

ESSENCE

POSTED: FEBRUARY 3, 2009

Robert Townsend: 'When I Make Movies I Kiss Every Frame'

Kenya N. Byrd

Robert Townsend has never flaunted his talent. He's always gotten the job done and kept moving and shaking in this fickle biz called Hollywood. As an actor, writer and directors, Townsend's wisdom and business savvy in this industry spans more than two decades, boasting cult classic films such as "Five Heartbeats" and "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka." In fact, he gave plenty of our favorite funny men their big break, including Keenan Ivory and Damon Wayans, the late Robin Harris. So it's not surprising that Townsend would be the one to helm a documentary on Black comedians entitled "Why We Laugh," which pays homage to those comedians who paved the way for today's jokesters.

ESSENCE.com chatted with Townsend about blackface, foul-mouthed comedians and his tribute to America's single moms.

ESSENCE.COM: Mr. Townsend, welcome back! We understand that you have a wonderful new documentary that celebrates Black comedians. What is it about?

ROBERT TOWNSEND: It's called "Why We Laugh" and it's based on a book by comedian D Militan who I've known for a long time. He called me and said he wanted to make this documentary, and when friends call you have to be there for them. He'd already done the work and the book was published and he asked if I wanted to direct it. It's a wonderful history of the Black comedians of all time. I like to say that it's one part love letter and other just chronicling their histories. We cover everyone from Dave Chapelle to Richard Pryor and Amos and Andy to Step N Fetchit. It explores the power of the Black comedians, and also their new voices in terms of Black America.

ESSENCE.COM: We love that you chose to acknowledge those comedians who set historical precedents despite the backlash they received from the Black community. Why?

TOWNSEND: Part of the reason we chose to include the Amos and Andy and Step N Fetchit is because these guys struggled even harder than any of today's comedians. Those guys had to wear blackface, like Burt Williams, who was a genius. He was in "Ziegfeld Follies;" he was the highest paid performer back in the 1920's. We are a talented people. Just think about how hip-hop took turn tables and started scratching. Who knew? Again, Black people are really brilliant and so the film is really a healthy discussion about comedy from the turn of the century. Even discussions about Dave Chapelle and what made him walk away from \$50 million. We discuss where we are and some of the

parameters. We talk to Bill Cosby, Chris Rock, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Sherri Shepherd, Sommore, Marlon Wayans as well as politicians like Andrew Young and Maxine Waters, Kweisi Mfume, and scholars like Michael Eric Dyson to share their different perspectives on where Black comedians are today.

ESSENCE.COM: How do you feel about the comedic style of many of today's younger comics?

TOWNSEND: Honestly, I'm hoping some of them will see this film and it will make them think about the jokes that they do. Some of these comedians go a little too far and forget that comedy is an art. There's a way to make folks laugh that doesn't have to be mean-spirited.

ESSENCE.COM: That's awesome! But we have to tell you that we adore your work, especially the "Five Heartbeats." Does it bother you that a lot of people sleep on your talent?

TOWNSEND: You know, I love what I do and when I get to create I'm happy. When I make movies for the big screen or [television](#) I try to kiss every frame and capture all the moments. "Five Heartbeats" was one of those films that had a slow burn and had huge success when it went to DVD. I put my heart into it and just said let me do me. The fact that people love it is more than enough for me. I just wrote a romantic comedy that I believe will resonate the same way that "Heartbeats" did.

ESSENCE.COM: You already have such a rich legacy as an actor, writer and director. What's coming down the pike for you?

TOWNSEND: I screened my first Internet television webisodes of "Diary of a Single Mom," which costars Monica Calhoun ("Best Man"), Billy Dee Williams and Leon at Bishop Eddie Long's church in Atlanta. It follows the lives of three single mothers—a Black, Latin and three elderly women. This project is near and dear to me because I grew up in a single-parent home and I hope it will inspire and encourage a lot of single mothers out there that they don't have to give up.