

Blacklight



A FESTIVAL OF BLACK INDEPENDENT CINEMA

By Salim Muwakkil

FLOYD WEBB COULD BARELY keep his eyes open as he told *In These Times* of his satisfaction with a job well done. He had just shepherded one of this country's most comprehensive exhibitions of black cinema and had earned both his pride and his exhaustion.

Officially titled "Blacklight: A Festival of Black Independent Cinema," the exhibition in Chicago ran from July 27 to August 10 and featured 40-plus films and video pieces from five continents. This was the festival's third year and, according to the 31-year-old Webb, a Chicago-based filmmaker who originated and directs the annual event, it was by far the most successful.

Nearly 10,000 people came out during the festival's two-week run to view films from the U.S., Papua, New Guinea, Jamaica, Peru, Brazil, Nigeria, Ghana, Upper Volta, Mauritania and Britain. A day-long screening of videos by U.S. blacks and a sampling of award-winning commercials produced by black advertising agencies; a soap opera pilot scripted by the always outrageous Ishmael Reed, a

film extolling the goals and accomplishments of the late Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement in Grenada and a film by the celebrated Cuban director Sergio Giral (who was also in attendance).

An additional festival highlight was a screening of Gordon Parks' *Solomon Northrop's Odyssey*, a powerful, stylishly rendered slave narrative slated for an upcoming showing on public television's *American Playhouse*. Parks (a modern-day Renaissance man who earns his living as a photographer, journalist, novelist, composer and poet as well as a film director) was also on hand. He answered audience questions following the screening and appeared at a packed reception in his honor.

Through all of this activity hovered Webb, overseeing and troubleshooting. "The whole idea for this event was born in my head, so I guess I feel kind of parental about it," he explained, seated in an office he shares with the editor of a black-oriented Chicago publication.

"It's a good thing that I have this feeling of responsibility about it because I've had to handle just about everything. From contacting the hard-to-find distributors and haggling over costs (many Third World distributors think that all Americans are rich, regardless of color), to arranging transportation and lodging for guests, to securing funding for the

festival's operation, to personally supervising the printing of the schedule brochures, to arranging venues...man, I tell you, it's been exhausting and in some senses even frustrating. But this festival and what it stands for is so crucial, in my opinion, that it just has to be kept alive."

Webb conceived the idea for an independent black film festival in 1981 when he decided to move beyond his disgust with the movie industry's stock depictions of blacks and take some concerted, organized action to provide alternatives to those depictions.

"For years we complained about the lack of complex black images coming from the Hollywood illusion factory," Webb said. "But after a while I simply began to understand that we had to do more than just complain. Why should we expect white Americans to present black Americans from any other perspective than their own?"

"Steven Spielberg is only doing what I want to do," he continued. "He's writing dialog and creating images from his own frame of reference, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Now we can either boycott the movie industry, as the NAACP periodically suggests, or we can begin to concentrate our energy and resources to produce filmic images of ourselves as we know ourselves to be. I decided that the best way to counter the negative-to-nil presence of blacks in Hollywood films would be to develop an independent vehicle that could present black cinema on its own terms."

Fired up by his vision, Webb organized the Black Independent Cinema Festival, a

four-night affair that ran in Chicago during the summer of 1981.

Quality black films.

"It demonstrated to me that a significant audience exists for serious, quality black films. We had a full house on each night of the festival. And I was further convinced of black cinema's commercial viability by a black film exhibition I helped organize in London in 1982. The people came out in crowds so unexpectedly large we couldn't begin to accommodate them all."

Later that year, with the assistance of Chicago filmmakers Sergio Mims and Terry White, Webb originated the Blacklight festival. "Our intention was both to provide alternatives to the images of blacks being projected by the mainstream media and to present a showcase for the growing number of black filmmakers from around the world."

Through his frequent trips to Europe, South America and Africa, Webb has cultivated a global network of contacts that has given Blacklight access to films from widely differing cultural and geographical contexts.

The first Blacklight festival, which was given invaluable aid by the Chicago Filmmakers and the Film Center of the Art Institute of Chicago, was an eight-day affair featuring 15 films. It showcased three films by black British filmmakers that were U.S. premieres, one classic—*The Other Side of the River*—by Seex Ngaydo Ba, a Senegalese filmmaker who is a disciple of Ousman Sembene, and Woody King's excellent and controversial film on Malcolm X, *Death of a Prophet*.

During its second year Blacklight became affiliated with the Chicago-based Forum for the Evolution of the Progressive Arts (FEPA), an aggressive arts organization that patterns itself after the

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