

Hollywood's Black Movers and Shakers

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Tracey Edmonds (Getty Images Entertainment)

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Blacks and film have been in the news quite a bit as of late. You've got the feud between Tyler Perry and Spike Lee, and the romantic comedy *Jumping the Broom* not only beating out mainstream romantic comedies but also coming in third behind monster hits *Thor* and *Fast Five* during opening weekend. One might wonder how a rom-com could become controversial, but *Jumping the Broom* did just that when CBS's *The Early Show* left the "movie that could" out of its summer preview of movies about weddings.

Thor courted its share of controversy, with the filmmakers and Idris Elba -- who was cast as Heimdall, a Norse god -- being pummeled by right-wing zealots for "cross-casting." And the complexity of being black and Muslim was examined, *finally*, in Sultan Sharrief's *Bilal's Stand* and Qasim Basir's *Mooz-lum*.

Can we say that Ava DuVernay is "winning," in our best Charlie Sheen voice, by using black film festivals to distribute her film *I Will*

Follow? And did we mention that black and brown films took over Sundance this year, showcasing gems like Rashaad Ernesto Green's *Gun Hill Road*, Dee Rees' *Pariah* and Alrick Brown's *Kinyarwanda*, which explores Christianity and Islam against the backdrop of 1994 Rwanda? Sundance 2011 had no fewer than 30 black filmmakers and films, prompting journalist Julie Walker to wonder aloud, "Is Sundance Becoming Blackdance?"

Can You Be Black and Green-Light a Film?

By hook or by crook, black films are getting made, mostly *outside* the Hollywood film industry. It is pretty much common knowledge that it is nearly impossible for anyone to green-light a film in Hollywood except for a handful of folks. Can you say "Brian Grazer"?

Being able to green-light a film means that one has the ability to concretely say, "This movie will be made." For all the folks thinking "Tyler Perry" right now, the fact remains that even he, with all of his power, isn't able to green-light a film at Lionsgate. Yes, he has a lot of control over his material, but ultimately it is an executive that gives the film the go-ahead.

If you're confused, you should be. Green-lighting a film is a complicated process. What's even more complicated is that there are no black folks in Hollywood who can green-light a film, except possibly Broderick Johnson, who is a partner in Alcon Entertainment. Johnson recently extended his production deal with Warner Bros.

You may not have heard of Johnson, but his films include the Academy Award-winning *The Blind Side* and, most recently, *Something Borrowed*. The moviegoing public often thinks that those who get the most mainstream press are the playmakers in Hollywood, when in fact, there are those, like Johnson, who go about the business of moving films forward with little to no fanfare outside of Hollywood.

Meet a Black Hollywood Heavy Hitter

Despite the uphill battle to get films made in Hollywood, black folks continue to face the challenge head on, choosing different paths and ultimately getting film projects to where they need to be so that they can make it to the big screen. We like to call the people who navigate the complicated and precarious Hollywood system to making-it-happen land "heavy hitters."

One such person is Tracey Edmonds, president and COO of Our Stories Films. The Stanford University graduate and Edmonds Entertainment founder is a 15-year veteran of film. Edmonds' 1997 film, *Soul Food*, brought the complexity of black families to the big screen. The success of that movie resulted in a television series of the same name for Showtime Networks. The series, which was on the air for five years, won several NAACP Image Awards.

Most recently, Edmonds' film *Jumping the Broom*, a romantic comedy about the blending of two families with different class backgrounds during a wedding weekend, has grossed more than \$25 million since it opened Mother's Day weekend. Edmonds, who grew up watching films and going to drive-ins with her close-knit family, believes that the biggest obstacle to getting films made in Hollywood is the shortage of outlets for "urban" (i.e., black) projects.

"When I started out in the industry, we had a plethora of distribution options for urban films and an assortment of studios to choose from," Edmonds says. "Now we're pretty much limited to only two distributors, so it's very, very difficult. It's extremely competitive because you have all the filmmakers of color in the industry competing for only a couple of slots a year." (Unfortunately, the same can be said of television. Original programs featuring urban casts are primarily shown on BET and TBS.)

Success Through Diversification -- and Networking

All too often, blacks filmmakers find themselves confined to making black films, making it is nearly impossible for them to produce mainstream projects that make it to the big screen. Edmonds adds, "It's a shame that Hollywood expects African-American producers to only be able to produce African-American content, whereas white producers can make urban and nonurban projects. I don't think as producers we should limit ourselves to

making urban projects. We enjoy watching mainstream films, so we should also be able to produce mainstream films."

One way that Edmonds tackles the challenge of getting a film made in Hollywood is by diversifying her projects and maintaining a strong professional network. Producer Will Packer of Atlanta-based Rainforest Films echoes this sentiment.

Like Edmonds, Packer has been able to get films made inside and outside the Hollywood film industry. Packer, who got his start with the cult film *Trois* (which grossed more than \$1 million), has made the hits *Stomp the Yard*, *This Christmas*, *Obsessed* and, most recently, *Takers*.

Packer -- who is currently working on *Think Like a Man*, an adaptation of Steve Harvey's mega-successful relationship book, *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* -- says there is no sure-fire way to get a film made in Hollywood. "You make your own rules," he says. "Even with the success I've had, still with each step of the way, it looks like this particular film may not be able to go, and I have to push it over the hump."

When Packer talks about pushing it over the hump, he means pulling out all the stops to help get it done -- including tapping into his sizable network. "You have to have relationships; you have to know how to sell it to talent, financiers and distributors; and you also have to keep the motor running as the producer."

Key: Learning the Business

Part of keeping the "motor running" is being thick-skinned -- and resilient enough to keep it moving, despite seemingly endless obstacles. Observes DeVon Franklin, vice president of production for Columbia Pictures, "I try to stay clear on what story I'm telling and why I'm telling it. Understanding from a business perspective which ideas are most commercial is also important, so I have to prioritize and make decisions about which projects to help push through the system." Franklin -- whose films include *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Hancock*, the remake of *The Karate Kid* and *Jumping the Broom* -- is currently working on a remake of the film classic *Sparkle*.

Decisive decision making is a skill that Edmonds and Packer also had to learn. Says Packer, "I had to learn the art of independent filmmaking, including raising money and getting distribution. I worked as a music supervisor before making a feature film, so I was constantly engaged in the process of learning and adapting, which helped me to figure out which film projects to make."

For Packer, this was strictly a learn-as-you-go proposition. An electrical-engineering major at Florida A&M University, he had no experience in entertainment or film. "At the beginning, it was all about just getting the film *Chocolate City* made. We had no expertise," he says.

"Then it was about making a film that could make money, which is what *Trois* represented for us," he continues. "Every film since then has been about honing our craft and telling a variety of stories that speak to our audiences and Hollywood." Packer is also taking what he has learned from film into television; he is co-owner of Bounce TV, a digital network launching this fall.

Learning the craft of filmmaking cannot be undervalued, says Franklin, who refers to himself as a constant student of film. "I want to become a better studio executive, a better storyteller, so there are a lot of books that I read in order to stay sharp and fresh," says the University of Southern California graduate.

The Rewards of Pleasing Your Audience

Having a passion for film, building and maintaining a strong network of inspired and influential people, telling compelling stories and even tackling the challenge of getting a film made all keep executives inspired.

But given all the obstacles, why do producers like Johnson, Debra Martin Chase (*Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*) and a handful of others even bother to try and make Hollywood films? Franklin, who is also an ordained preacher and recently published the self-help book *Produced by Faith: Enjoy Real Success Without Losing Your True Self*, says that nothing compares to going to the movies and hearing audiences, laugh, cry and respond to a film in which you have invested every ounce of your being.

"There's nothing better than when audiences really get [a film] the way that you intended for them to get it, and they connect to the story the way that you hope they would," he says. "That's why we do what we do."

Edmonds, who planned to become a doctor before her life changed drastically after meeting and falling in love with Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, now her ex-husband, echoes that sentiment. "As a child, I loved films, but coming from a working-class family, it was expected that I would go to college and become a doctor or lawyer.

"I was on that path until God and fate stepped in and put me on the course that I've been on for many years now," she adds. "I love making films and giving audiences quality programming that they deserve. It's truly a blessing."

These heavy hitters have been at bat a long time, paving the way for others to follow. This leaves us wondering: Who's up next?

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