

Point of View

EDITORIAL

To Be Equal

HOLLYWOOD WELFARE: THE DEVELOPMENT GAME

There are wild cries for welfare reform in this country amid the hysteria of the so-called new conservative mood. Everyone talks of welfare cheats but one never hears the real estate industry, the clothing industry, the food industry or the medical industry attacking the welfare system because they get most of the money. Welfare is as much a subsidy to those interests as it is to the men, women and children who are the focal beneficiaries of the system.

Those who benefit most from welfare never complain. Hollywood has a welfare system of its own wherein recipients get a stipend for work that is mostly non-productive. Though a major part of Hollywood's welfare system manifests itself in feather-bedded jobs, the most glaring existence of welfare in the film world is in the so-called area known as development.

Development is a broadly based term which involves ideas, stories, scripts, productions and like things optioned or bought by studios and production companies with the stated intent of nurturing to the point of being a finished movie ready for distribution and making money. The major studios each spend between \$10 million to \$20 million yearly for development. That is well over \$100 million per year but few of the efforts ever appear on the screen. Even the few that do, have a 78% failure ratio. Yes, 78% of the over 400 movies a year released in Hollywood lose money.

The normal time it takes between the presentation of a story or idea to producing the film is 18 months. During that time money has been dispensed and people have been paid.

Annually studios carry 100 to 200 projects in development month after month.

A leading official of a major studio was quoted in an article in the LA Times in late September on the subject of Hollywood's development game. He said, "It's by far the last efficient part of the movie business. It is simply indefensible," he added.

A chart accompanying the above mentioned article listed projects in development as of September 25, of last year for 10 studios. The projects ranged from Warner Brothers with a high of 250 to Orion with a low of 17. Warner Brothers had 30 projects beginning with the letter "M" alone. That figure equals the full development package of The Cannon Group, second lowest in development projects.

Collectively the 10 studios had 907 projects at various stages of development. They had already released 156 pictures and of those releases 94 were pictures developed in house, 62 of the pictures were picked up from other sources.

Using figures from the chart, we have devised a release to development ratio for each studios based upon the facts of the moment.

The Cannon Group which has developed 21 of its 26 releases in house and who have only 36 projects in development has the highest ratio, 70%.

Orion which has developed 8 of its 12 releases in house and who has 17 projects in development was a distant second with 47%.

From there there is a big drop down to 11% with Columbia, Paramount and Universal lumped together at that ratio.

Disney is next with 8% followed by Tri Star (7%), MGM/UA (6.6%) and 20th Century Fox with a low of 4%.

I cite these figures to show the low percentage of fruition of those projects started in the first place. This leads to the real point.

Less than 30 of the projects in development are black projects. Warner Brothers has more projects that start with the letter "M" than all these studios combined have in black movies.

Another major point is that less than 50 of the projects have a major black character.

Considering the low ratio of development to production, the studios are saying to black America that they don't

POPE BACKS U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by John E. Jacob

Pope John Paul II's visit to the United States left a residue of good feeling for his message, most especially among black Americans who were heartened by the Pope's support for the civil rights movement and for his condemnation of economic deprivation among blacks.

By addressing a gathering of black Catholics in New Orleans, the Pope reached out to America's black masses and focused national attention on their plight.

With one paragraph of one speech, the Pope managed to concentrate more media attention on the problems of the black poor than years of efforts to break the media barrier of indifference. The core of the Pope's message was:

"Even in this wealthy nation, committed by its Founding Fathers to the dignity and equality of all persons, the black community suffers a disproportionate share of economic deprivation. Far too many of our young people receive less than an equal opportunity for a quality education and for gainful employment."

That's what black leaders

intend to make black movies or movies with major black characters in them.

If America asks blacks to look at movies with all white casts why can't it ask whites to look at movies with all black casts?

To be fair, development does serve a planning and development function for the industry. It does serve to develop relationships with new and emerging talent with potential to be nurtured into productive future relationships.

Even with this being true, the absence of blacks with a fair share of the development money is a revealing sign that the movie studios don't want to do business with blacks except at the box office as ticket buyers.

The limited and few development deals extended to blacks are cheap and under rigid control in contrast to those deals routinely given to whites. Blacks are stifled, hassled and under pressure not to fail when most of the whites do fail.

Tied into some of the deals are professional development leeches who are the film counterpart to the so-called welfare cheat. These people live and thrive on give away paychecks and some of them live high on the hog and haven't had a credit on a film actually seen since Carter's Little Liver pills. Yet these people engage in a cultural and social life with dignity and are not attacked by the media and rightwing politicians for receiving their welfare checks. They are cloaked by clandestine nepotism and cronyism in a welfare system closed to blacks.

have been saying for years—but government programs to alleviate poverty have been cut back, school reforms have largely bypassed issues of equity, and poverty has become more intractable.



John E. Jacob

The number of poor families has increased by 35 percent since 1979, even with a booming economy and a go-go stock market, and the government cut programs ranging from child nutrition programs to Medicaid payments to the elderly.

The black poor have seen their numbers increase, their meager incomes shrink, and racism become respectable once more.

To all of these terrible developments, Pope John II raised the moral issues of equity and diversity and held high a banner behind which

people of all races and faiths can unite to struggle for a more just, equitable nation.

It was significant that the Pope went out of his way to cite the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a minister of another faith, reminding us of his "providential role in contributing to the rightful human betterment of black Americans and therefore, to the improvement of American society itself."

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Those words recognize that the struggle for black equality is not just another special interest but a struggle to make America a better place for all of its citizens.

All in all, the Pope offered an object lesson to Americans on the importance of social justice, the evils of racism, and the need to recognize

and honor cultural pluralism and diversity.

His visit should spur a continuation of the Church's expanding role in the coalition for racial justice and economic justice.

It was preceded by last year's pastoral letter of the American bishops, which forcefully argued for economic policies that fight poverty and create opportunities for all.

Religious leadership and the churches were at the forefront of the civil rights struggles of the past and churches of all denominations will play an increasing role in today's movement for necessary social change.

After so many years of backward national policies and indifference to the needs of the poor, Americans are beginning to realize that the thrust to equality is a moral issue and moral imperative.

United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL THE "WHITENING" OF MICHAEL JACKSON

We have all noticed the "whitening" of Michael Jackson: the newly widened eyes and thinned lips, the surgically pointed nose, the cleft chin and, now, to complete this distorted picture, the lightened skin. Greg Tate, in a recent *Village Voice* article, calls Jackson "the boy-who-would-be-white... another Negro gone mad..."

Even by itself Michael Jackson's blatant self-denial would be disturbing. But, when seen in the context of recent studies, this self-negation seems merely a reflection of the negation of African American worth throughout our society.

Recently publicized studies

by Dr. Darlene Powell-Hopson and Dr. Sharon McNicholl show that pre-school children, both black and white, rejected the African American image in dolls as "bad" and inferior. But their studies also showed that this perception could be changed, even over a short period of time. The doctors suggest that the presence of black dolls, particularly in the homes of African American children, is very important. In their tests, as many as 70% of the African American children tested had only white dolls in their homes. With African American dolls finally on the market, why do African Ameri-

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