

Getting the Last Laugh

A funny new film shoots back at 'blaxploitation'

Robert Townsend recalls the time a British director of a sleazy "blaxploitation" movie coached him on how to be black. Townsend listened incredulously as the white filmmaker detailed how the actor, playing a pimp, should lunge out of a Cadillac and beat up a prostitute. The problem, as the director complained in pear-shaped tones, was that Townsend wasn't grabbing his crotch: "No, no, no, Robert! Hooooold it!" Insecure, and struggling as an actor, Townsend took hold.

Yes, he was ashamed. He still is. But it was an acting job, and it led to other acting jobs, and now he's used his experience to direct "Hollywood Shuffle," a funny satire about the way Hollywood stereotypes blacks. Townsend took a lot of risks to make the film—and the story behind "Hollywood Shuffle" is as good as the film itself: a long-shot combo of hustle and luck

in which a black actor with only minor credits makes a movie and sells it to Hollywood.

Townsend broke a number of important rules to make "Shuffle," the most important of which was the first to go: never use your own money. In 1983, fresh from supporting roles in two films, "A Soldier's Story" and "Streets of Fire," Townsend had a tidy sum in the bank. His friends advised him to do something sensible, such as buying a Porsche. But Townsend spent it making two short movie sendups with a black perspective: a short film-noir spoof, "Sam Ace," and a Siskel-and-Ebert parody with jive critics entitled "Sneakin' in the Movies." Now out of money, but dedicated to making a feature film, Townsend began to earn money from doing stand-up comedy and acting, and then spend it making other satirical bits. At the same time, he began

cobbling together a narrative framework that would tie all the pieces together: the story of a young black actor trying to make it in Hollywood.

Flat broke, and with several slightly related short films on hand, he broke an even bigger set of rules. Credit-card companies had taken notice of the promising young actor and were sending "preapproved" invitations to apply. He took them all, and soon had a credit line of more than \$40,000—enough to wrap up the film. He didn't have cash for his volunteer cast and crew, but he would fill their gas tanks—20 at a time—with his Visa. He charged raw film (\$5,000 worth in one visit), food, wardrobe and more; cash-only transactions were handled with credit-card cash advances. Now, ready for the final push, the race with his credit-card bill began.

Heading off the charge: Within a month, Townsend had a gala showing of his movie to several interested distributors. (The screening-room rental, of course, was charged.) And he settled on the Samuel Goldwyn Company, which had shown a deft hand with other offbeat films such as "Stranger Than Paradise." Goldwyn picked up the salaries of the cast and crew, who had gone without payment until the film could be sold. And more importantly, the distributor paid off all the incoming

