

Carrots to bait the trap

By Gregory L. Gudger



YAPHET KOTTO

A classically simplistic rabbit trap operates thusly: a carrot is tied to a string on one end and to a stick on the other. The stick gingerly props up a cage under which the carrot sits. Once an unsuspecting victim picks up the carrot, the string is pulled, the prop disengages and the cage falls, trapping the rabbit who, incidentally, gets to eat the carrot.

Veteran Black actor Yaphet Kotto has feasted well on the "carrots" which entice his peers and, consequently, he is very familiar with the trap that Hollywood compels Black actors to fall victim to: playing in roles in which they "just happen to be there" like part of the set; the only roles offered to minority, non-comic actors. This stereotyped entrapment, however financially rewarding, robs Kotto of the creative freedom and public recognition needed to become a "star."

Speaking at a regional conference of the National Association of Black Journalists in Seattle, March 6, Kotto made it quite clear that he is grateful for the financial health he's garnered in motion pictures and television, but he laments, "In this lifetime, I'll never be able to play the kinds of roles I've always liked to play." He believes that neither he, nor many other non-comic minority actors, will be offered the lead role in a major motion picture or TV show and, subsequently, receive the support and publicity accorded to white stars. As a result, "I'm very sad about my film career," a frustrated Kotto said, adding, "In four or five years, I hope to get out of it."

In his view, the vast majority of Black actors and other minority actors will never reach star status as a la Newman, Redford, Streep or even Derek; not because they don't have either the talent or the assets, so to speak, but because minorities are considered by movie producers as "not bankable in Europe" and abroad - a major source of Hollywood's profits.

Kotto has spent many profitable years on the tube and the silver screen since migrating from his native New York more than two decades ago, and has coveted the distinction of "The First Black" as, for instance, a James Bond arch enemy ("Live and Let Die"), as a recognized Black character to kill a white American in a movie and get away with it ("The Liberation of L.B. Jones") and as a major character in a science fiction movie ("Alien"). He was also one of the first Blacks to appear on hit TV shows like "Gunsmoke."

In most of his many roles, he was "the guy who just happened to be there": a one dimensional character, going nowhere from nowhere, while providing a backdrop for white stars. "Those roles have been beaten to death and it has not changed a thing," said Kotto, reflecting the frustration of Black actors who have hung in, but have failed to reap the full and deserved benefits of their profession. "I want to play a character with real problems, human problems; where Dustin (Hoffman) doesn't want to do a script, I want them (producers, directors) to say 'Let's go out and get Yaphet Kotto, but I know that's not going to happen.'"

Throughout his career, Kotto has paid for his roles with a lot of hustling, wining and dining, and a lot of "dying" on screen and off. "For many years, they would not allow me to have a woman...because I am typically Afro-American looking," recounted the second generation African immigrant in explaining how his postential as a romantic lead has been all but killed. "One director told me, 'You are not going to kiss in this film.'"

On screen, he's been blown up, baked, shot and victim of other forms of demise. In many cases, he was the first to go, or was supposed to have been until he sought to have it changed. Black actors, in many instances, have to challenge scripts so that roles will have more time, more depth, more dignity and subsequently try to escape uni-dimensionalism. But he said, "I didn't come in to my craft to be a writer or I would have gone into writing. Without that intervention, however, Kotto's role in "Brubaker" would have remained just three pages long.

Simply to increase the number of Black and other minority screen-

writers may not bring the depth to Black and other minority characters either. They have their traps as well, according to Black screenwriter Cecil Brown. In an article in the January 1981 issue of "Mother Jones Magazine," Brown criticized producers for de-humanizing Black characters in his screen play for "Which Way is Up." Regarding the editing of the script, Brown noted, "I found it interesting that the kinds of changes made in my script all had to do with making Black characters into caricatures."

In his article, "Blues for Blacks in Hollywood," Brown points an accusing finger at the racism in the business, while Kotto only alludes to it. Citing the "plantation mentality" that pervades Hollywood, Brown lashes out at filmdom for depicting and casting Blacks as marginal and undimensional, as does Kotto, but he further vilifies Hollywood for making "Black pictures" with white heroes, as evidenced by "The Blues Brothers," "Brubaker," and "The Jerk."

Using what Brown calls the "Uncle Tom's Cabin Formula," white producers, writers and actors take up the "issue" of Black's plight only to make white consumers feel superior over Blacks by arousing their pity. He adds, "white writers create Black characters while Black writers cannot get jobs writing for either Black or white shows." To illustrate his point, Brown notes that only 65 members of the 5569-strong Writers Guild is Black, and of the 1540 of those writing for a weekly TV series, only four are Black. Even the television classic "Roots" had all white writers but one because, according to producer Stan Margulies, "...Black writers would have been too close to the material." Such was not the case with Jewish writers and "Holocaust," Brown concludes, because "Hollywood...is afraid to see Blacks for what they are."

Along the same racial lines, Donald Bogle, whose interpretive history of Blacks in films - "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks" -- stood as only the second such detailed chronology written as recently as 1973, implies throughout his work that Blacks are merely cast as reflections of white America's interpretation of the socio-political status of Blacks. For example, only in the 60s and early 70s during Black America's ostensible presence in white consciousness, did Blacks at least appear to escape the traps of marginality in any significant numbers. Even then, however, "When we compare the actors of the past with those of the present (1973) or when we contrast the movies of

yesteryear with those of today, I think all of us ask ourselves despairingly just how far American movies have progressed in the past half-century in recording the Black experience accurately or sensitively." He adds sadly, "In some ways, it does not look as if we have progressed at all."

Cecil Brown's update reinforces Bogle's point; Kotto's lament confirms it: "Blacks in the motion picture industry are back where they were 20 years ago."

Kotto, however, emphasizes the economic rather than the racial factors in defining Black filmdom's plight, although the relationship between the two is inextricable. Somewhere along the line, he explained, someone decided that Blacks and other minorities are not "bankable" abroad, unable to garner sizable box office receipts. Given the history of Black artists escaping the limitations of America's racism by fleeing to Europe and creative freedom, Kotto's perception seems misleading.

However, few films with Black leads have grossed huge sums outside of the United States according to Kotto, who estimates that "in the last 15 years, Black films have grossed about \$8 million" - an extremely modest sum compared to single film grosses of \$300-400 million that producers now look at as respectable. During the period of the "Black issue" films of the 60s and early 70s, however, those minimal grosses "helped Hollywood when it was in a slump" said Kotto, by attracting larger Black audiences to box offices; a trend of support that continues today.

Despite that support by Black consumers, "Diana Ross and Gloria Foster are not getting the awards... not appearing on the talk shows... not appearing in the magazines. That ought to tell you something is wrong," said Kotto. In his estimation, Blacks are caught in a vicious cycle in which only a few "super-niggers" are afforded the crumbs of opportunity from tables where the least talented whites feast.

"Mediocrity and talent makes achievement," he philosophizes "and we (Blacks) are not allowed to be mediocre." Kotto noted that Canada Lee brought dignity and depth to roles and was near appropriately recognized for his abilities. Bogle's book is replete with similarly eschewed Black genius.

Such works by Black writers -- Black reporters in Kotto's estimation -- hold one of the keys to Black actors receiving their due. Kotto challenged Black reporters "to make your columns ring and make them specific" to help Black actors out of the rabbit trap, get more good Black films produced, and get those "in the can" onto the screens of movie houses. Publicized queries for the talents of Pam Grier, Gloria Foster, Calvin Lockhart, Kyle Johnson among other Black stars, Kotto feels, can help Blacks reach the stardom (and bankability) previous few have experienced.

At the same time, unreleased films like Kotto's own "Crucible" and shows like "The Sophisticated Gents" can help Blacks achieve their potential in filmdoms.

The type of "networking" between Black Hollywood and the Black press Kotto sees as essential should be more productive than the relationship between the two has been in the past. According to Kotto, the demise of the Black issue films of the 60s and 70s was prematurely caused by cries of "Blacksploitation" by Black newspeople who failed to see these

films as the vanguard of a new genre. The image of Black portrayed in films was the issue, but when he produced a Black GP-rated film to meet the "image" expectations voiced by the Black press, his product was "booted" into oblivion, along with \$500,000 of his own money.

"We (Black actors) have done our share," Kotto told the JABJ, "You have got to support us," and not continue to victimize actors like Pam Grier who was criticized for displaying her physical attributes on screen, then "burned" after advocating for better roles for minorities, and finally, criticized again for her controversial role in "Fort Apache: The Bronx."

Given the nature of the trap, "you gotta eat," Kotto said, if Blacks should continue to ply their craft.

"But that does not mean we should continue accepting such stereotypes," Bogle said in 1973, and, according to Brown, Blacks and other minorities are becoming more organized and more vocal. In 1980, which Brown calls the "year of slave rebellion," Black and other minority actors breathed prophetic life into Bogle's words by protesting minority misrepresentation in "Fort Apache," and "Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen," as well as TV offerings like "Hanta Yo" and, most notably, "Beulahland." In 1981, Black actor Roger Mosely added his voice to Kotto's in lamenting the plight of Black Hollywood.

Whether or not these rebellious activities take root and spawn a golden age of minority stardom, or even bring equity to the ranks, depends on the "ringing" columns of the Black press (and presspeople) and, in Kotto's estimation, on the power of the Black movie-going public to deny filmdom the national dollars it needs to survive. "The only thing they pay attention to," he said, "are the economics."

Until then, the trap awaits; as the cage falls, one appetite is satisfied, while yet another consumes.

Asset or liability?

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Adams High School, where they spent two weeks in "PEP" training. "The purpose of this program was to teach you how to get a job," one young woman said. "It was interesting, but for me it was a waste of time because I already knew I wanted to work at Wacker. When I heard about the Wacker project, I decided that was where I wanted to work. I thought it would be interesting."

From Adams, trainees went to POIC. There they studied math and English, as well as proper work attitudes. "The math was good - it is useful to some extent on the job. I see no reason for learning all that English - we don't need it on the job. But I like to learn, so I enjoyed the school."

The Observer was not able to ob-

tain records on those who were accepted by the City and sent to the City, but POIC provided information on those trainees who successfully completed their course. Those who finished between July 1979 and March 1980 included 503 men and 299 women. Of these, 20 percent were under 22 years, 72 percent were between 22 and 44 years, and 8 percent 45 and over.

Sixty percent were white, 30 percent Black, 4 percent Oriental, 2 percent American Indian, 2 percent Hispanics, and 1 percent "other."

Of special interest is the educational status of these trainees: 31 percent had college training; 42 percent had high school or equivalent; 24 percent had 9th to 11th grade; and only 3 percent had 8th grade or below.

(Continued next week)

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From the Front Door

By Tom Boothe

From the Front Door, I have been asked by several of my readers over a long period of time, where do I get my inspiration to write the types of subjects, I have written about.

Inspiration No. 1: I have always been interested in a clean, honest, wholesome, respectful environment. I have always, as far back as I can remember, been interested in positive relationships with people. (Constructively productive; as opposed to disruptively destructive).

Inspiration No. 2: I am a Professional Philosopher, who started writing back in the late 50s and by the mid 60s, I had completed a Thesis on Human Relations Communications and published the essence of it in 1972 and again in 1978 under the title of "Final Wisdom." All of my publications and positions are now simply projections and reflections from my Thesis. This motivates me to compare real life situations, circumstances and attitudes of our community, to a result orientated practical guide to potentially improve relationships and attitudes between citizens and our community, toward building a more positive climate under which to live.

Inspiration No. 3: I see, hear and read a lot of reactions to situations and circumstances between citizens and groups of citizens related to opinions on issues. These are communicated and transmitted as complaints and criticism. Most of this reaction and interaction between citizens and groups of citizens never go beyond personalities and the "Blame Factor Syndrome." Because of this fact, I became motivated to share some of my opinions with the public in general. My position is to always take positive "Result Based" practical Action toward building a better community, as opposed to adopting or continuing with the negative "Blame Factor Syndrome" and "Reacting" to not having a better community in which to live and present to our children.

Inspiration No. 4: I live here in this community of Portland, Oregon and I welcome the responsibility to do my part to help keep it clean, honest, wholesome and respectful. Philosophically, when all or just the majority of our community citizens accept the personal responsibility to work at cleanliness, honesty, wholesomeness and total respect, I would have obtained my task in life, and will probably begin to philosophize about the effects of the rings around Saturn, or the Moons around Jupiter have on the sex life of Mars. Ask yourself, "Why can't I live in an environment that is clean, honest, wholesome and respectful?"

Your answer is within you and your children and maybe together we can share the same inspiration to build a clean, honest, wholesome respectful community...

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