

"Magic" Of Hollywood Working In Black Johnson Multi-Plex

HOLLYWOOD - A phone call to the Magic Johnson Theaters doesn't simply yield the titles and times of pics playing in the brand new 12-plex. It also offers an odd, if not haunting, directive: Baseball caps worn backwards are not allowed.

"It's a gang thing," concedes manager Eric Martin, who runs the complex, which is located in Baldwin Hills, a largely black upper middle-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. "What we're trying to do is tell the community that we don't want that type of association here."

Not the typical problem facing a movie theater chain, but former L.A. Laker star Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Sony Theaters have taken an expensive jump shot and they're very much aware of the havoc that could be caused if Bloods and Crips chose to settle their disputes in the spanking clean 60,000-square foot complex.

Together, Sony and Johnson have ponied up between \$4 million-\$5 million in a 50-50 split to exploit a market that has had little attention: minority ticket-buyers in minority neighborhoods.

The first Magic Johnson Theaters opened June 30 and already Sony and Johnson are seeing green. The venue is outpacing theaters in upscale districts all over the country.

Black Stars Return For Orion Film

HOLLYWOOD - Leaving behind the debris of the aborted "Divine Rapture," Orion Films renews efforts to produce its first film since emerging from bankruptcy when lensing commences Saturday on a film bringing back top stars of early '70s blaxploitation pics.

The untitled film, shooting for 5 1/2 weeks in Gary, Ind., stars Fred Williamson ("Hammer"), Jim Brown ("Slaughter"), Pam Grier ("Foxy Brown"), Richard Roundtree ("Shaft"), Ron O'Neal ("Superfly") and Paul Winfield ("Gordon's War"), Isabel Sanford ("The Jeffersons") among others.

Isaac Hayes ("Theme From Shaft") is composing the score and talks are under way with Virgin Records to release the soundtrack.

Fred Williamson is producing the modestly budgeted theatrical film through Hammertime Prods., owned by Williamson and his wife, Linda. Larry Cohen ("Hell Up in Harlem") is helming from a script by Kin Rattan.

Story concerns a group of former gang members who reunite to take on a group of drug-dealing gangbangers and clean up the old neighborhood.

"The market has always been there for the black hero,"

"We've had attendance of about 150,000 in about five weeks," says Barrie Lawson Loeks, co-chairman with her husband, Jim, of the Sony Theater chain. "That puts it clearly in the top 10 locations of our circuit, which includes 160 locations across the country."

The notion is that African-American and Hispanic audiences are willing to pay for first-run pics as readily as anyone else.

Theater chains traditionally have eschewed first-run feature sites in locations like Baldwin Hills — not to mention much tougher 'hoods in the Bronx or Washington — largely because of the fear of violence but also because they always figured it wasn't worth the investment.

But the idea for the theaters was not cooked up in the backroom at Sony as another way to squeeze box office out of a saturated public.

Johnson came to Sony with the plan after an attempt to create a similar venture with AMC Theaters had fallen apart. His goals remain blissfully pure in the endeavor. Johnson calls himself "a firm believer" in the empowerment and employment of minorities.

"We've been going to movies that weren't in our neighborhoods for years," says the former NBA All-Star. "We still go and never complain that

there was not one in our neighborhood, or if there was it was one screen, rundown and outdated. We just want the same thing everyone else has."

Loeks, however, takes a more fiscally charged view, pointing to the "extraordinary" demographics in Baldwin Hills. "I have never seen that many people with so much money without a theater. There's a lot of income out there."

The Loekses, like Johnson, grew up in western Michigan, where the Loeks family has long operated cinemas.

The grand plan is to find those pockets of minority money. Another Magic Johnson Theater is about to break ground in Atlanta and talks are under way for Washington, D.C., New York, Detroit, Chicago and Boston.

At the Baldwin Hills site, Johnson is a regular customer. He'll show up several times a week, shaking hands, signing autographs and even seeing movies. He readily admits that his presence adds to the prestige of the theaters and to the box office.

More important, however, it also curbs violence.

"I think it helps, the fact that they know I come there a lot," he says of gang members and former street toughs, some of whom were hired to help build the structure.

Williamson told Daily Variety. "This is the old school and the new school together."

Eschewing the term "blaxploitation," Orion prexy Len White told Daily Variety: "I call them urban adventure movies."

According to White, the idea

was hatched along with Williamson while they were waiting to tee off on the seventh hole during an End Hunger charity golf tournament. Foreign rights have been sold through Big Bear Releasing; Orion holds North American rights.

"I shake their hands, sign hats, take pictures, talk to their wives and mothers. They know I have my money invested. I'm not just talking."

The gang issue, however, is still a worry. Martin says the worst problem he's faced so far was an unexpectedly crowded first day. But he adds that if someone walks up to the door with gang colors or a backward baseball cap, they're asked to take it off or leave. Additionally, a "courtesy code" is posted that explains quite clearly what is allowed.

"Clothing with inappropriate words, phrases, graphics or any display of gang colors and flashing signs is not permitted," it states. "Only police officers and authorized security officers are permitted to carry weapons on theater property."

Some patrons are put off by the blunt language.

"Why should our security be any better or worse than anyone else's just because we're a black theater?" says one customer of the complex. "We're not any different than theaters in Beverly Hills or Hollywood."

Johnson agrees, but says the

guidelines are simply about the one thing that gang members understand best: respect. "We're respecting them. Everyone just wants respect."

In that interest, the theaters are structured in a wide-open, seemingly unprotected manner. Ticket booths have no protective glass. Customers — even those without a ticket — are invited to roam the lobby, whether it's to watch six Sony bigscreen TV sets showing trailers or to play videogames or to buy pricey food at the refreshment stand.

But the protective force is certainly there. The MJT employs private security guards, who are not armed but are well-trained. The effect, Johnson says, puts people at ease.

Another unique aspect to the chain is the desire to use the venue for minority filmmakers to screen their product.

Ever since the opening, a low-budget indie pic called "Sankofa" — described by its advertising as an "epic drama about the African holocaust" — has garnered phenomenal receipts at the theater. In the first five weeks in its only L.A.

location, the pic has earned more than \$75,000.

Johnson and Sony also are hoping that some studios will take advantage of the facility for premieres and screenings. They're already negotiating with TriStar Pictures to secure the fall preem of "Devil in a Blue Dress," starring Denzel Washington.

In the meantime, Johnson and Sony are content drawing on a curious L.A. community that has turned out in droves so far — and keeping the gangs at arm distance.

"You'd be surprised," says Johnson. "We get people from the (San Fernando) Valley, from Bakersfield, from Redondo Beach, from all over. We get some whites, too. Everyone wants to see what it is. Then they get there. No fear. When everybody walks in, they just come in to have a good time."

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