

## CHI-TOWN Happenings By Nichelle "Nix" Johnson

### *The Chicago International Film Festival Brings Good Films and Foxy Jackie Brown to Town*

The 34th Chicago International Film Festival (CIFF) returned to its two-week program, which for many was a good thing. According to Michael Kutza, founder and artistic director of CIFF, attendance was up 10% from last year. Over 111 features and 64 shorts were screened from 36 countries, 46 were U.S. premieres, all were Chicago premieres. One program which received a lot of buzz was the 2nd Annual Celebration of Black Cinema (CBC) which included a tribute to Pam Grier, panels, and films created by people of color.

Pam Grier's *Foxy Brown* was shown to a near capacity crowd at the 600 North Michigan Theater. Grier introduced the film, and following the screening, discussed her past and recent works with L.A.-based entertainment attorney, Gary Watson.

The panel "Black Face: Actors and Actresses, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" featured Pam Grier; Hill Harper (*He Got Game*, *Park Day*); Sterling Mercer, Jr. writer/director of *Park Day*; **Gary Watson**, entertainment attorney; and Jerry Martinez, author of "What It Was...What It Is". Grier explained the term Blaxploitation was a marketing tool to define the audience, but didn't reflect how she felt. Mercer focused on the roles of actors and consumers. He said, "Your money matters. It's the only thing that can change the opinions of those with no cultural incentives to put more Black actors out there. ... As long as we are not in a position to control the product, we will never be in a position to express the diversity of experience."

A second panel "The Making of a Black Film: *Park Day*, From Idea to Screen" featured *Park Day*'s writer/producer Sterling Mercer, Jr, producer Cathleen Alexander, the film's star Hill Harper; entertainment attorney **Gary Watson**; and Jeff Friday, president, UniWorld Films/Acapulco Black Film Festival. Mercer discussed why he kept *Park Day* independent versus going to the studios. "[The studio is] a form of artistic segregation just as heinous as any form of segregation...it's insidious and you become victimized, become brainwashed into accepting what's an acceptable genre for us." The panelists were very insightful and shared information on the film's journey from concept to securing investors, to distribution.

In addition to *Park Day*, the Celebration of Black Cinema Program showcased six other films representing people of color, including *Free of Eden* and *Down in the Delta*. *Free of Eden* stars Sidney Poitier and his daughter, Sydney Tania Poitier. *Down in the Delta*, Maya Angelou's directorial debut, won the Audience Choice award.

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