

American Black Film Festival: Fifteen years later, still necessary

By **JOZEN CUMMINGS**

Glancing at the Hollywood landscape today, it might appear that ethnic film festivals like this year's American Black Film Festival are relics from cinema's more segregated past. The four-day event, which celebrates its 15th anniversary when it kicks off on July 6 in Miami, has long been a supporter of African-American filmmaking.

However, if you consider that at this year's Sundance Film Festival, there were no less than 30 black films and filmmakers showcased in some capacity, then one could argue that black film is making significant inroads beyond predominately black events and/or audiences. For example, the Salim Akil-directed vehicle, 'Jumping The Broom' proved to be the little film that could when it opened nationwide as the week's third top-grossing film, behind 'Fast Five', which also stars, Tyrese Gibson and Dwayne Johnson and 'Thor', starring Idris Elba.

The independent film, 'I Will Follow,' written, directed and produced by Ava DuVernay (pictured below) and starring Salli Richardson-Whitfield, Omari Hardwick, and Blair Underwood, received critical acclaim

while also managing to triple its box office revenue from an initial \$50,000 investment. Plus there are vets such as Tyler Perry and Spike Lee, who despite having philosophical differences about movie making, are still regarded as two of Hollywood's most successful directors.

But Jeff Friday (pictured above), founder of the ABFF and CEO of Film Life Incorporated (the company who owns the ABFF) says accomplishments like these are not as progressive as they appear, deeming such examples "the illusion of inclusion." The phrase sounds slightly Don King-ish, but it's no less true, Friday explains. "There's always going to be one or two independent films," he says, pointing to 'I Will Follow' as an example. "But that film didn't have any mainstream distribution."

Mention, 'Jumping The Broom,' and Friday is quick to point out such black niche movies are a dying breed. With the exception of Perry, Friday says, black-themed movies are not being made in significant numbers.

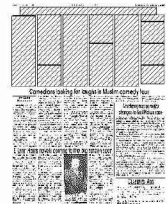
"The industry is going away from making black movies," he explains. "They're making big budget films and yes, they're smart enough to say we have to throw in a black

actor, but it's a coded success."

If this year's ABFF had a theme, Friday says it would be "looking back but moving forward." He recalls that the late 1980s and 1990s was an era when black actors and black crew members were being employed in critical numbers. From that era, Kennan Ivory Wayans will be honored with the Entertainment Icon Award. He produced 'Eddie Murphy: Raw' (1987) and 'I'm Gonna Get You Sucka,' (1988) and executive produced 'In Living Color,' the pioneering sketch comedy show that gave modern-day popular actors like Jennifer Lopez and Jim Carrey their first big break.

Robert Townsend, the director of 'Eddie Murphy: Raw,' and the cult classic 'The Five Heartbeats,' will open the ABFF with his new film, 'The Discarded Boys.' The film features Loretta Devine and is based on the true story of Vivian Saunders, a woman who started an alternative school in North Carolina for boys who were getting kicked out of traditional schools.

Other highlights at this year's festival include a screening of comedian Kevin Hart's new stand-up comedy film, 'Laugh At My Pain.' Academy Award-nominated director John Singleton will also be a part of a



screening for a 30-minute documentary on the making of his debut film, 'Boyz In The Hood,' which will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. Bill Duke will teach master classes on acting and Townsend will also

teach a master class on pitching a film to studios for distribution.

Friday says, the master classes, the screening of films featuring new talent and paying tribute to black Hollywood trailblazers are the reasons why the

ABFF is still necessary. "[Hollywood] isn't going in the right direction," he adds. "The festival has to keep beating the drum, we want to be a platform to show what black artists can do."