

No Stranger To The Business

It's too easy for actors to get slapped with labels, and Cuba Gooding Jr. — better known to moviegoers as that tough-but-sensitive-guy-from-the-'hood — should know. Few could forget Gooding's role in John Singleton's *Boyz 'N The Hood*, a heavy-duty social commentary about growing up in South-Central Los Angeles.

But Gooding, with his latest film *Judgment Night*, is trying to make audiences forget. He's not interested in being the spokesperson for films on racial injustice — he just wants to be an actor.

"Because I'm a black man, because of my birthright, I'm a black actor," says Gooding, 25. "The key should not be that I'm black, but that I'm an actor."

Gooding's part in this month's *Judgment Night* — a movie about four friends' harrowing evening in inner-city Chicago — is quite a departure from his role as Tre Styles in *Boyz*.

In that film, released in 1991, Tre struggles against the backdrop of poverty, strife and racial injustice that brought South Central to the nation's attention during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Somehow, Tre manages to escape the endless cycle of despair that traps so many of the characters who live there.

Now, in *Judgment Night*, Gooding is back in the 'hood, but he's not exactly playing one of the homeboys.

The movie, which also stars Emilio Estevez and Denis Leary, tells the story of four young men who set out for a boxing match and make a wrong turn into a bad neighborhood. There they witness a gang murder, and the killers — mistaking the men for friends of the victim — pursue the four across the city as they try to make their way home.

"It's sort of like *The Warriors* meets *Deliverance*," Gooding says.

"In the movie, I play a guy who was the star quarterback in high school, and he still lives in that time," says Gooding. "He's a big jock. I mean, it's like six or seven years later and he still wears his letterman jacket."

"He's just a guy, hanging out with his friends, not taking any responsibilities," he says.

Gooding admits *Judgment Night* is of "a completely different genre from issue films like *Boyz*," but says he wants to avoid being typecast.

"When I took on this role, I looked at it as another part," he says. "It's just another movie with four different characters thrown together in some hairy situa-



By Dwayne Fatherree, *The Vermilion*, U. of Southwestern Louisiana

Cuba Gooding Jr., star of *Boyz 'N The Hood*, knows Hollywood well by now — but still says naiveté led to his success.

tions and abnormal circumstances."

Born in South Bronx, N.Y., Gooding spent his teenage years in Southern California. His father sang with the early '70s R&B group The Main Ingredient, so Gooding became familiar with the entertainment world at an early age.

As a teenager he took up break-dancing, and performed onstage with Lionel Richie at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

But he got his first big break while attending a Hollywood high school, when a friend's mother saw him in a school play, liked what she saw and became his agent.

Gooding passed on college because of his interest in acting, instead building his career slowly on TV commercials and bit parts in shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *227* and *MacGyver*.

"In the business, it all comes down to enduring," Gooding says. "You have to be willing to lose your family, your friends, your house... hoping that you'll get a break."

After *Boyz*, Gooding threw himself into film, playing a boxer in 1991's *Gladiators*, a soldier in last year's *A Few Good Men* and co-starring in the HBO movie *Daybreak*. He is now shooting a film with Paul Hogan, tentatively named *Lightning Jack*, to be released in 1994.

Although Gooding hasn't played in any 'hood-genre films since *Boyz*, he has had an offer or two.

"After I did *Boyz*, I got one really stupid script," Gooding laughs. "It was really drivel. It was about a guy from the 'hood, and he dies. He comes back to life because he had something left to do or whatever... That's the kind of attitude that you find in the business."

But "the business" and the people behind it still have a massive impact on popular culture, Gooding says.

"Everybody is looking to do the right thing on paper, but the people in power control it all. If they show a famous actor wearing a certain kind of sunglasses in a movie, everyone will run out and buy a pair of those glasses. They dictate the way that our society is going to work."

"The only way to make it, to be able to control things, is to be one of the top 5 percent — no, the top five people — in your field," he says.

Because of this, Gooding has set his sights beyond acting. "An actor has a certain amount of input into a film," he says, "but I would like to get at the foundation of that input, in production and direction."

Even though he grew up as an insider of the entertainment world, Gooding credits his success to naiveté.

"I guess, like they say, ignorance is bliss," he says of his travails during the leaner years. "I have always been around the entertainment business. It didn't occur to me that I might not succeed in it."

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