

ENTERTAINMENT

Cliché-filled movie touching, but misses potential

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Sentinel-Voice

"Life", starring Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence, is another one of those films which had such potential, but it wasn't realized because the filmmakers took the easy way out with a formula story.

Although Murphy and Lawrence sometimes deliver good performances, they fail to offer truly compelling characters.

"Life" begins in a Harlem speakeasy in 1932. Ray Gibson (Eddie Murphy) fast talks his way into the nightclub. Ray is a con artist with big dreams who spies on easy marks for pickpocketing.

His mark is Claude Banks (Martin Lawrence), a newly employed bank teller who is taking his marriage-minded girlfriend out for a night on

the town. The destinies of Ray and Claude are forever linked by their chance meeting on this night.

Both men owe money to a local gangster, Spanky Johnson (Rick James). Both men are short on the cash. When Spanky threatens to torture and, possibly, kill them, Ray comes up with a plan to save their lives. Ray proposes that he and Claude make a run to Mississippi to pick up some moonshine and return it to Harlem. Spanky agrees and the men are on their way.

What should have been a routine bootlegging run becomes trumped-up charges for murder and a "life" sentence in the Mississippi State Prison. Despite their best efforts, Ray and Claude remain in the prison for sixty years.

My primary criticism of



MARTIN LAWRENCE

"life" is that the writers failed to create a work with depth, despite the considerable potential that the story had and the talents of the actors. No doubt, the writers intended "Life" to be a raucous comedy and thoughtful drama about friendship and the treatment of African-Americans in the Southern criminal justice system.



EDDIE MURPHY

Instead, the film meanders with weak, stereotypical representations of prison "life". For example, there's the inevitable confrontation between the imprisoned hero, Murphy's Ray Gibson, and a hulking, menacing prisoner named Goldmouth (Michael Tarro). As you might guess, the imprisoned hero, although beaten and bruised, emerges from the "David versus Goliath" battle with his dignity intact.

The very tired bit about gay/bisexual prisoners, characters Jangle Leg (Bernie Mac) and Biscuit (Miguel Nunez, Jr.), who hit on the

new prisoners, is flat because it's been done the same way countless times before.

Of course, no prison film set in the South would be complete without the tough, racist Southern "bossman" (Nick Cassavetes) and his lackey (Brent Jennings) who attempt to make life miserable for the inmates.

Any viewer who has seen a film with even a slightly comic take on Southern prisons knows that there will be lots of demeaning, threatening "barking" in the face of the new prisoners, but despite this, the prisoners, more or less, run the show.

Despite the use of almost every Hollywood cliché about Southern prison life, actors Murphy and Lawrence manage to occasionally rise above and breathe life into their characters.

Murphy and Lawrence have created the African-American version of "The Odd Couple" and "Grumpy Old Men" in a "Shawshank Redemption"-like situation. Sometimes, their bickering is quite humorous. For

example, Murphy threw some classic comedic darts when he fusses at Lawrence's character, even though Murphy's character chooses to be punished along with Lawrence's character.

Sometimes, the ways that Murphy and Lawrence showed their characters' individual struggles were compelling. A talent that I hadn't seen before in Martin Lawrence was evident in one poignant scene in which he sadly stares at young people.

Lawrence convincingly showed the devastation that would come from realizing that one's life was slipping by and there was seemingly nothing that one could do about it.

However, Murphy and Lawrence often use excessive profanity and the "n" word to get laughs.

Neither of these actors, especially the talented Murphy, needs to resort to these offensive tactics. "Life", like real life, has its moments. "Life", like real life, has matters that need work.

Warwick

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our top rap artists. Pete Escovedo and Celia Cruz are on here with me to add that Latin flavor. Plus, there's more traditional material. This project is actually the first part of a trilogy that we're planning. I asked various people in the music industry to select some of their favorite Dionne songs for this CD. I was really surprised at the selections that were made. We've already started on the second part of the trilogy.

SCOOP: YOUR SONS WORKED WITH YOU AS PRODUCERS ON THIS PROJECT. WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

WARWICK: It was just incredible. Nepotism is something that we try to practice every now and then. I'm a firm believer that nepotism is okay, but you have to be qualified to do the job. And, both of my sons are more than qualified to do the jobs of producers and songwriters.

SCOOP: WERE THEY NERVOUS INSTRUCTING MOM ON WHAT TO DO IN THE STUDIO?

WARWICK: No, not really. They've both been around my music for ever. As my producers I was there to follow their instructions. What was most gratifying for me was to stand on the other side of the glass window in the studio and suddenly your producer would say, 'Mommie let's do that line again.' And, I would just go, oh my that's my little baby giving me these instructions!

SCOOP: AREN'T YOU SINGING THE THEME SONG FOR THE SOAP OPERA 'THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL'?

WARWICK: Yes. We were commissioned by the Bell family to write a lyric for the show. I made a guest appearance on the show this past November. So now the tune is played in the closing credits of the show. It's called "The Love Theme."

SCOOP: WILL THERE BE MORE ACTING COMING YOUR WAY LATER THIS YEAR?

WARWICK: Hopefully so. I am preparing material for a Broadway show called 'Dionne Sings Dionne.' It will be a project that's somewhat autobiographical put into music

form. We're looking at possibly having it open by the late fall or coming into winter. I'm very excited about this project. Broadway is just such a very specialized area of the entertainment industry.

SCOOP: WHAT IS THE DIONNE WARWICK DESIGN GROUP ALL ABOUT?

WARWICK: The Dionne Warwick Design Group has existed for 17 years now. It's a group of interior designers, of which I happen to be one in the group.

There are also furniture manufacturers too. We are currently waiting for a contract to do the interior design for a hotel in the Poconos. We do design for both commercial businesses and residential homes...And people shouldn't think that interior designers are just for the rich. It's quite affordable for almost any budget. We are planning to release an interior design kit.

It will be sort of like a do-it-yourself design kit that will allow people to be their own interior designer. Hopefully, it will help dispel some of the fear of thinking they can't afford a designer. It will be almost fail proof.

SCOOP: AND TELL ME ABOUT YOUR OTHER BUSINESS, CARRITODD/WARWICK PRODUCTIONS.

WARWICK: That's a theatrical production company we put together. It primarily promotes entertainment type events. We're working with the U.S. Embassy in Brazil to do an international music festival...I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit about me whenever I was away from music.

THE SCOOP: YOU'VE ALSO SANG OPERA, I'M SURE SOME PEOPLE MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT THIS. IS DOING OPERA A BIG STRETCH FOR YOU?

WARWICK: I guess to a degree it is. But I think if you have a talent in the area of voice you should be able to approach it. All music is in accordance to how a singer approaches it.

When people think of opera, they think of so many of the wonderful operatic singers, one being my cousin Leontyne Price.

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