FILM

Black and white comedy bought and souled

By Pat Aufderheide

The comedy hit Soul Man, in which a crass, rich white boy gets a scholarship to Harvard Law School by masquerading as a black, is easy to attack. The hard part comes in choosing where to start. And no matter which direction you come from, you run up against the brick wall of box office: the film has drawn audiences across the country.

The success of the film, produced by Steve Tisch and directed by Steve Miner, is a breathtaking statement on endemic racism and sexism, since the very joke implies a denial of the most basic realities of discrimination and cultural balkanization in the country.

Mark, the film’s hero (C. Thomas Howell)—who no one in the film, including blacks, seems to notice is wearing tons of pancake makeup in place of a skin—acts blithely as if being black were a matter of color, not culture (“It’s the Cosby decade,” he says. “America loves black people!”). Rae Dawn Chong performs her role as Mark’s unwilling love object with an admirable disdain, and James Earl Jones as the law professor seems to will himself into another movie, perhaps The Paper Chase. But the plot set-ups, which set new lows for TV sitcom gags, weight the film toward Mark’s blind conviction that America will forgive anything from—even adopt with affection—a cheerful (and white) fool.

Some people just aren’t getting the joke. The film has been attacked by law students’ organizations, and by the Beverly Hills/Hollywood chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Charging “racism and sexism,” and focusing cautiously on specifics, the NAACP argues that the film’s insults include the implication that “no black student could be found in all of Los Angeles who was academically qualified for a scholarship geared to blacks.”

In fact, the Cosby decade appears to be happening mostly on television. On the heels of the film’s release came a Washington Post report on a decade-long decline in the tiny number of black partners in heavy hitter Washington law firms. The explanation lies, apparently, in the lack of institutional pressure to continue affirmative action practices. Undercutting the racial divisions of society, many black lawyers in the District then protested the focus of the Post’s coverage, charging that they were making an excellent living within the black community, without having to suffer the indignities of working in a white-dominated power law firm.

Back in fantasy-land, meanwhile, producer Tisch defended himself by saying that black filmgoers at a preview screening had an “extremely positive” reaction. Trade magazine Variety gave it a rave review, calling it “excellently written, fast paced and intelligently directed.” Given the cheerfully callous execution of Soul Man, this judgment can only be taken seriously as a patronizing slur on white people.

Soul Man star C. Thomas Howell

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etarians and ate their food raw because they believed raw food healthier for the body and the soul. They believed in letting orange peels, banana peels and other organic refuse “cycle” back into the earth. Composting? They did not believe in embalming dead people or burying them in caskets. They thought they should be allowed to “cycle” back to the earth, too. They loved dogs after all, by a black mayor, the Honorable Wilson Goode (see story page 8) of the aforementioned City of Brotherly, etc. (Meanwhile, there was incredible controversy over the filming of a movie in which no one is killed and a black man slaps a woman.)

Eerie silence

Nor do I yet know what to make of this silence. Was the bombing of black people, with a black person ostensibly (in any case) responsible, too much for the collective black psyche to bear? Were people stunned by the horror of the MOVE people without husbands. Or young men who refused any inducement to “fit in.” Yet they had the nerve to critique the system. To reject it and to set up, in place of its rules, guidelines for living that reflected their own beliefs.

The people of MOVE are proof that poor people (not just upper- and middle-class whites and blacks who become hippies) are capable of intelligently perceiving and analyzing American life, politically and socially, and of devising and attempting to follow a different and, to them, better way. But because they are poor and black this is not acceptable behavior to middle-class their house. Nor the bullhorn aimed at airing their neighbors’ backwardness and political transgressions, as apparently they had a bad habit. From what I read MOVE people were more philosophical than perfect; I probably would not have been able to live next door to them for a day.

The question is—did they deserve the harassment, abuse and, finally, the vicious death other people’s intolerance of their lifestyle brought upon them? Every bomb ever made falls on all of us. And the answer is no.

“The real reason for the government hit-squad is no secret: MOVE is an organization