

Entertainment

The Making Of Hollywood Shuffle

"If I don't believe in myself, how can I expect anyone else to." With that in mind, Robert Townsend set upon a plan to produce and direct his first film. He just signed a three-picture deal with Indigo Productions as an actor, and asked if he could direct one of the films. Because he had never directed before, the answer was no. It wasn't the first time a production company had turned down a request to back his debut as a director, but for Townsend it marked a turning point. He decided to make the movie on his own. He started by pooling the money he had made from roles in "A Soldier's Story" and "American Flyers" and the retainer from his three-picture deal, and began "Hollywood Shuffle."

It didn't take long for the money to run out, but Townsend was determined to continue. Because he was earning more as an actor, Townsend began to receive credit cards in the mail from various banks, and as he was tossing them into the



Lydia (ANNE-MARIE JOHNSON) and Bobby (ROBERT TOWNSEND) embrace in a break from his pursuit of hollywood stardom in "Hollywood Shuffle," a Samuel Goldwyn Company Presentation. 1987 The Samuel Goldwyn Company.



Director ROBERT TOWNSEND on location in Los Angeles during the filming of his first feature, "Hollywood Shuffle." A Samuel Goldwyn Company Presentation. 1987 The Samuel Goldwyn Company.

trash, it started to dawn on him that these cards represented a great deal of a money and a way to finish the film. Between high credit limits and cash advances drawn against those cards, he charged equipment, raw film stock, food for the crew, and costumes. A very unconventional way to finance a film, to say the least.

Townsend had taken all this onto his own shoulders, in the face of a lot of negative

feedback, constantly hearing "this can't be done," and "it won't work." "I went on faith," says Townsend, "and the belief that I could direct. I learned a lot from acting in films, and from being shot poorly, so I knew what I didn't want, as well as what I was aiming for." Townsend remembers being filmed during a comedy routine, where the punchline depended on the audience's view of his hands. The direc-

tor didn't frame it that way though; Townsend's hands were left out of the shot and the home audiences had no idea what the studio audience was laughing at. Townsend knew he could frame a shot better, even if he didn't have the credits yet. So he persevered.

And as people saw the initial footage, they started to believe. In a town where the phrase "trust me" rarely inspires confidence, it did with

the people that Townsend hired. He couldn't promise them money up front, glamorous locations or working conditions, but he could give them something they had been looking for — a project they believed in. Many of the actors had been through the kinds of difficulties "Hollywood Shuffle" pokes fun at and loved having the chance to do a send-up of today's Hollywood.

Townsend also had a great pool of talent to draw from — many of the comedians he worked with in comedy clubs, like Franklyn Ajaye and John Witherspoon, were anxious to do movies, some

for the first time. Other performers, such as actress Anne-Marie Johnson, wanted more meaningful roles than they'd had in the past. The presence of some of Los Angeles' top comedians created a set that was fun-filled. One of the hardest things to control during filming was the crew's laughter. Although the cast was well-rehearsed, with so many comics around, improvisation crept into the performances and, as many shots wrapped, the crew would burst into laughter.

The script and its enactment weren't the only things that inspired laughter. Some of Townsend's shooting

methods were unorthodox. Trying to save money, the permits necessary for location shooting were not obtained. Acting as producer and location manager, as well as actor and director, Townsend would load all the equipment into one van and the costumes, make-up, and crew into another, and drive to a location. In his mind's eye, Townsend would block the shot and then tell the crew where and how he wanted everything. He'd rehearse the cast so they could do the shot in one take and, when all these steps were completed, he'd get out of the van to make sure the

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