

REEL DEAL

Film Fests All in the Family

BY LORI S. ROBINSON

How much good could it possibly do for an unknown African-American filmmaker to show his first movie at a Mexican beach resort? A lot—especially if the tourists are more than your ordinary film buffs. Just ask Christopher Scott Cherot.

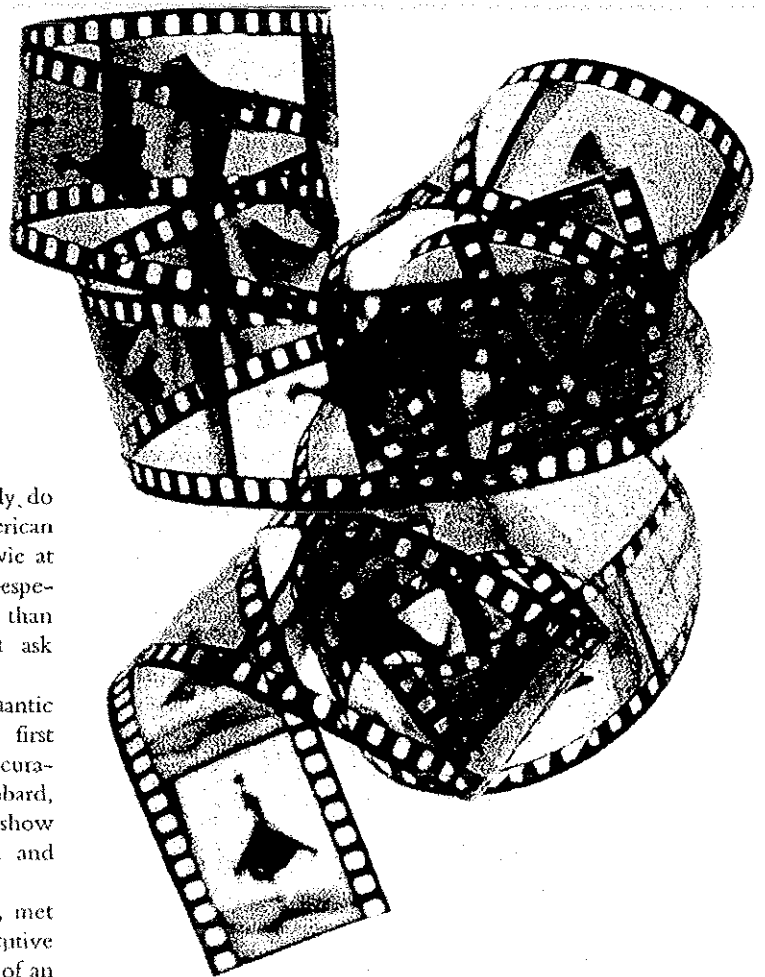
Last July, the writer-director screened his romantic comedy *Hav Plenty* on opening night of the first Acapulco Black Film Festival by invitation of its curator, Warrington Hudlin. Afterward, Kenneth Lombard, president of Magic Johnson Theaters, pledged to show the film at the chain's Los Angeles, Houston and Atlanta locations.

Still in Acapulco four days later, Cherot, 30, met Kenneth "Babyface" and Tracey Edmonds, executive producers of the box-office hit *Soul Food*, in front of an Orange Julius restaurant. The Edmonds soon became his executive producers. With their backing, the Bronx native screened his film at the Planet Africa section of the Toronto International Film Festival two months later. There, Miramax Films Chairman Harvey Weinstein saw it and within a month, signed on as its distributor.

"What is powerful to me is that Black people put together a Black film festival, discovered a young filmmaker, then two other Black people came and picked him up," says Hudlin, who cofounded the Black Filmmakers Foundation in 1978. "He went from complete obscurity to success, and every hand along the way, every hand that lifted him up, was a Black hand."

African-American film festivals—such as the six-year-old Contemporary African Diaspora Film Festival in New York, produced by husband and wife Reinaldo and Diarali Spech—have been steadily popping up throughout the United States for the past 10 years.

And they are not just in big cities. In September, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth will host the fourth annual Twin Cities Black International Film Festival in Minnesota. Produced for about \$35,000, the festival is



staffed largely by volunteers and is financed by ticket sales, business underwriting and foundation grants. The Sarasota Africana Film Festival, held last month in Sarasota, Bradenton and Venice, Fla., cost about \$75,000 to produce. It also boasts corporate and foundation funding, state subsidies and lots of volunteers.

These independent Black festivals not only give audiences opportunities to see more domestic and foreign Black films than Hollywood ever has, they also provide Black industry hopefuls and insiders with career-enhancing resources. Workshops, competitions and panel discussions have become fixtures. "They really help in terms of being able to connect to an industry insider," says Aqelah Davis, an aspiring scriptwriter. "It's helpful to know the obstacles that other people have come up against."

Black festivals also provide "a network so that directors and actors can meet each other," says Ayuko Babu, executive director of the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles. After actress Angela Bassett and director Euzhan Paley met at his festival, they decided to collaborate on a film about Bessie Coleman, the first Black woman pilot, Babu says. Festivals also give industry

RICHARD BRAGA/VEEP/PHOTONICA



Christopher Cherot with actors from his movie, Chenoa Maxwell and Robinne Lee. Warrington Hudlin, Robert Townsend, Bill Duke. Celebrity panel ponders questions from the audience. Debbie Allen raises a point. Music composers James Munné and Babyface. Halle Berry.

executives and agents a venue for measuring Black audience reactions to films and for scouting talent, he adds.

The need for Black film festivals is clear. Hudlin, who has been tracking Black releases since 1986, says of about 400 Hollywood studio releases each year, only eight to 13 are Black films. Ironically, he adds, African-Americans finance about 25 percent of box-office sales.

"We first started to do film festivals to just get people to see our films, and to get the filmmakers to get together and exchange their views," says Manthia Diawara, director of Africana Studies at New York University and a world-renowned film expert.

Ultimately, a film's success hinges on distributors, companies responsible for getting movies into theaters. "And unfortunately, [festivals] have not been able to help Black films pick up distributors," Diawara says. "That's the main struggle."

Haile Gerima, president of Mypheduh Films in Washington, D.C., agrees. "Festivals come and go. For years I've observed them. What we need in Black cin-

ema are independent Black distributors, exhibitors and producers," he says. Having grossed \$3 million and played for packed crowds in more than 35 cities without a distributor, Gerima's 1993 *Sankofa* is a story of rare success. He credits community-based word of mouth and the Black media for "launching" the film.

Still, organizers say Black festivals have generated a supportive circuit. And, though it remains to be seen if Cherot's case is the beginning of a self-empowerment trend, they are optimistic. "My plan for this film was to put it on videotape and use it as a résumé to get myself a deal in the future. I never really intended all this." At least for Cherot, whose *Hav Plenty* is scheduled to debut in theaters in April, the future is now.

LORI S. ROBINSON, a Maryland-based freelance writer, frequently writes on issues affecting the African diaspora.

FESTIVALS FOR '98

March 26-29

African Film Festival 1998: "African Visions IV-Independent Visions" comes to Columbia College in Chicago. (312) 344-7170; www.colum.edu/festivals/African/

April 24-May 3

Vues D'Afrique Film Festival in Montreal, Quebec. (514) 284-3322

April 15-24

The New York African Film Festival: "Modern Day/Ancient Nights" at Lincoln Center (at the Brooklyn Museum starting April 25). (212) 352-1720

June 17-July 29, except July 1

Newark Black Film Festival hits the Newark Museum and other venues in the city. (973) 596-6550

July 13-19

The second annual Acapulco Black Film Festival. For travel information, call (800) 318-1667. (212) 219-7267

Aug. 1-14

Black Harvest International Film and Video festival at the Film Center at the School of Art Institute of Chicago. (312) 443-3734

Aug. 5-7

Martha's Flavor Fest on Martha's Vineyard, Mass. (212) 726-2179

Aug. 20-24

Urban World Film Festival in New York. (212) 501-9668

Sept. 18-27

Twin Cities International Black Film Festival in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. (612) 825-1486