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## MOVIES

### **African-American films ride 'Cosby effect'**

#### **Hollywood taking note as middle-class tales succeed**

By Terry Armour

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Preston Whitmore didn't exactly set out to make a statement. He didn't think he was filling some void in Hollywood. When he penned the screenplay for "This Christmas," his semi-autobiographical film about the trials and tribulations of a middle-class African-American family celebrating the holidays, he was simply writing about what he knew best.

"When I sat down to write this, I was merely writing stories based on my family experience," the director said. "When I sat down to write, I just wrote about the stories that happened to me."

These stories about family, while universal, rarely make it onto the big screen. More often, films that deal with the African-American experience focus on the hip-hop community, "gangsters" and violence. But the latest spate of movies depicting middle- to upper-middle-class life, including "This Christmas," which opens nationwide Wednesday, is proving there is an audience for this type of fare.

The release of "This Christmas," starring Delroy Lindo, Regina King and Chris Brown, comes on the heels of Tyler Perry's surprisingly successful "Why Did I Get Married?" which baffled Hollywood experts and critics alike by earning \$53 million in its first five weeks in theaters.

Set in San Francisco, "This Christmas" tells the story of the Whitfields who, for the first time in four years, are together for the holidays, each with his or her own set of baggage. There's the oldest daughter Lisa (King), who has reached an impasse in her marriage. There's Kelli (played by Sharon Leal), whose love life has taken a back seat to her career. There's oldest son Quentin (Idris Elba), who is only home because he's on the lam from some hoods.

The drama plays out amid the family's struggle to decide whether to sell shares of its profitable dry cleaning business. The filmmakers are hoping "This Christmas" will be a strong box-office draw like "Why Did I Get Married?" The Perry movie -- about four couples dealing with marital problems during a planned retreat -- earned \$21.3 million to lead the box-office race its opening weekend, finishing ahead

of George Clooney's much-hyped "Michael Clayton" and the equally hyped "We Own the Night," starring Mark Wahlberg and Joaquin Phoenix.

"A studio's traditional thinking was if you want to pull in an urban audience, you need to have a hip-hop element," said "This Christmas" producer Will Packer. "Over the past 10 or 15 years, hip-hop was a new and emerging form that pulled in that core African-American audience as well as had that crossover potential. It was a business decision more than anything. What is happening now -- and it's a great time as far as I'm concerned to be making films about the African-American experience -- is Hollywood realizes that there is an audience out there that doesn't regularly see themselves on film."

And when those films are in theaters, that audience will support them.

Buoyed by a strong cast, led by Angela Bassett, the 1995 drama "Waiting to Exhale" grossed \$67 million domestically, according to numbers provided by Box Office Mojo (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>). In 1997, George Tillman and Bob Teitel's set-in-Chicago film "Soul Food" cleared \$43.7 million. And "The Best Man," the 1999 comedy-drama starring Taye Diggs and Nia Long, made \$34.1 million.

"That middle-class African-American audience is sporadically taken seriously," said Brandon Gray, president of Box Office Mojo, which since 1999 has tracked Hollywood box-office numbers. "You will get a picture like 'Why Did I Get Married' or 'Soul Food' or 'The Best Man,' and it will do well, and the industry will act shocked and surprised by it, as if it came out of the blue. But there is this sense that the audience isn't being as consistently served as it could be, because it is a lucrative market. These films tend to be relatively low budget, and they tend to post good grosses. None has been a real blockbuster, but they don't need to be blockbusters. They have a built-in audience."

Not doing enough

Tillman, for one, doesn't think the studios do enough to tap into that market.

"When we did 'Soul Food,' 'Waiting to Exhale' was the only film at that time that dealt with the African-American middle class," the Columbia College grad said. "Unfortunately, after that, we haven't really progressed or made many films that really continue to show life in that middle class world. Over the last two years, it has come back, which I think is a very positive thing. What the audience still wants to see is a variety of characters that they can relate to."

King agreed.

"First and foremost, as a people, we are so much more diverse than how we are depicted most of the time in movies," said the actress, who grew up in the affluent African-American neighborhood of Windsor Hills in Los Angeles. "Most of the time [in films] we're poor or we came from something poor. That kind of discredits people who aren't poor but they worked hard to be where they are. We yearn to see movies like ['This Christmas'] because we see us. When I say 'us,' I don't just mean black people; I mean black people who grew up middle class."

Whitmore grew up the youngest of three kids in a working-class Detroit neighborhood. His mother and father were divorced, and after a stint in the Marine Corps, he attended Cal State Northridge and then went on to law school before becoming a filmmaker.

"To a certain degree, everyone in the movie was inspired by someone from my family," Whitmore said. "In fact, the three male sons in the film are inspired by me at different sections of my life. If you look at

'The Cosby Show' -- and I grew up watching that show -- they were an upper middle-class doctor and lawyer. Not that that's far-fetched, but my story is more homegrown. In Detroit, someone would open a store or a dry cleaners that would lead to their prosperity in a middle-class life. That's one of the things I wanted to show in 'This Christmas.'"

But it was "The Cosby Show" that ushered in a new perception of African-Americans in Hollywood. Premiering on NBC in 1984, the long-running comedy featured the Huxtables, a well-to-do black family living in New York City. Bill Cosby starred as a doctor married to a lawyer (Felicity Rashad) in the Emmy-winning sitcom, which after a successful run ended in 1992.

Almost didn't get made

It was a show that almost didn't get off the ground because the network couldn't figure out what the target audience would be.

"There was this whole big debate among television executives -- will black audiences who can't relate to this embrace it?" said "This Christmas" producer Will Packer. "Of course they did. Not only is there an audience of middle class ... African-Americans who rarely see themselves portrayed, there is an audience of working-class African-Americans that love inspirational entertainment like 'The Cosby Show.' Now what you're seeing is the doors are opening for more portrayals of middle-class, intelligent and articulate African-Americans dealing with issues that are not necessarily specific to the African-American culture but, nonetheless, are seldom told. It's 'The Cosby Show' effect, if you will."

Further evidence of "The Cosby Show" effect is another upcoming release, "The Perfect Holiday," a Christmas comedy starring Morris Chestnut, Terrence Howard and Queen Latifah that will be in theaters Dec. 12.

But for now, the focus is on "This Christmas."

And when all is said and done, the only color that truly matters in Hollywood is green.

"If our film works right after Tyler Perry's," Packer said, "you can bet on it that you will see movies going into production next year with similar portrayals, because Hollywood always responds that way."

"At the end of the day, it just comes down -- to the studios -- to dollars and cents," King said. "If they see these two movies -- 'Why Did I Get Married?' and 'This Christmas' -- make money within weeks of each other, I guarantee there will be a person at every studio saying, 'Where's that script that somebody mailed here a year ago?' That's the way it is because, unfortunately, everybody wants to be first at being second in Hollywood. They don't want to be the first one to try it. They want to be the first one to have that second success story."

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