

ENTERTAINMENT

Film explores America's racial facets in black and white

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Special to Sentinel-Voice

James Toback, 1992 Academy Award-nominee for Best Original Screenplay (Bugsy), is perhaps best known as the director of Two Girls and a Guy and The Pick-Up Artist, a pair of off-beat comedies starring Robert Downey, Jr. as an inveterate womanizer. In Black and White, Mr. Toback has again tapped Mr. Downey to play it promiscuous, but bi. This is only one of Toback's provocative castings, as the director boldly plows new ground while creating an unsettling, cinematic urban anthem for The Hip-Hop Generation.

Filmed on location in and around New York City, the movie purports to capture an intriguing societal phenomenon where class, racial, and sexual boundaries are not merely being crossed, but erased. Thus, the camera follows the migratory pattern of some rebellious, privileged white kids from Manhattan's Upper East Side to Harlem where they hang with characters played by the likes of rappers Raekwon, Power, Method Man and Sticky

Fingahs.

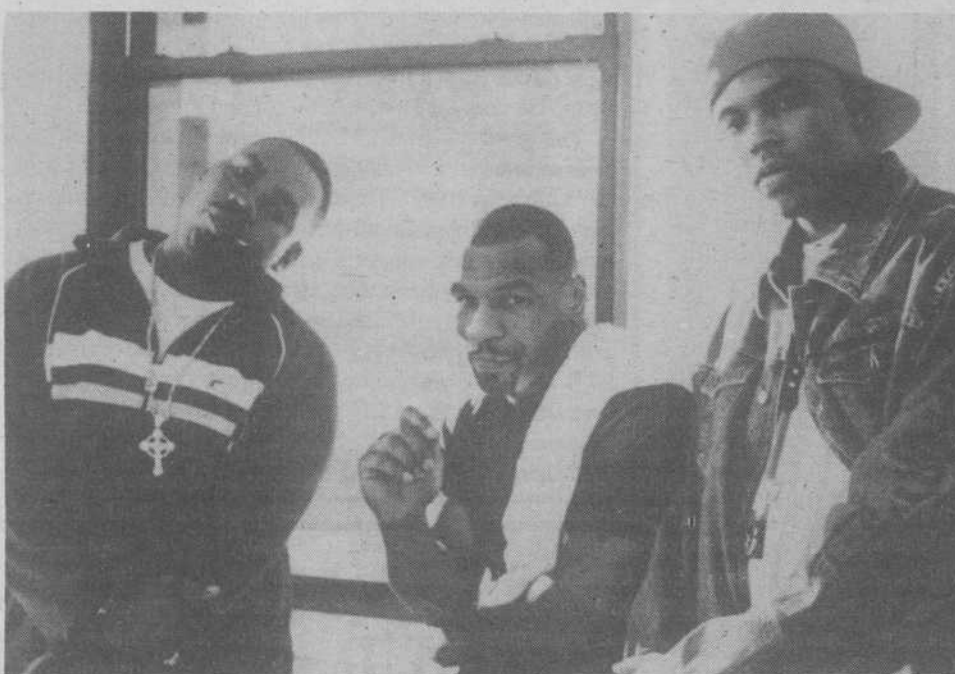
Uptown, the wannabe bohemians emulate not only the gangsta' modes of speech and dress, but their anti-social and illegal behaviors. Thus, the film suggests that under the spell of the rhapsodic rhythms, rudderless youth might be drawn deep into a world of indiscriminate sex, drugs, even murder.

I wonder. I know that every generation embraces some form of counter-cultural rebellion. But hey, whatever happened to cramming phone booths, swallowing goldfish and flagpole sitting?

The bleak teenage wasteland of Black and White is compelling because one can't help but be transfixed by its array of jarring juxtapositions such as entitlement versus deprivation, tolerance versus bigotry, hedonism versus repression. Again and again, sharp, undeniable contrasts. Confrontations.

Director Toback is to be applauded for squeezing the most out of a limitless cast on a limited budget.

Appearing, against type, in red-tinged dreadlocks and nose-ring is proper



Left to right — Raekwon, Mike Tyson and Power appear in James Toback's "Black and White" film produced by Screen Gems and Palm Pictures.

Princetonian Brooke Shields (of TV's Suddenly Susan). Typically funny-man Ben Stiller (There's Something About Mary & Keeping the Faith) is here as a crooked, hard-nosed cop. And Jared Leto (The Thin Red Line) plays a gay high school teacher.

Getting seasoned actors to stretch into unfamiliar roles is hard enough, but squeezing laudable performances out of

inexperienced celebrities is even harder. So, Toback is to be further commended for transforming boxer Mike Tyson, New York Knick Allan Houston, German supermodel Claudia Schiffer, singer Bijou Phillips, Trump's ex Marla Maples, and Quincy's daughter Kidada Jones into credible thespians.

The elliptical plot affords each member of the ensemble

cast a story to tell. Sam (Ms. Shields), married to bi-sexual Terry (Mr. Downey), is making a documentary about the fascination of white kids with contemporary African-American culture. Charlie (Ms. Phillips), the reckless, rich daughter of stuffy Muffy (Ms. Maples), is an adventurous teen involved with another woman, a white classmate and a black street hoodlum.

Dean (Mr. Houston) is a city college basketball star who explores troubling questions with his philosophy grad student girlfriend, Greta (Ms. Schiffer).

When Dean rationalizes throwing a game for money, the disappointed Greta makes a rationalization of her own. As the combustible story continues to unfold, each character faces some form of moral crisis, and each is ultimately implicated in what is an indictment of both the gangsta mentality and of a moral vacuum in the culture at large.

And these fully-developed characters rise and fall, unpredictably, not on the basis of the usual stereotypes, but each on the merits of his or her own behavior. By film's end we have learned the lesson simply stated early on, namely that, "White people are as different from each other as black people."

Hold onto your hats, because it's rough riding these meanest of city streets.

Excellent (3.5 stars)

Rated R for nudity, graphic sex, profanity, ethnic and homophobic slurs, and violence.

Whitney Houston's erratic behavior might signal problem

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Whitney Houston took the stage to a standing ovation at Arista Records' 25th anniversary tribute to her mentor Clive Davis in a heavily scrutinized six-song performance.

Rumors about Houston have swirled in the wake of drug abuse allegations, a much-discussed absence at last month's Academy Awards telecast and a disjointed magazine interview.

Houston tripped walking onstage Monday night and sometimes she spoke rather than sang the words to her hits while four backup singers, including her brother, Gary, sang them.

She stopped abruptly before the final dramatic notes of "I Will Always Love You" to signal for a drink of water.

Husband Bobby Brown walked on stage with the water.

She took a sip and kissed Brown, who patted her sweaty forehead before walking off.

The singer's publicist, Nancy Seltzer, said Tuesday that Houston always pauses at that point in the song and chats with the audience or gets a drink.

"She does everything for dramatic effect," Seltzer said.

Houston's interplay with the backup singers was an intentional variation on her customary delivery, and the slip was because there was water on the stage, Seltzer said.

"The girl went out there and she gave them a rip-roaring performance," Seltzer said.

Brown injected himself into another song, cavorting

wildly back and forth on stage before grabbing his wife's microphone and letting loose with a chorus.

"The record's not over yet, remember," Houston said cryptically at the end of her 20-minute performance.

Dressed in a shimmering long gown, Houston wore her hair in a flip.

"She looks fabulous," Dionne Warwick, a cousin of Houston's, said backstage.

Houston didn't appear

backstage to talk with reporters.

She joined some of the biggest names in Arista's history to perform for label founder Davis, who signed Houston when she was 19. The two-hour special will air May 15 on NBC.

"You ask anybody in the industry who is the great singer in the world today, it is she," Davis said backstage. "When you see her, you'll see an artist at the top of her

form."

Before she performed, Houston sat smiling in the audience with her arm resting on Brown during a medley by Barry Manilow. Seated next to Davis, Houston sang along as Manilow performed "I Write the Songs."

She and Brown later rose to their feet in the front row at the Shrine Auditorium to dance to "Supernatural" by Santana.

Backstage, Warwick denied a report in this week's People magazine that she and

(See Houston, Page 12)

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