

OPINION

Have You Seen 'Red Tails' Yet?

Film brings respect to black Americans

BY WILLIAM REED

Have you gone to see Red Tails yet? When the biopic about the heroic Tuskegee Airmen fighter pilots opened, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs set the tone for African Americans by tweeting: "It's important that we all go support Red Tails the movie and go see it this weekend!"

The movie Red Tails has become a black cause célèbre. The most expensive film ever made with a predominately African-American cast has renewed debates about whether "black films" can succeed at movie box offices. Blacks' esteem and posture in the marketplace seems at stake based on Red Tails' financial successes,



or lack thereof.

Red Tails was financed by legendary Star Wars director and producer George Lucas, with a little help from his friends Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry.

To promote the movie, Lucas makes the case that "the deck is stacked against" movies based on the black experience.

Lucas has been putting forth that Hollywood's lore is that black history is a downer and no one wants to see it on the big screen.

Much admiration should go to Lucas for the chutzpah he's shown in promoting Red Tails. Principal among Lucas' ploys was telling how difficult it was getting the film financed and made. Lucas says he began developing Red Tails around 1988. But, because of the prejudices of Hollywood, it took him 23-years before he went on his own and spent \$58 million to produce and \$35 million to distrib-

ute the film.

The crocodile-tear line Lucas, who has an estimated net-worth of \$3.2 billion, is using is that he spent \$100 million to bring the film to the world, and the world should beat a path to the theaters to see the film and help him recoup his investment.

With Red Tails and his "civil rights" storyline, Lucas gave black Americans the kind of "respect" we seek; and we intend to pay him back for the gesture.

The billion dollar question is how can we replicate the same kind of nationwide enthusiasm for films that blacks produce? Lucas' claim that Hollywood executives refused to fund films with an all-black cast has compelled millions of black Facebook users and tweeters to focus chatter and attention toward supporting the movie. Lucas' marketing genius made Red Tails a "must see" for black Americans.

Special screenings of Red Tails were hosted by prominent blacks

across the country. Receptions and screenings were held in Washington by President Obama, by Snoop Dogg in Los Angeles, and in a host of cities by Tuskegee Airmen chapters. Wells Fargo Bank gave Lucas "red carpet treatment" as Red Tails' "official financial institution sponsor."

Red Tails has redeeming features and draws on the exploits of the 332nd Fighter Group. It stars Cuba Gooding, Jr. (previously in The Tuskegee Airmen, an HBO movie made for television) and Terrence Howard.

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black aviators in the U.S. military. They were trained as a segregated unit at Tuskegee Institute and became one of World War II's most respected fighter squadrons. Despite continuing racism throughout their lives, many became affluent businessmen and community leaders.

Lucas' investment has as shot of paying off. Red Tails opened in 2,500 theaters, and raked in

\$19.1 million its opening weekend. Theaters in African-American markets did especially well in top grossing theaters in New York, Los Angeles and Atlanta. Males made up 51 percent of audiences, while 66 percent were over the age of 25.

As the film continues to have box office success among African-American audiences, it will not mean that Hollywood studios will suddenly see the light and increase their investments in black movements and films; if anything, it will do more for Lucas and his iconic stature than it will for black cinema.

Supporting black films, art and culture in general, should be a tenet of the African-American community. But, it surely would be a better use of our time and talents to give up looking to Hollywood for our affirmation, images and definition.

William Reed is president of the Business Exchange Network.

About That Education Reform Lending support to positive action now

BY SAMUEL D. HENRY, ED.D.

We were those cute seven year old black boys in the grainy photo when we met at Cub Scouts in the Baptist church basement, and I remember that both our beautiful black moms had put Vaseline on our hands so we wouldn't ash up.

We discovered that our fathers had been teen friends: proud young black men working a depression night job of mopping

floors in the Navy department. We grew up together in lower middle class black Washington D.C., but then, in high school I noticed a divide that led me to a lifelong passion for school reform.

In high school, I was designated 'gifted' in track 1; he was relegated to track 3; we were thrust into separate worlds.

My world had teachers who were inspiring with an open-

ended, creative and challenging curriculum that compelled critical thinking and participation in public life. His was populated by staid, rigid and dull teaching that neither cared about active learning, nor invited community.

Even at 16, I recognized this

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was an education of despair. It was wrong, it needed to change.

Fast forward 48-years: After participating in 11 different projects of school and higher education reform, most successful, last fall I went before the Oregon Legislature, nominated for a seat on the Oregon Education Investment Board.

The OEIB was created because the inequities of school and life promise that slammed my best friend a half century ago are still rampant in our home

state.

Too many kids, especially too many kids of color, are still relegated to the underclass of education, oftentimes treated as if we are a disease to be cured.

When you look at the data you see that Oregon has underserved

our students of color, our poor students, our homeless, and those youngsters who learned another language at home.

The No Child Left Behind law passed a decade ago was a political and social hoax. It talked about eliminating the 'achievement gap', but we soon realized that law was just a high stakes testing game where our kids could not win. It was a one-way test down a dead end alley.

In 2012, we still desperately need school reform, with some

honest looks at practices and people that are failing us, and better understanding of those who are successful.

So I can't imagine a better reason to sit on the OEIB, because this is not just the work of the governor, although I appreciate his vision and leadership, this is the work of our communities and our common legacy.

Fifty years ago our fathers and mothers raised us to have a sense of duty and connection to our black communities and to act on behalf of others in our nation and beyond.

Education reform in Oregon is stirring and I have joined others for positive action now. We do invite and need your continuing participation, your comments and support.

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