

# Eddie Murphy Breaks Into The Bigger Time

BY BILL BRAUNSTEIN

America's fastest rising young comedian is just a few minutes away from having the living bejeezus kicked out of him. Quietly tucked away in a claustrophobic dressing room on a downtown Los Angeles parking lot taken over by the crew of Paramount Pictures' *48 HRS* is funnyman Eddie Murphy. Murphy, whose only previous screen appearances are of the television variety as the only certifiable star of the third incarnation of *Saturday Night Live*, will soon be engaged in cinematic fisticuffs.

The scene is to be filmed in a sleazy alleyway bedecked with glitzy neon to make it resemble a San Francisco street. "We got right up to the start of the fight last night," says a subdued Murphy, dressed in his character's Armani glen plaid suit, waiting for darkness to fall. "Got right up to the point where I throw the first punch. But by then the sun was coming up."

Murphy leans back on the narrow couch and smiles. Behind him, hanging in a tiny closet is a pair of worn denim jeans and a denim overcoat that he would undoubtedly feel more comfortable in. After all, Eddie Murphy is 21 years old. The three months he's been working on the movie represent the longest period of time he's ever been away from home.

Yet, here is Eddie Murphy, starring in a big budget motion picture, opposite a major star, Nick Nolte, being directed by Hollywood veteran Walter Hill. Talk about being on a roll. His first comedy album, *Eddie Murphy*, had been released earlier in the week. He was scheduled to do Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, the next day (his third appearance on the late night kingpin's show). He had bought a black Mercedes, his fourth car, the previous week. And this September he started his third season on the show that began it all for him, a show he also helped to revive, *Saturday Night Live*.

After a year as a second string "feature" player during SNL's ill-fated 1980-81 season, Murphy helped take the show to new heights with brilliant and crazily original characterizations when he was finally allowed to turn it all loose last season. Armed with a brash cockiness and a veritable laundry list of impersonations and odd characters, he began his comedy march off the beaten laugh track with parodies of Buckwheat, of Little Rascal fame; Velvet Jones, a jive talking huckster; Mr. Robinson, the ghetto's answer to the clean-as-white-bread Mr. Rogers; and film critic Raheem Abdul Muhammad, who defiantly asks why *Shaft* was never nominated for an Oscar.

Murphy's impersonations are equally on target, with the barbs leaving no figure untouched. Some people even say that his humor has a mean streak, that he can be mercilessly cruel. Take, for instance, a sketch he did last season portraying Muhammad Ali as a punch-drunk, disoriented old man. There was his soulful James Brown, dressed in curly red wig, singing *Annie's* "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow." His Little Richard Simmons is two parodies for the price of one. And then there was the infamous Larry the Lobster sketch, where a tuxedo-dressed Murphy invited viewers to vote whether he should kill the crustacean on live TV. (To his dismay, the lobster was allowed to live.)

"I don't do easy comedy," says Murphy. "I'll do anything that is not taboo to mess with. Like, I won't do jokes on religion or the shooting of the pope or Martin Luther King's death. That kind of thing. But people watch *Saturday Night Live* to see outrageous things. They want to see shocking stuff that they didn't know you could do on television. And that's the stuff they remember."

For the past three months, however, Murphy has had to be content to play only one character, that of Reggie Hammond, a convict sprung from jail for 48 hours to help a cop played by Nick Nolte find some convicts that have murdered a wave of policemen. During the scene that will be shot tonight, Murphy and Nolte, after spending the day together, are fed up with each other. Nolte decides to let Murphy know he means business by trying to wipe the street with him.

A knock on the dressing room door signals he's needed on the set. He walks out of the dressing room and down the seedy street, where hustlers, hookers and transvestites have come to watch the excitement. Off-duty policemen have been hired to patrol the area and an occasional backfire from

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