

ENTERTAINMENT

Samuel Jackson perfect star to drive 'Shaft'

Kam Williams

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Oscar-nominee Samuel L. Jackson (for Pulp Fiction) is at the top of his game when erupting as that crazed, borderline personality who is almost out of his mind. He's given such inspired performances in movies like Jackie Brown and Jungle Fever that I'm not even sure you can call it acting.

Over the years, this veteran of 73 films has expanded his repertoire, reining himself in to prove himself capable of handling any role. But, personally, I feel disappointed, almost cheated, when Mr. Jackson portrays restrained, low-key characters like Mace Windu of The Phantom Menace or Charles Morritz of The Red Violin. I find myself left waiting for an eruption that never comes.

Therefore, director John Singleton (Boyz n the Hood) is to be commended for tak-



(left to right) Ruben Santiago-Hernandez as Grovitch, Vanessa Williams as Carmen, Dan Hedaya as Roselli and Samuel L. Jackson as John Shaft in "Shaft."

ing the wraps off Jackson for Shaft, the highly-charged sequel to the biggest '70s-era blaxploitation hit. But Shaft 2000 should be considered a sequel in name only, as it lays a searing finger on the pulse of present-day New York City to make an almost too inflammatory exploration of

police corruption, class differences and racial divisions. For instance, just by employing an emotionally-tinged catch phrase such as, "It's Giuliani time!" the director triggers images of the raw political realities of a city divided by the issue of police brutality. Shaft, then, never

sells out to Hollywood, but remains so uncompromisingly edgy that I never stopped squirming in my seat.

This time around John Shaft (Mr. Jackson) is a renegade NYPD detective assigned to handle the racially-motivated murder of a black man outside a bar by a spoiled,

rich kid named Walter (Christian Bale).

Frustrated by a corrupt system, which allows the rich to escape justice, Shaft (a la Dirty Harry) gets taken off the case for trying to take the law into his own hands.

Shaft, of course, continues to pursue his man, anyway, with the help of female cop Carmen (Vanessa Williams) and reluctant buddy, Rasaan (Busta Rhymes).

Ms. Williams, once Miss America for a day, has unfortunately aged horribly. Just look what they did to her chest. There's a quick shot down her blouse, here, which reveals a plastic surgery nightmare.

The scene is almost as memorable as Sharon Stone's sans panties, but for the wrong reason. (Wish me luck avoiding Vanessa.)

An enveloping subplot involves a local Dominican drug lord named Peoples

Hernandez (Jeffrey Wright). Peoples is a power broker in the slums who seeks to align himself with Walter as an entre' to polite society. But this production rarely ventures downtown, sticking to the mean streets of ethnic enclaves.

Magnificently cast, the dangerous triangle of Shaft, Peoples and Walter find themselves equally matched in power and intensity. The action is brutal, fast-paced and unrelenting. With fitting cameos by original Shaft Richard Roundtree and original director Gordon Parks. Also appearances by Toni Collette as a key witness and football great Lawrence Taylor as a jealous boyfriend. But this generation's Shaft is too busy kicking butt to bother with the flirts in skirts.

Excellent (3.5 stars) Rated R for very graphic, gratuitous violence, hard-core profanity and sexual situations.

Play about Duke Ellington coming to television

NEW YORK (AP)—The musical "Play On," based on Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" and fortified with 20 songs by Duke Ellington, ran on Broadway in 1997 and has since been touring the country.

When it was staged at the Pasadena Playhouse in California last fall, it was filmed for TV. That performance will be shown Wednesday from 9 to 11 p.m. Eastern, as a "Great Performances" presentation of Thirteen/WNET. Ellington's granddaughter, Mercedes Ellington, choreographed "Play On," which is set in Harlem in the 1940s. The idea of adapting "Twelfth Night", and using Ellington songs that fit the story belonged to Sheldon Epps, artistic director of the Pasadena Playhouse.

"Sheldon thought he'd bring these two great men together," Mercedes says. "He didn't know they'd already met."

Ellington, who died in 1974, had immersed himself in Shakespeare, and composed "Such Sweet Thunder," music for the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Canada. Mercedes gave Epps the recording. In "Play On," a young woman named Vy arrives in New York from a small town to meet her Uncle Jester in Harlem. She hopes to show some of the songs she has written to Duke Ellington.

Women don't write songs, Jester tells her. He dresses her as a man, calls her Vy-Man, and introduces her to Ellington. Ellington, meanwhile, is pining for a glamorous jazz singer named Lady Liv, and sends Vy-Man to her as a go-between. Lady Liv has an uptight assistant called the Rev and a comic dresser named Miss Mary.

Mercedes Ellington had plenty of scope for creating dances, and the camera work for TV captures them to fine advantage. When Vy arrives at Grand Central Station, she sings "Drop Me Off in Harlem." That leads into "Take the A Train," with Vy in the center of the dancing ensemble. The opening is so vigorous that the dancers get short of breath, and the leading actors backstage are miked to join in on singing "A Train."

"I did a lot of modern stuff for the dancers in the station," Mercedes says. "Then it explodes into color and

swing when they get to Harlem."

Other than Raum Ruffin as Duke Ellington, the eight principals also dance. Mercedes has changed the choreography for each new cast in each city, taking advantage of individual strengths, the way her grandfather would change musical arrangements when new musicians joined his band.

Natalie Venetia Belcon, who plays Vy in the televised performance, has the most dance training of anyone who has played the part, Mercedes says, so her character dances more than in previous versions. Nikki Crawford and Richard Allen, hired for their rich voices as Lady Liv and the Rev, also do a lot of dancing.

Mercedes' mentor, choreographer Donald Saddler, told her to be true to the period of the show. She had danced his choreography in the revival of the 1920s "No, No, Nanette" on Broadway,

and, "He taught me to have respect and not make fun of people, to be genuine and to start from scratch."

In "Play On," she used tap, soft-shoe and jitterbug but no modern jazz dancing. She watched 1940s films with scenes of people doing the dances of the day. "The show's dancers are trained. I want them to look like people who did not have that training. "The music is basically

swing," Mercedes says. "The dance for 'I'm Beginning To See the Light' is jitterbug. People who are old enough can look at it and say, 'I used to do that.'"

Mercedes is the oldest child of Mercer Ellington, Duke Ellington's only child, who died in 1996. Mercer was a classmate of Luther Henderson's at Juilliard, where they both studied music. Henderson arranged the

music for "Play On."

A graduate of Juilliard, too, Mercedes studied dance, and her first job was as a dancer in "West Side Story" in Australia. As choreographer For "Play On," she eagerly awaited each day's rehearsals with the dancers.

"To see them make the transition from the '90s to the '40s was a great feeling," she says. "It's like it wasn't a job."

B.B. King plays 200 dates yearly

NEW YORK (AP)—At 74, B.B. King still plays 200 dates a year, but that's not all he's doing to keep the blues alive. The B.B. King Blues Club & Grill opened Tuesday in New York's Times Square.

King plans to play the opening week. He will be followed by the likes of Koko Taylor, Chaka Khan, Robert Green and Pinetop Perkins. The owners of the Blue Note, a New York blues and jazz spot, will run the club. "I'm a terrible businessman," King said. "Awful. But when you find people you trust, you'll be OK. These are good people."

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