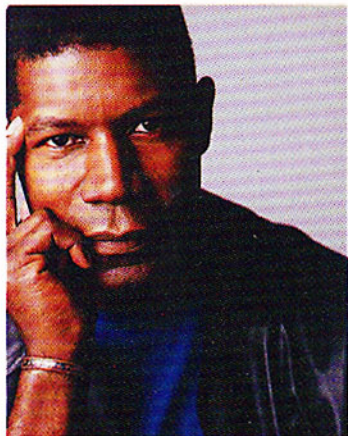
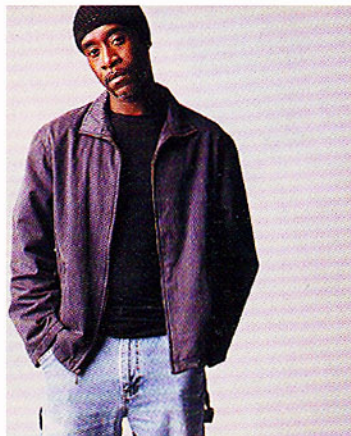
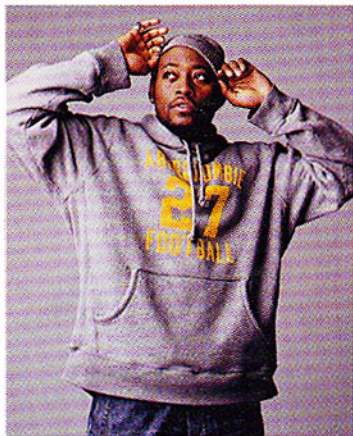
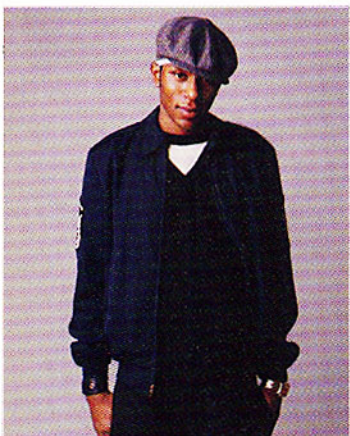


MEN OF THE MOMENT

Let your gaze move from sleepy eyes to broad shoulders, from wide smile to wicked grin. These talented fellas specialize in make-believe. Like a good lover, they can convince us that anything is possible. Want to feel a thrill? Have a laugh? Fall in love? Just dim the lights, and let these breathtaking men take *yours* away.

By Jeannine Amber
Photographs by Kwaku Alston

IN THE COMPANY OF MEN



Among the rappers who've made the leap from the recording studio to the silver screen, **MOS DEF** is a shining star. Born Dante Smith, he played in *The Cosby Mysteries* almost a decade ago and has since appeared in an Oscar-winning movie (*Monster's Ball*) and a Pulitzer Prize-winning play (*Topdog/Underdog*). This year he stars with Edward Norton in *The Italian Job*. But even with all this going on, Mos Def, 29, has decided he doesn't do press.

J.A.: *I really think you should talk with me.*

M.D.: An army general once said that the press are spies and should be treated as such.

J.A.: *I'm not a spy. I work for ESSENCE.*

M.D.: I love ESSENCE. I'm honored to be in ESSENCE.

J.A.: *Great. Then let's talk about your new movie.*

M.D. [writes on a notepad]: My work has something that it's trying to say and it's rude for me 2 interrupt and get in its way. Black people stay tuned for the Boogiemanshow and find out some things that you might like 2 know.

J.A.: *What am I supposed to do with this?*

M.D.: Print it.

Don Cheadle [who's sitting nearby]: Keep the original. You can always sell it on e-Bay.

OMAR EPPS settles into a leather sofa in a West Los Angeles photo studio and smiles politely. He's got almond eyes that are so tender you want to cry just looking at him.

Epps, who graduated from the prestigious Manhattan School of the Arts and entered show business more than a decade ago opposite Tupac Shakur in *Juice*, has had hits (*The Wood*, *Love & Basketball*) and misses (*The Mod Squad*, *In Too Deep*). Some actors would find this career sizzle and fizzle a little disconcerting, but Epps, 29, is philosophical. "Spirituality and humanness, at the end of the day, that's what it's all about," he says.

Well, sort of. Epps also has a keen appreciation for the bottom line. "In this business, there's only one color—green," he says. "When I can look into my bank account and see \$100 million, that's when I can look back and say, 'I've made it.'"

This single father of a 3-year-old girl stars with Meg Ryan in the boxing saga *Against the Ropes*, which opens this month. "This is going to be a successful film—bottom line," he says. "It had that energy on the set. It's this mystical thing. You know when it's real."

DON CHEADLE laughs a little if you ask him how he feels now that he has made it. "I never think I've made it," he says. "Every time you finish a job, you're unemployed."

Still, Cheadle, 38, has made very few missteps. In 1995 he won critics' notice opposite Denzel Washington in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Since then he has appeared in a string of hits, including *Ocean's Eleven*, *Boogie Nights* and *Traffic*.

But Cheadle is quick to add that Hollywood is a difficult place for African-American actors looking to stretch. "I've been very blessed to work with director Steven Soderbergh three times," he says. "But I've played a cop, a gangster and a thief. Was that stereotyping? I don't know. I just know I've done more diverse things on television and in theater than in film."

Despite the obstacles, this year may be Cheadle's best. He's set to star opposite Kevin Spacey in *The United States of Leland* and with Vince Vaughn in the crime thriller *The Other Side of Simple*. He will also make his directorial debut with *Tishomingo Blues*, in which he has the starring role. "I'm a little worried," he says with a sigh. "I hear this Don Cheadle is very difficult to work with." >

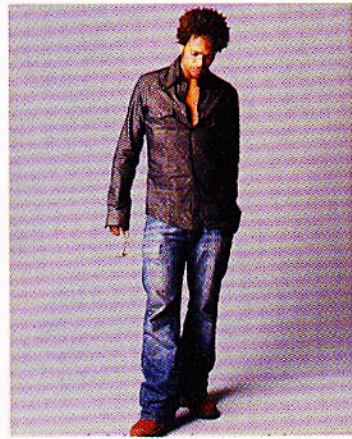
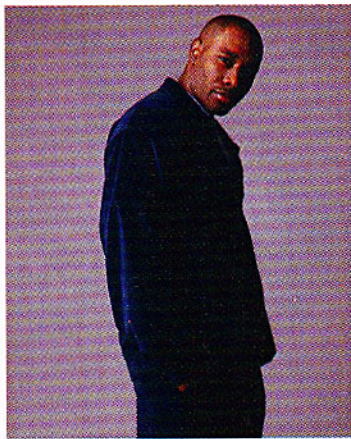
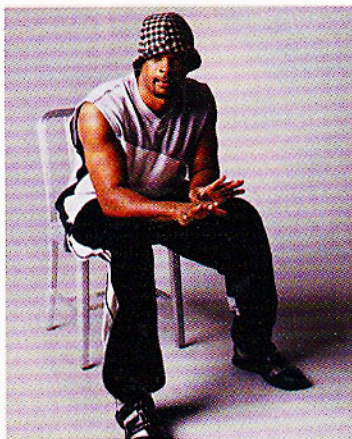
In a cream-colored linen suit and brown leather sandals, **DENNIS HAYSBERT** glides into the dressing room with straight-backed dignity. He exudes a rare elegance, like a throwback to the days of bona fide matinee idols.

While Haysbert is perhaps best known for his presidential role on Fox's critically acclaimed series *24*, nothing piqued audiences' attention like seeing the six-foot four-inch actor playing a love interest.

Last November Haysbert, 48, starred opposite Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid in the 1950's period piece *Far From Heaven*. Oscar buzz began almost as soon as the film was released, due in no small part to the on-screen tension of unrequited desire created by Haysbert and Moore.

Which raises the question, how come Haysbert—a divorced father of two whose films include *Love & Basketball*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Heat* and *Major League*—rarely gets to kiss the girl?

"It's glaring how unfair that is," he says. "They let White men hug and kiss our most beautiful Black female stars. I'd love to play a romantic lead where I truly get the girl in all the ways that matter. Fair is fair." >



MEKHI PHIFER's moving furniture around in his living room, trying to straighten the place up. "I had some people over this weekend," he says. He's got a voice as rough as sandpaper and a grin as wide as the Hollywood sign.

At 27 Phifer has already appeared in at least 24 films, including *Soul Food* and *8 Mile*. Soon we'll see him in *Honey* with Jessica Alba. Plus, he's managed to secure a coveted spot on NBC's *ER*. Not bad for someone who went to his first big audition with nothing but a snapshot from a Woolworth's photo booth. Divorced with a 3-year-old son, Phifer says he has turned down work to maintain his values. For instance, he says he refuses to do "those romantic comedies where I have to take off my shirt and be sexy."

"Mekhi's serious about his craft," says his *ER* costar Sharif Atkins. "I overheard him and Noah Wyle breaking down a scene we did yesterday, having it make sense. Mekhi's really into making sure the heartbeat of his character is truthful."

"You can't do just anything," Phifer says. "You have to have confidence in yourself and integrity in your work. When you do this acting thing, you're immortalizing yourself."

There's a leopard-print throw on the daybed in **DAMON WAYANS's** dressing room at the Disney studio in Burbank, California. He calls it his pimp blanket, which is a pretty risqué thing for a grandfather to say.

Of course, Wayans, 42, is not your typical pops. Most don't tell their 20-year-old sons to keep journals of their experiences as new fathers—everything from domestic squabbles to disastrous diaper changes—to provide material for TV.

Wayans, a member of the talented clan that brought us the groundbreaking *In Living Color*, is one of the masterminds behind ABC's *My Wife and Kids*. Like *The Cosby Show*, *My Wife and Kids* is redefining the way African-American families are represented on television. "Cosby dealt with the lighter side of family," he says. "I'm dealing with the really, really real." Shotgun weddings, PMS and virginity have all been explored on the program.

Wayans will add a third generation to his TV family next season when one of the show's teenagers becomes a parent. "There's no shame in your child having a baby," he says. "It can be a beautiful thing." And, he's betting, good for a lot of laughs.

Oh, to be young and pretty in Hollywood. **MORRIS CHESTNUT**, whose features are as fine and symmetrical as the most beautiful sculpture, laughs and says, "It sucks!"

"Most of the time what I get offered are progressive, young, well-educated, gainfully employed Black men," says Chestnut, 34, who starred in *The Best Man* and *The Brothers*. "But I'm trying to go against that a little bit. Like in *Half Past Dead*, which I did with Steven Seagal, I got to play the villain."

In 1991 Chestnut landed a starring role in *Boyz n the Hood*. "I'd taken a couple of acting classes, and suddenly I was a lead in this movie," he recalls. He says it took him years to figure how to play the Hollywood game. "*Boyz n the Hood* was a huge hit, and I didn't know how to respond to that. I was trying to get some more work. I didn't think, *Let me build a film career.*" After *Boyz*, Chestnut did a stint on the short-lived TV series *Out All Night*. Then he came to his senses.

This year he'll star in *The Break Up Handbook* opposite Jamie Foxx and in the crime drama *Confidence* with Dustin Hoffman. "Working in a film with Hoffman was a great opportunity," he says. "I don't want to just smile in every movie."

Sometimes when **GARY DOURDAN**—who plays the brooding Warrick Brown, a forensics specialist on CBS's top-rated crime drama *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation*—goes to the supermarket, things get a little out of hand.

"People are hysterical," he says. "Oh, I love the show. Oh, my gosh! The next thing you know I'm talking to a whole family." Ah yes, the price of fame. But Dourdan has always been one to get noticed. In fact, he was discovered while out for a stroll. "I was walking down the Champs Elysées in Paris and the director Debbie Allen saw me," he says. They started to talk and Allen eventually cast him as a regular in the *Cosby* spin-off, *A Different World*. Dourdan followed with an eyebrow-raising breadth of roles, from the cringe-inducing *Trois*, which he calls his low point, to the \$90 million science-fiction suspense-filled thriller *Alien: Resurrection*.

Dourdan is in negotiations to shoot *My Boy* this summer, a film in which he may play a biracial rock star in Ireland. The role has a special challenge. "The Irish are like the Jamaicans," he says, laughing. "If you don't get the accent right, you're assed out." □