

Feature Bound



Keith Lock

Stephen Williams

Stephen Williams

Stir it up

Soul Survivors is a contemporary urban fable which takes a stylized, expressionistic view of two Jamaican immigrant cousins fighting for emotional survival in a rapidly changing Toronto neighbourhood. Soul Survivors is being produced by Paul Brown (I Love a Man in Uniform) with commitments from Telefilm, the OFDC and distributor Norstar, with a budget of 1.3 million.

"You a go tired fe see me face, can't get me outta de race" Bob Marley

the word "racist" in an almost casual way during a discussion. On the other hand, to an educated person of the white middle-class, the word "racist" may be a supreme insult, conjuring up images of the KKK, segregation and lynch mobs.

One very talented Black filmmaker with a project in development a few years ago bitterly recalls a script meeting with a distributor in which he was told that his central character "wasn't Black enough."

Comments about a character not being Black enough or Chinese enough or Indian enough can be problematic, since they deny the filmmaker's right to define his or her own vision.

Fortunately, the Canadian film industry is starting to emerge from this denial and racial misperception. The iceberg of indifference is beginning to melt. But if there is a weak link anywhere in the system, it lies in distribution. Surprisingly, most of the filmmakers I spoke with did not encounter problems with the agencies, but found great difficulty in convincing distributors to back their projects. Since the distributor is the trigger to agency funding, this looks like a potential bottleneck. Of the four films mentioned, only *Soul Survivor* has a distributor (Norstar Releasing), and is being produced with the participation of the agencies (Telefilm Canada and the OFDC). One senses that distributors shy away from what they perceive as the multiculturalism "kiss of death" at the

Canadian box office. The idea that Canadians do not want to see films about people who are not white is being challenged and will no doubt be put to rest in years to come.

This year will see the first Japanese-Canadian feature, the first two Black features, and the first feature by a Chinese-Canadian woman. How are these new filmmakers seen by the rest of Canada's writers, directors and producers? Without a doubt, the vast majority of Canadian film industry insiders embrace First Nations filmmakers and filmmakers of colour as colleagues. However, at certain times, there is confusion or at least bemusement among white filmmakers about these filmmakers. Who are they and why are they intentionally segregating themselves from "the rest of us?"

Recently, in the presence of a group of filmmakers of colour and First Nations filmmakers during a session of the Canadian Film Centre's Summer Lab in which I took part, one exasperated white filmmaker blurted out, "Are you making race-specific films, or are you just making films?" She herself is a white filmmaker who had only made films about white characters, yet couldn't see that she might also be described as a maker of "race-specific" films.

Cultural identity can be a refuge and harbour for all filmmakers, or it can form a kind of prison where we limit our affections to those few who are like ourselves. Ultimately, once the excitement dies down over the present cinematic string of firsts, the expressed desire of the First Nations and filmmakers of colour is to free themselves from this prison of being perceived as "ethnic." Even so, it is only through these first productions that there can be a widening of the current boundaries of Canadian Cinema so that it truly embraces everyone.

WERE THERE particular difficulties in getting a Black feature film financed by the agencies? Absolutely. Issues surfaced frequently around language (Jamaican dialect is a prominent feature of the script), and its various nuances and subtleties. Cultural behaviours and assumptions that the all-white adjudicators brought with them to their read of the material were both frustrating and revealing. Questions were also raised about the existence of a strong enough Black cast in the country. My feeling is that these folks are here and, frankly, we ain't seen nuthin' yet. All the films made by Black folk in this country, present and future, will continue to demonstrate for our actors that there is life after *Top Cops*.

Other issues impacting on funding involved expectations around an audience for this film. The traditional bureaucratic mantra around this is that there is not a large enough Black audience to support a film of this nature. As if only Irish folk go to *The Snapper*. As if



Mina Shum

Countdown to happiness

Double Happiness is the story of Jade Li, an ambitious, irreverent Chinese-Canadian actress who tries to find love and her place in the world in opposition to the family traditions she's been brought up in. Double Happiness is being produced for approximately \$800,000 through the New Views program, a co-venture of B.C. Film, Telefilm and NFB Pacific Centre.

“Our hiring practices on the film are pro-active. When other people start being taken to task for hiring lily-white crews, then we can talk.”

only Italian folk went to see *Medi-terraneo*. My argument: don't hold a Black film up to criteria that are not applied to any other kind of film.

There are additional difficulties in making Black films in a culture that is intrinsically founded on false notions of white supremacy. Those narrow cultural assumptions and biases prevail in the halls of our bureaucracies despite the preponderance of white liberalism, even as these attitudes are vigorously denied. But whether anyone likes it or not, Canada's population – and necessarily its audience – is changing. The movies we make are gonna have to reflect that, or fall into obsolescence.

With regards to the Black community, several things need to be said. First of all, this “Black community” in my experience is not some monolithic mass, but rather a rich, varied, heterogeneous group. I depend on having a significant Black presence in crew, talent, production staff, for emotional support and practically, for the craft skills these folk bring. As we in this country are still in the early stages of creating a Black crew and talent base, many of the experienced keys will end up being white, and I'm not about to fuck with one million tax-

payer dollars.

So our hiring practices on the film are pro-active, while being at the same time mindful that we gotta have the strongest project possible. Certain-

ly there are grumblings in some quarters about this kind of affirmative action. My response: tough. When other people start being taken to task for hiring lily-white crews, then we can talk.

I, like many others, am excited by the prospect of there being not only one, but two Black-directed films being made this year. Not only will it mean two different perspectives, it will also relieve the burden of responsibility for any one of the films to speak for the entire Black population in Canada.

Because they are being financed under different guidelines, it's hard to speculate on how one has affected the other. I think the naysayers will wait until the films' performance at the box office can be measured. If the films don't kick, watch out. The backlash will be upon us in a big way.

I hope that this film does well enough critically and with an audience, particularly the primary audience for which it is intended, so that I can keep making films. Beyond that, I hope that this film will present another piece of the puzzle – which is the place of African peoples in the West.

One love, Jah guide and peace.

JAN. 27/94: Somehow, in the chaos and excitement of going into pre-production for my first feature, this metaphor came to me. Filmmaking is a rollercoaster: just make sure you have fun, don't get scared, don't throw up and hang on. When we (First Generation Films: Rose Lam Waddell, Stephen Hegyes and I) first got the green light, we said it was our dream come true. Now, I just pray for those nights when I can get REM, let alone dream. When I was selected over 56 other projects, I relooked at the first draft (it was entitled *Banana Split* then) and noticed the date: *June 1/91*. Scary. It took three years. Three years and everyone's help: from the first Summer Lab at the Canadian Film Centre, to the Canada Council, to the Praxis Screenwriting Workshops, to official development with story editor Dennis Foon.

Feb. 1/94: Found this entry in my ongoing journal. This was just before moving to Montreal to do the New Initiatives in Film internship at the National Film Board. I went there with the intention of staying a year to make a half-hour drama about falling out of love. But I had to put that contract on hold and come back when *Double Happiness* got the green light. Here's the entry: *Aug. 20/93*: Moving stuff for the garage sale and being overcome with feelings of sadness, bizarre because life is really exciting now. Don't really know what's gonna happen now. I know that for the next year I will be making *Forced Exposure* in Montreal. But if I win New Views, I will be back here sleeping on someone's floor, making the film I've always dreamed of making. It will be good. I know that if I get the chance to do it, it will be good. What if it doesn't happen? Fuck, I couldn't take it. But I do know that I have Council funding, so ▶