

It ain't easy

Black film directors face near impossible task

"What do you do when you go to a new school? You find the biggest boy and you whip him. Hollywood was the biggest boy for me, and I've found it and I've whipped it."

For Melvin Van Peebles, Hollywood's newest Black film director, such a conquest did not come easy. Nor is it easy for other blacks to break through what they feel is a barrier of discrimination in the film industry.

With his newest release, "Watermelon Man," Van Peebles

has earned what he calls his "establishment Ph.D. in filmmaking." But like many black filmmakers, Van Peebles had to go abroad to get his start in the industry. After spending 10 years in France producing films and writing books, he surprised his American compatriots by winning an award as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival in 1968 with the film "The Story of the Three Day Pass."

For William Greaves, former

producer of the Emmy award-winning NET series, "Black Journal," the country was Canada. "It was pretty clear to me back in 1952 when I was trying to crack into the industry that there was just a wall of racism and discrimination that I could not possibly penetrate," says Greaves.

Ossie Davis, acclaimed as an actor, playwright and stage director, acknowledges "had I been white, I think I would have been a director 10 years earlier."

The three black film producers will be profiled on National Educational Television's "Black Journal" in the fall.

"I think the situation (for blacks) is still basically quite grim," says Greaves, who now runs his own production company in New York. "I think, except for isolated pockets, there still isn't any really widespread presence of black filmmakers... throughout the film industry in terms of anything resembling our percentage distribution in the population."

CHIEF OBSTACLE

The chief obstacle for Blacks who aspire to be filmmakers is entry into certain of the motion picture unions, who according to Greaves, accept blacks "on a token basis."

The problem was ironically illustrated recently when "Black Journal" crews prepared to film an interview with Davis, who was speaking at a news conference in New York sponsored by the Committee to Petition the United Nations. The "Black Journal" crew, composed of some non-union members, were evicted from the conference room by a news team from one of the New York commercial television stations, who claimed they could not share facilities with non-

union members.

Although the confrontation was over a "jurisdictional" issue, Tony Brown, Black Journal's executive producer, argues that the exclusion of his crews from the conference was discrimination in disguise because blacks are kept out of the union.

Davis concedes that "some of our people have been getting jobs in some of the networks...but not too much has been done. They say the job situation is very tight. But we can't afford to wait...The key thing is a guarantee of job opportunities from the networks."

Davis says television networks and motion picture producers "are locked into contracts with labor unions which will refuse to produce with non-union members."

TRY HIS LUCK

He dismisses the possibility that Blacks can underwrite the cost of their own film productions and circumvent the unions. "If you come into the market with a non-union product, how are you going to get distribution? Somewhere along the line someone's got to pay union dues... Show me one union distribution house that has a projectionist who is union that will show the thing."

This is disputed by Van Peebles, who is evidently willing to try his luck in this type of black enterprise. He has underwritten the cost of his up-coming film, "Sweetback's Bad Ass Song," made by a crew which is 50 per cent black and Puerto Rican.

Van Peebles says he was not satisfied with the number of Black filmmakers who were brought in on his insistence for "Watermelon Man." "These six men represented only a very small portion of the work force in the entire film. I realized we had pushed

the unions as far as they would go. However, I don't think it was far enough."

RUSSWURM WINNER

Greaves, who grew up in Harlem, had a full career as an actor in the theater and motion pictures before he started producing for television. He was featured in Louis Derochemont's motion picture "Lost Boundaries," and later acted a leading role in the Broadway hit, "Lost in the Stars." His production of "Black Journal" for National Educational Television won him the Russwurm Award for excellence in television journalism. He also received the American Film Festival's Blue Ribbon Award this year for his film "In The Company of Men," produced by NET. That film also won awards in four major film festivals.

Van Peebles was born in Chicago and operated cable cars in San Francisco before going abroad. While in France, he produced several short films and wrote six books, five of them in French.

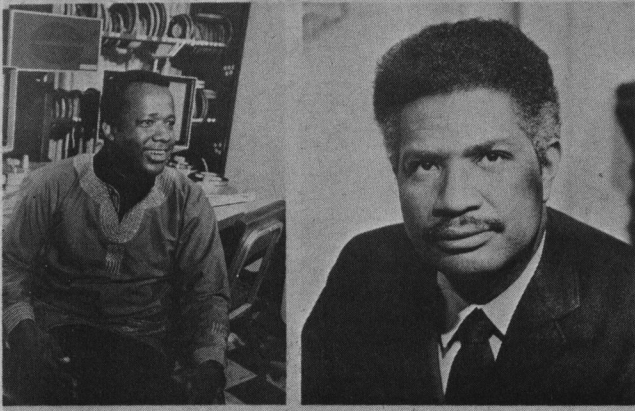
Davis, born in Cogdell, Georgia, has starred in a number of films, including "Sam Whiskey," "The Scalphunters," "A Man Called Adam," "The Hill," "The Cardinal," "Purlie Victorious" and "No Way Out." He makes his debut as a motion picture director with his most recent film, "Cotton Comes To Harlem." He has appeared in several television shows, including "The Defenders" and "The Nurses and the Doctors," and has written a few TV plays.

"Each generation must discover its mission-fulfill it or destroy it-" Frantz Fanon



Melvin Van Peebles

Tony Brown



William Greaves

Ossie Davis

Three prominent black filmmakers tell how they broke through the barrier of discrimination in the film industry in National Educational Television's "Black Journal." Tony Brown is the program's executive producer.

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