



RICKI ROSEN - PICTURE GROUP

**Credit where credit was due:** Actor-director Robert Townsend raced with his bill

bills—before they were overdue. In retrospect, Townsend says, "I was gambling my butt off."

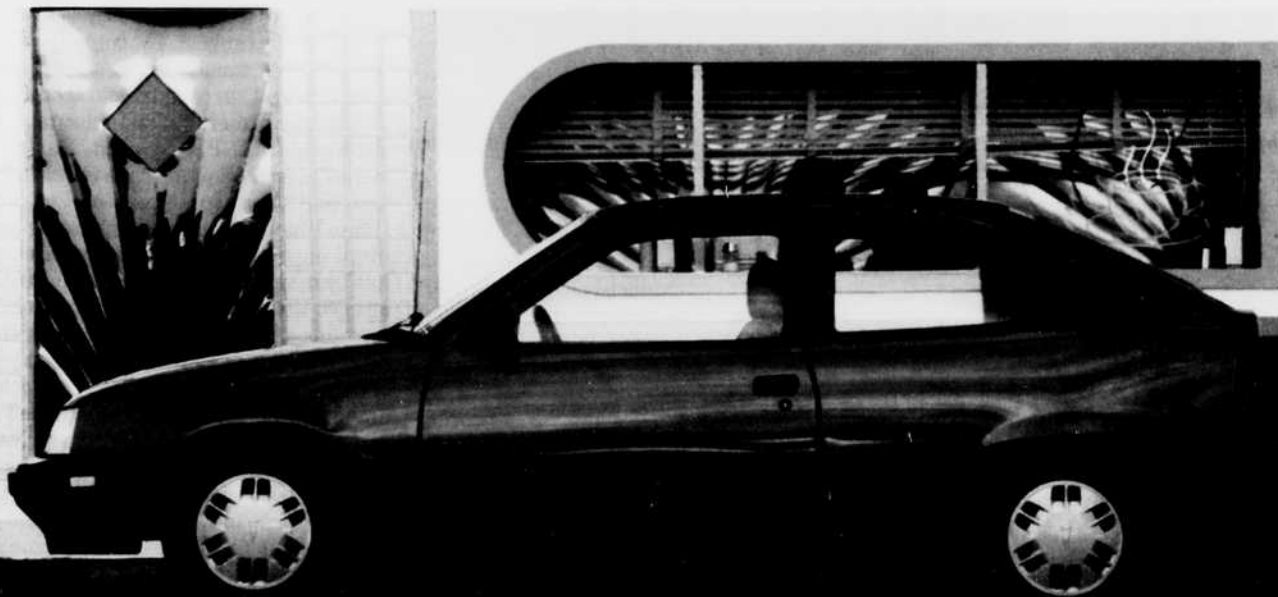
And, luckily, he won. "Hollywood Shuffle" portrays the experiences of Townsend, and other black actors and actresses, in a way that's both good-natured and unsettling. Bobby Taylor, played by Townsend, auditions for movie roles while working at a low-rent hot-dog stand, "Winky Dinky Dog." When Bobby gets cast as the lead in

an exploitation movie—showing blacks in the typical Hollywood range, from pimp to gang member to slave to pimp—he has to choose between dignity and poverty. The real pleasures of "Hollywood Shuffle" have to do with the tangential shorts that slam-dunk racial stereotypes. Bobby lunges out of the water with machine gun blaring as "Rambo"; as "Sam Ace," he brings a fashion-plate master criminal to his knees by withholding his curl-activator

hair spray. And a side-splitting commercial for "Black Acting School," without any visible irony, offers to train talented black performers for demeaning roles. The film's one drawback is a story line that's a little too pious—it's easy to preach about dignity when you can pick your parts. Townsend got ahead by swallowing his pride; Bobby Taylor refuses to demean himself and ends up doing commercials.

At 29, Townsend is a long way from his insecure days. Sitting in a 33rd-floor suite of a New York hotel where the concierge answers the telephone in French, he sports a pad-shouldered, bright yellow and black jacket in a big, fuzzy glen plaid; the slacks are baggy and the T shirt is black. On the dresser sits a fedora. He has retained the credit cards, though he rarely uses them. In fact, the bailout from Goldwyn actually improved his standing in his creditors' eyes. As proof, he reaches into an eel-skin billfold and, eyes gleaming dangerously, pulls out an American Express Platinum card. Dropping his voice into announcer's timbre, he reels off a future film trailer: "'Hollywood Shuffle' is a hit," he growls, but he still can't get money to make movies. He concludes ominously, "Robert Townsend is back—with a Platinum card." Coming soon to a theater near you.

JOHN SCHWARTZ



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