

HOLLYWOOD

BLACKOUT

By Brent Staples

**When blacks
stop joking**

**do whites
stop watching?**

DO BLACK FACES PLAY WELL IN Peoria? Will white audiences pay to see black actors who don't sing, dance or tell jokes? According to Robert Harris, president of Universal Television, the answer is flat out no. In an interview published in the October 13 *TV Guide*, Harris repeated the old axiom: a Nielsen is a Nielsen is a Nielsen.

"Aside from comedy shows, there has never been a long-running hit series with an all-black cast or a single black lead," Harris said. And the law, according to the Nielsens, is that if viewers don't watch it, it doesn't get on.

Answers to the same questions are awaited in Hollywood, particularly since this month's release of John Sayles' *The Brother from Another Planet* and Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story*—two major motion pictures with largely black casts.

The \$350,000 that went into making Sayles' comedy about a black extraterrestrial who comes to Harlem came in from the producer's MacArthur award. Norman Jewison, who went the traditional financing route, found Hollywood hostile to his project.

A Soldier's Story seemed a solid pack-
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Louis Gossett Jr. as he
appeared in *AN OFFICER
AND A GENTLEMAN*.
Richard Pryor with Jackie
Gleason in *THE TOY*.

