



# CAN'T A BROTHER GET NO LOVE

Mekhi Phifer, Omar Epps, and Taye Diggs all have what it takes to be superstars: talent, drive, and sex appeal. So why aren't they pulling in the *Titanic* roles and the blockbuster bank? Jeannine Amber is hot and bothered.

**T**hey are the stuff of late-night, under-the-covers fantasies, these three kings. Dark skin, broad smiles, big hands, and oh those kissable lips.

This one here, this Omar fellow, he's the slick one. Playing against Tupac Shakur in *Juice*, he seemed sensitive and thoughtful. But in real life? Different story. He's tightly wound. Like if you made him mad he'd punch a wall, and if you turned him on he'd throw you up against one. He's something a little dangerous.

And that one there, that pretty boy Taye, who blessed us with a view of his magnificent backside in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, is, in person, ramrod-straitlaced: pulls out the chair, dabs his mouth with a napkin, could charm the pants off your grandmother. If he were your sister's man, you'd tease her, "Marry him, or I will."

And this third prince, Mekhi. He's got long eyelashes and a big-grin, little-kid face. In the romantic comedy *SoulFood*, director George Tillman Jr. captured his sheepish, naughty-boy sexiness. Lay him in your lap, rub his head, and give him something sweet to suck on. He inspires that let-me-be-your-mama instinct, 'cuz he looks like mischief.

All this flavor, and talent too. Between them, Omar Epps, 26, Mekhi Phifer, 24, and Taye Diggs, "twenty-something," have 15 films to their credit and are set to star in an impressive 10 more in the next year, including *The Wood* and *In Too Deep*, which open this month (see "Gotta Give 'Em Credit," page 132). They've played hotties and husbands, hustlers and cops, and *Newsweek* calls them "promising... up-and-comers." But what mainstream Hollywood seems to have missed is that with their bad-boy, good-boy, baby-boy sex appeal, these men make up a holy trinity of female fantasy. With the right *Titanic*-like role, the right airbrushed promo poster, the right teen-beat marketing, they could easily be big-screen heartthrobs. And in Tinseltown, when the ladies love you you're box-office gold.

There's just one hitch: Hollywood, which specializes in white-on-white Academy Awards, is still scared to death of a young black man who can make the ladies swoon. When it comes to movie heroes—the ones who save the day, get the girl, make us wish our dates were cuter—vanilla treats are all we're

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given. Brad Pitt, with his washboard stomach; Matt Damon, with his mile-wide smile; Leonardo DiCaprio, with the boat. But just try to think of one young black man who has been billed as a dreamboat in a big-budget film made by white Hollywood. Will Smith? Strictly cute and cuddly. Cuba Gooding Jr.? A rah-rah cheerleader. Wesley Snipes? A hardbody renegade. Eddie Murphy? Martin Lawrence? Chris Rock? Chris Tucker? All good for a laugh.

Even Denzel Washington, the finest of the lot, has been cast time and again as choirboy-chaste, despite scenes that cry out for some steam—think Alan J. Pakula's *The Pelican Brief* (Warner Bros., 1993) and Penny Marshall's *The Preacher's Wife* (Buena Vista, 1996). Although colleagues have said that it's Washington himself who shies away from sex scenes, the reticent star heats up the screen as the romantic Demetrius in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (Black River, 1991) and as the horn-blowing ladies' man Bleek Gilliam in Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (Universal, 1990)—both films directed by people of color.

"Black directors see the [sex] appeal of black men and make films that showcase it," says Donald Bogle, film historian and author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (Continuum, 1998). "I think for the most part, white directors and writers don't see that [appeal]. This becomes a problem in many of the careers of these young black actors."

Brian Robbins, who directed hot stuff James Van Der Beek in *Varsity Blues* (MTV Films, 1999), says that unless a film is a comedy, "it's almost impossible to get a Hollywood movie made with a [young] black lead. I'm not necessarily saying the studios are racist. It just doesn't work for them economically. A movie like *Love Jones* [New Line, 1997], which I loved, didn't make a lot of money. But comedies work because they're accessible—they cross over. Will Smith is the ultimate example [of success], but even he hasn't been a romantic lead in a movie."

**T**aye Diggs looks serious and smart in his little silver octagon glasses. He's leaning back in a booth in the dining room of the Valencia Hyatt, about an hour north of Los Angeles, his muscle-man shoulders bulging through his white, long-sleeve waffle tee.

Diggs, who grew up in Rochester, N.Y., is in Valencia—a white-bread California suburb that has nothing going on except the Magic Mountain amusement park—to film *The House on Haunted Hill*, which opens this fall.

Diggs's role is a supporting one with not much opportunity for him to sizzle like he did as Angela Bassett's young love in *Stella* (directed by African-American Kevin Sullivan).

"If [mainstream Hollywood] needs to cast a sexy guy, they automatically think sexy *white* guy. That's just how Hollywood is," says Diggs, whose first

newcomers Van Der Beek, Ryan Phillippe (*Cruel Intentions*, Columbia, 1999), and Freddie Prinze Jr. (*She's All That*, Miramax, 1999), must worry about how they're going to cart their loot to the bank. Because in Hollywood, heartthrobs get *paid*.

Top moneymaker DiCaprio, for example, may have won critical acclaim



Omar Epps, sitting pretty

## HOLLYWOOD IS STILL SCARED TO DEATH OF A YOUNG BLACK MAN WHO CAN MAKE THE LADIES SWOON.

big break was on Broadway in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Rent*.

"In this movie my character's name is Eddie Moses. And my agent's like, 'This is great because it wasn't written 'black.'" But I'm an ex-ballplayer saying stuff like, 'Yo, where we gon' go?' Like I know so many white guys named Eddie Moses who talk like this." Diggs leans back and whistles. "So you just go with the flow and take the best. It's almost not fair because you know Brad Pitt has other things to worry about."

No doubt, screen idols Pitt, DiCaprio, and Damon, as well as

playing the mentally challenged Arnie in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (Paramount, 1993), but it wasn't until millions of women watched him go down in a mist of sea foam that he could command top dollar. In the wake of the \$283 million-grossing *Titanic* (20th Century Fox, 1997), the star's rumored per-flick asking price has rocketed from \$2.5 million to more than \$20 million. Even though DiCaprio appears to be making an effort to lose his sexy-boy image by starring in offbeat flicks like Danny Boyle's upcoming *The Beach* (20th Century Fox), he's still proof of what studio

execs have known ever since they put Clark Gable's name above the marquee: Sex sells. And unless an actor has access to the hottest roles, he can get stuck under the financial glass ceiling.

"I'd be making a whole lot more money if I was a white actor," says Omar Epps, "and everybody fuckin' knows that." Late one Friday night, Epps is sitting on an overstuffed maroon sofa at his friend's Beverly Hills apartment drinking vodka and juice. The place is not luxurious but it does have white carpeting, so Epps has his shoes off, and he's got pretty nice feet. He's also got 11 tattoos above the waist and one down below. "Maybe if I was white I would have known that *Titanic* was even being *made*." For a while, in 1997, Epps, who grew up in Brooklyn, carted around a clipboard and stethoscope as the young Dr. Dennis Gant on NBC's *ER*. After 10 episodes, his character buckled under the pressure and jumped in front of a subway train.

This month, Epps will be starring with Diggs and Richard T. Jones in *The Wood*, a sweet coming-of-age flick that may help to rehabilitate his reputation after the abysmal *The Mod Squad*. But with a cast of relative newcomers, the low-budget *Wood* is not likely to make Epps a superstar.

"White people rule the fucking world, not just Hollywood. That's the way it is," says Epps. "White women all over the world want to see *Legends of the Fall* [TriStar, 1994]," he says. "And it's not just white women. You got all these sisters talking about, 'We need to see more black men!' But then they go out there and support all the Leos. It's about what they've been taught they want to see. Just like they open up a magazine and see Lil' Kim with blond hair and think that's attractive."

**E**ver since D.W. Griffith directed *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (in which order is restored to a southern community after a bunch of sheet-wearing whites defend their women from the wild Negroes), Hollywood has grappled with its portrayal of black men as sexual beings. There's been fascination and there's been fear. That tension has produced a cinematic history filled with images of black men as ghetto pimps, jungle bucks, or dancing eunuchs—rarely as someone for a grown woman to love.

"I think the slogan 'Fear of a Black Planet' is not too broad when you look at Hollywood," says Clyde R. Taylor, professor of Africana Studies at New York University and author of *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (Indiana

University Press, 1998). "The society has a certain idea of what a hero should be, and that's always been white, male, and young."

Tracey Edmonds, executive producer of *Soul Food*, says most of the scripts her company, Edmonds Entertainment, has been offered to develop "are about the music industry or drugs or gang warfare. The studios just aren't trying to place young black actors in a Brad Pitt role because they don't think it's what the audience wants to see."

When directors do try to make a romantic film with a young African-American lead, they almost never do as well as the \$43 million-grossing *Soul Food*, which starred Vanessa L. Williams and cost \$7.5 million to make. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* cost \$20 million to produce but only grossed \$37 million. The black-on-black romance *Love Jones*, which starred Larenz Tate, took in only \$12 million, and although Christopher Cherot's *Hav Plenty* was considered an indie success for attracting major-studio distribution, it raked in only \$2.3 million. Hollywood has learned that movies about colored folks in love are not sure bets at the box office. And with these films floundering, it's tough for a young black actor to make millions of moviegoing women fall head over heels.

"The questions distributors always ask themselves is, how will this play in the suburbs, how will this play in the South?" says director Tony Cinciripini (*Confessions of a Hit Man*, Hemdale Home Video, 1994). Two years ago, Cinciripini shot a movie called *Hell's Kitchen*, a powerful, gritty film about a ragtag group of New York youths caught in a robbery gone wrong. The film stars Mekhi Phifer as Johnny Miles, a tough but noble young man who takes the fall for his friends. At the center of the film is a love story between Johnny and his beautiful white girlfriend, played by rising star Angelina Jolie.

"When I was shopping the script, I was offered \$15 million to make this picture with a white actor," says Cinciripini from his office in Los Angeles. "I said, 'Fuck you' and walked out. After that I was considered stupid for having missed this business opportunity." *Hell's Kitchen*, which Cinciripini shot with \$6 million he raised himself, generated good buzz at the Toronto Film Festival where it premiered last September. It has yet to be picked up for major-studio distribution.

But it's not just Hollywood that has a problem with on-screen miscegenation. One industry insider who didn't want to be named recalls a 1998

## GOTTA GIVE 'EM CREDIT

H-town may not be offering Mekhi, Omar, and Taye heart-throb roles, but between them they've still managed to bank 15 films—and counting. *By Kenya N. Byrd*

### MEKHI PHIFER

#### RÉSUMÉ

- *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (Columbia, 1998)
- *Soul Food* (20th Century Fox, 1997)
- *Hav Plenty* (Miramax, 1997)
- *High School High* (TriStar, 1996)
- *Girl 6* (20th Century Fox, 1996)
- *Clockers* (Universal, 1995)

#### COMING ATTRACTIONS

- *Hell's Kitchen* (Unapix, 1999)  
Call it *Rocky* with a twist: Phifer stars as Johnny Miles, an aspiring boxer who spends five years in the pen after taking the rap for a robbery gone bad. But his trouble doubles when he's released and discovers that his girlfriend, Gloria (Angelina Jolie), is plotting his murder.
- *O* (Dimension, 1999)  
High school basketball star Odlin James (Phifer) is the Othello for Generation X. He and a teammate, the lingo-esque Hugo (Josh Hartnett), go head-to-head for the affection of Desi (Julia Stiles), a modern-day Desdemona.
- *The Other Brother* (Xenon, 1999)  
Martin Blaze (Phifer) is a loner who hasn't dated in more than a year. His brother, Junnie (Andre Blake), is the opposite: a self-proclaimed Casanova who decides to teach Martin how to be a player. Will Junnie's lesson work?

### OMAR EPPS

#### RÉSUMÉ

- *The Mod Squad* (MGM, 1999)
- *Scream 2* (Miramax, 1997)
- *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Miramax, 1996)
- *Higher Learning* (Columbia, 1995)
- *Major League II* (Warner Bros., 1994)
- *The Program* (Lauren Film, 1993)
- *Juice* (Paramount, 1992)

#### COMING ATTRACTIONS

- *Love and Basketball* (New Line, 1999)  
Quincy McCall (Epps) and his on-again/off-again girlfriend, Monica (Sanaa Lathan), have been playing basketball and hanging out since they were 10 years old. But when the NBA and WNBA recruit the lovebirds, everything changes.
- *The Wood* (Paramount, 1999)  
(See Taye Diggs)

#### • *Breakfast of Champions*

Walt Disney is in negotiations to pick up this film, which is based on Kurt Vonnegut's 1973 satirical novel of the same title. Epps and Bruce Willis costar.

#### • *In Too Deep* (Miramax, 1999)

Cincinnati cop Jeff Cole (Epps) goes undercover to investigate a drug lord named God (L.L. Cool J) but gets temporarily pulled off the case after having one too many brushes with death. When Jeff returns to the job, he becomes so consumed by the hustler lifestyle that he begins living the part.

### TAYE DIGGS

#### RÉSUMÉ

- *Go* (TriStar, 1999)
- *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (20th Century Fox, 1998)

#### COMING ATTRACTIONS

- *The Wood* (Paramount, 1999)  
To marry or not to marry is Roland's (Diggs) dilemma hours before his wedding. His boys Mike (Epps) and Slim (Richard T. Jones) come to Roland's rescue, and the three spend an afternoon reminiscing about their pubescent macking days. Will the groom jump the broom?
- *Best Man* (Universal, 1999)  
Author Harper Stewart (Diggs) is a best man with a big secret. At his buddy Lane's (Morris Chestnut) wedding, a bridesmaid (Nia Long) gets an advance copy of Harper's sexy new novel—and discovers the characters are all too real.
- *The House on Haunted Hill* (Warner Bros., 1999)  
In a remake of the 1958 Vincent Price horror flick, ex-ballplayer Eddie Moses (Diggs) gets an offer he can't refuse: Spend a night in a remodeled asylum and win a million bucks. Geoffrey Rush, Famke Janssen, and Chris Kattan costar.
- *Mary Jane's Last Dance* (MGM, 1999)  
College senior Alicia (Mia Kirshner) joins a snobbish clique of girls—played by Meredith Monroe, Rachel True, and Dominique Swain—and ends up in the hospital. It's up to Sheriff Artie Bonner Jr. (Diggs) to crack the case.

advance screening in New York City for Spike Lee's *He Got Game* (Touchstone): "When Denzel [Washington] leaned in to kiss Milla Jovovich, a black woman in the audience got up and was like, 'Denzel, you promised!' Denzel is sort of a knight in shining armor for the black community. So some black women react very adversely to the idea that he is 'choosing' a white woman over them. They didn't want to see it."

On page 132 of the coffee-table photography book *Body & Soul: The Black Male Book* (Universe, 1998), there is a picture of Mekhi Phifer, shirtless. He's staring straight into the camera, his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his baggy pants. It's a hot shot, and the real Mekhi looks at it quizzically.

*You look very sexy.*

"Really? What makes this sexy?"

He isn't fishing, he genuinely wants to know. He also wants to know whether that scene in *Soul Food* where he pushes Nia Long up against the wall in the beauty salon is offensive. He's concerned because he spends a lot of time thinking about his image. Four years ago, Phifer, who grew up in Harlem, was planning to go to college to study electrical engineering, when, on a whim, he went to an open call for Spike Lee's hoodlum epic, *Clockers*. He got the lead. Now here he is, studying a half-naked picture of himself over dinner at Gary's Jamaican Hot Pot, a tiny joint on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, a few blocks from where he was raised. Outside the restaurant, three little girls see him and tap on the window. Phifer looks up. The girls scream and run away.

This fall, Phifer is going to be starring in *O*, a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's passion-filled drama *Othello*. "I love the story," says Phifer. "You see this character go from being a cool, calm guy to this guy who winds up going crazy. I always wanted to play somebody like that. Like a love-story type of thing."

In *O*, Phifer's character is more tragic than heroic, but it is a love story nonetheless, backed by a major film company and aimed at a mainstream audience. Maybe this is the beginning of a change. Not just for Phifer, Diggs, and Epps to win the roles that might get them paid, but also for a generation of moviegoers who want to take home a new Hollywood fantasy. There he is now, that smooth, brown-skinned brother, looking hot, saving the day, and making all the ladies swoon. ▣

*Additional research by Kenya N. Byrd*