



The colour of money

At the Disney studios, black actors still speak lines of jive-talk. So what became of the famous "black wave" in US film? Ed Ball reports from Hollywood

To reach the employees' cafeteria at the Disney studio in Burbank, California, you walk up Mickey Drive, past a green topiary of the smiling rodent himself, and turn left at the corner of Dopey Avenue. Here I had lunch with my friend Tony Puryear, a 33-year-old screenwriter and transplanted New Yorker on a year-long fellowship with Disney, which has recruited him and some 20 other African-Americans to produce scripts of colour. Every studio is looking for the next black thing; and Tony seems to know the cohort from which it will be pulled.

"The fact about show biz is that it's small, so you can practically know most people," he offers, talking at the rate of about a screenplay page a minute. "The fact about black show biz is that it's so circumscribed you can come to town and meet all the

players in a few months." The first tier of black Hollywood would have to include Oprah Winfrey, Eddie Murphy, Quincy Jones (if you count the music business), and Reuben Cannon, one of the town's premier casting agents.

Then there's the Wayans clan: Keenen Wayans, executive producer of *In Living Colour*, and his brother Damon Wayans, who has reportedly just got a role in a new action film, *The Last Boy Scout*. I'm more interested in what you might call the second tier: Hollywood's incipient blackness.

"That's probably less than 100 people," Tony computes. "There's Cheryl Hill at Hollywood Pictures [a division of Disney]. There's Stephanie Allain, an executive at Columbia. Ernest Dickerson is the cinematographer who shot all of Spike [Lee]'s movies, and he is now directing his first

feature, *Juice*. There's a young black video director from New York, Paris Barclay, who did a lot of videos for his own company, called Black and White TV, including several of LL Cool J's videos." It seems the entire cadre can be listed if we sit here long enough. "Then there are all sorts of actors." But "talent" is notoriously ephemeral; producers and crew are not.

In the wake of the two-year-old *In Living Colour*, a popular black television series, and in the aftermath of Mario van Peebles' riot-tainted but profitable *New Jack City*, some 19 films by black directors are scheduled for release during 1991. Bill Duke's adaptation of the Chester Himes gangster novel *A Rage in Harlem* is released in Britain on 27 September; Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* opens on 6 September (see review on page 31), with the London pre-

miere of *Boyz N' The Hood*, directed by the 23-year-old John Singleton, due on 25 October. Back in the US, the recently released *Five Heartbeats*, directed by Robert Townsend, spins the tale of a sharkskin-clad Motown-style vocal group. And *Hangin' with the Homeboys* comes from director Joseph Vasquez, who is African-American/Puerto Rican.

This sharp appetite for blackness has lifted at least one film-maker virtually out of high school and into directing: 19-year-old Matty Rich, whose *Straight out of Brooklyn* is about a family that lives in a New York housing project and sports a college-bound son. Amid all the brothers, a few black women are arriving as mainstream directors, though more are finding places in union jobs and as studio executives. Two years ago Euzhan Palcy directed *A Dry White Season*. This year, Julie Dash finished *Daughters of the Dust*, about life in South Carolina's Gullah country.

Just like the white cadres, some of black Hollywood marched right out of élite pri-

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vate colleges and into the studios. "There is something like a black Harvard mafia," claims Tony, citing Warrington and Reggie Hudlin, the Cambridge (Massachusetts)-educated brothers who together made last year's *House Party*. "Yule Caisse is another Harvard mafioso; he just did the new Run-DMC video. He has an agent who sends him out to try and get feature-directing gigs, and he may just get one this year."

The west-coast variant of the Ivy League theme seems to be led by Jackson-McHenry Productions, which made *New Jack City*. Doug McHenry came from Stanford University, and, along with his partner George Jackson, he is about to co-direct *House Party 2*. Another Stanford graduate, 28-year-old Trey Ellis, is a black novelist and screenwriter who has a deal for two movies with Touchstone Pictures, a Disney affiliate. With an influential agent and several scripts loitering in the wings at the studios, Ellis is not doing badly; he lives near the beach in Venice, and works out most days. Over coffee, Ellis assessed the politics of colour film.

"I'm kind of afraid of this movement, this mania for black films," he observes. "It's been going on for a while, but none of the pictures has been doing very well [financially]." The exception of the moment is *Boyz N' The Hood*, which opened in the US to strong receipts in July. A future exception might be Ellis' own script, *Tuskegee Airmen*, a kind of black second world war

flyboy-flick that Columbia will produce.

"What's weird about black film," says Ellis, "is that all the decisions are being made by white people 50 years old. They don't understand what they are looking at, and sometimes they are so impressed merely to see motion pictures made by black people—like it couldn't be done—that they lose their critical abilities. I think that black film will fade unless we form our own institutions.

"It would be good if there were something like a black film distribution company, for instance. [Bill] Cosby and [Eddie] Murphy could buy a small distributor if they wanted to. But blacks are afraid of getting together that way, because we have a terrible record in entrepreneurship. People seem to feel better working within the system."

What's it like inside that system? Back at the Disney lot, Tony Puryear and I walk up Dopey Avenue, between manicured lawns and amid chirping birds that sound as if they are taped. We arrive at an ADR (additional dialogue recording) studio where work is proceeding on *True Identity*, a picture directed by Charles Lane about a black guy who passes himself off as white.

In the large, carpeted and padded studio, actors are taping additional scripted lines to fill out the sound track of the just-completed film. About ten African-American and Hispanic actors sit around on sofas, quietly waiting their turn. They talk softly, make discreet jokes, their laughter subdued. A film screen covers one wall; beneath it is a big digital counter, while in the middle of the room stands a microphone.

Two black actors step to the microphone, the screen lights up with two passers-by on a ghetto sidewalk, and the digital counter winds down, 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . Man: "Yo, baby, didn't you git da kid?" Woman: "We ain't have to til lateh, honey." Man: "Watch choo been doin' then!?" That's it; a couple of lines of jive and the two actors return to a sofa and resume their understated talk.

Another actor steps up, this time Hispanic, and sputters out a speech balloon of stereotype; and a third who, like the others, undoubtedly belongs to the Screen Actors Guild and commands top union rates. The final film, from director Charles Lane, may be critical of "blaxploitation" cinema. But this is a truly ambivalent and peculiar moment, a glimpse of the new mixed in with the old—a kind of double-agency that will continue as long as film-makers keep up their reconnaissance along the seams of colour.

The picture on page 29 is from "Five for Five: the films of Spike Lee", a retrospective with essays by Toni Cade Bambara, Terry McMillan and other writers, and photographs by Spike's brother David (Little, Brown, £14.99)