

November 5, 2004

David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train:

“David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train from Hiphopbattle.com. With Jaime Foxx on the verge of being nominated and possibly wining a Oscar for his performance in Ray and Halle and Denzil wining their Oscars two years ago...My question have these things helped black films get accepted or become more profitable in overseas markets?”

Major Hollywood Player:

“The state of black films overseas is lousy?”

That short--but poetic and highly pessimistic answer--was made by someone high up on the entertainment industry food chain that should no better, but obviously didn't. The person who made that quote had little thought about the ripple effects on other highly impressionable people listening to him. The person who made that statement unfortunately is only expressing the sentiment and mentality that many top, middle and lower executives in Hollywood. Who is this indifferent Hollywood heavyweight who would dare say something so disheartening to black cinema? The answer to my question above was given by none other than Michael Burns, Vice-Chairman, Lions Gate Entertainment. Yes, the same Lions Gate that put out Monster's Ball and all the other great urban cinematic masterpieces like, The Wash, State Property and The Cookout. It's also the same Lions Gate that releases 700 DVDs and videos per year.

When I asked that question to Michael he was on an American Film Market finance conference panel on the future of feature film financing. The conference took place in a splendid and large exhibition room at the beach front Fairmont Miramar Hotel on Wilshire in Santa Monica. Not the Santa Monica Loews, which was down the block where the November 2004 AFM was jumping off. No this conference was held early on a Friday morning. November 5th 2004 to be exact.

And if you did not have a press pass or an AFM attendee badge you had to break off \$85 bucks just to sit down and have a croissant and coffee. But for many a conference like this would be worth it. There were at least two hundred producers, bankers, film lenders, distributors and investors who wanted to hear from some of the best and brightest assembled by the conference's host Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, LLP and The Independent Film & Television Alliance.

The rest of the Industry folks sitting comfortably on stage with Michael Burns were Brad Krevoy, CEO, Motion Picture Corporation of America; Kathy Morgan, President, Kathy Morgan International and John Schmidt, Co-Founder, President & COO, ContentFilm. All of these people are in high profile positions and have decades upon decades of combined knowledge and wisdom in Hollywood.

I honestly thought asking such a broad question like, “With Jaime Foxx on the verge of being nominated and possibly winning a Oscar for his performance in Ray and Halle and Denzil winning their Oscars two years ago...My question have these things helped black films get accepted or become more profitable in overseas markets?”, would allow the panelists to say something inspiring or even politically correct. But what I was thinking was so damn far off it was unbelievable.

It just so happened that I was the last person to ask a question to the panel. There was a noticeable pregnant pause as my question echoed in the large room. Nobody on the panel looked eager to touch my “tar baby” of question. But Michael was the first to speak up and he acted like he was telling it like it is and not beating around the bush. He didn’t black films were viable or going to be more profitable with more blacks winning Oscars.

I quickly asked a follow-up question that if he truly thinks black films generally perform poorly in foreign markets, then why is Lions Gate pushing *The Cookout* at this year’s AFM. Michael simply responded that he had low expectations for *The Cookout* overseas and at best hoped to get some cable sales in foreign markets. I’m sure Michael never told Queen Latifah that she had such little value overseas. And I’m sure he never told Tyler Perry when he green-lit his *Diary of A Mad Woman* that his film would have know value overseas.

The rest of the panelists had no other words of encouragement. Kathy Morgan tried to say it was not about race—it was about certain types or genres of films to translate better than others overseas. Brad tried to help her by saying that many American comedies that are hits in the states regularly flop in foreign markets. John had to reluctantly agree with Brad, Kathy and Michael. John’s company was responsible for DMX’s, *Never Die Alone*. But it failed over here before it ever had a chance to go fail overseas. In fact, DMX had a string of three consistent films who’s opening box office was \$15 to \$20 million. That is until Content made *Never Die Alone*. The film grossed \$5,645 Million and only \$264,324 was made in overseas box offices. For a DMX film that was extremely bad.

But what made my whole question and answer session awkward was the growing perception in the room that whatever they—they being the panelists—said about the state of black films was absolutely right and uncontestable. I will admit that for the entire seminar the panelists gave great Industry advice and insights on the AFM and the state of making films today. For example, Kathy had an excellent example of how a successful film concept is like a child that has good DNA, such as Brad Pitt, Cameron Diaz and Steven Spielberg as star attachments and having good parents, such as a bank for financing and a studio for marketing and distribution.

Really, if these are top experts in Hollywood; why do they know everything about developing films, financing films, making films, distributing films, marketing films, etc,. But all you have to do to make these so-called big time Hollywood experts look confused, uncomfortable and speechless is ask them what to do with black films. Just asking the question reduces their IQ thirty or fifty points.

It does not take a genius in film distribution to understand if you do nothing to promote a film or create a bad ad campaign for a film, then that film will do poorly overseas. It does not matter if the film's stars are black, white or purple. I don't know how many of these Industry film finance panels I can keep going to before I hear some folks with some sense finally get it. But sadly and far too often the state of black films overseas is in the hands of Industry are entrenched in their own misguided or shallow beliefs. Kathy Morgan on the panel the film business is "nothing like any business on the planet. Kathy was absolutely right.

Hollywood is the only place in the universe where one can fail at a job that they were absolutely certain was never going to succeed and then blame their failure on actions, people or forces that had absolutely nothing to do with their job.

By

David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train