions should be made in programs in the school, but the method used to evaluate programs should be consistent, he said.

"Reading is a national priority for a department of education," he said. "It is also a state priority."

Simeonsson said that if other faculty members, the provost or other University officials have different priorities for the school, they should inform the faculty.

"We want to know if it's a political decision," he said.

Simeonsson also said he welcomes the idea of combining reading and special education programs.

"It's not that we don't welcome change," Simeonsson said. "The issue really is, 'Let's do this in an orderly way and look at the facts.'"

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threatening, intimidating or disruptive nature or because it improperly restrains freedom of movement, speech, assembly, or access to premises or activities" can result in expulsion, suspension or other penalty.

In telephone interviews over the weekend, several of the trustees discussed their reasons for voting as they did.

One of the trustees who voted against the resolution, Earl Phillips, said he did so because Chancellor Christopher Fordham had already promised that the University would investigate the incident.

"I thought that was sufficient action," Phillips said.

The University may find it difficult to discipline the students because the events took place off campus, he said.

Thomas Capps, who also voted against the resolution, said he did not agree with some of the wording of the resolution.

"The conduct by the group was unacceptable," he said, "but calling them terrorists is a little heavy."

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