



News+Notes



Cedric the Entertainer, Nicki Minaj, and Ice Cube in *Barbershop: The Next Cut*

INSIDE THE BLACK COMEDY BOOM

A diverse new crop of ensemble films is bringing the funny to help bolster the spring box office. *By Nina Terrero*

▶ **ONE OF THE BIGGEST MOVIES TO** hit multiplexes this month likely won't be a superhero flick or a dystopian drama. *Barbershop: The Next Cut*, the third installment in the series, is leading a wave of black comedies at the box office, including the comedic horror flick *Meet the Blacks* and Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele's action-comedy (with a cute kitten), *Keanu*.

This mini-surge comes on the heels of the controversy over the lack of black dramas and performances nominated for Academy Awards. Ironically, the audience for black comedies has

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never been stronger. According to recent data, minority audiences purchased 37 percent of the 1.3 billion tickets sold in the U.S. in 2014. "With the general market, you have movies coming out all the time," explains Jeff Clanagan, CEO of Code-black Films. "Because there's a lack of movies [geared toward black filmgoers] coming out, the audience is much more loyal."

And comedies targeted primarily at African-American audiences mean big profits for Hollywood. The original *Barbershop*, released in 2002, grossed \$76 million on a \$12 million budget. *The Next Cut* (out April 15), which sees Ice Cube's character save his shop from gang violence, is on track to open at \$17 million. Already this spring, *The Perfect Match*—a romantic comedy starring Terrence Jenkins and crooner Cassie Ventura—has grossed more than \$9 million, placing it in the top 10 with the animated smash *Zootopia* and the third *Divergent* film, *Allegiant*.

Often released between Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend and summer, black ensemble comedies succeed, in part, because they are

reaching a historically underserved audience. "Growing up, I certainly felt like I wasn't seeing myself on screen," says *The Next Cut* director Malcolm D. Lee.

Yet onscreen representation of minorities hasn't improved much. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Southern California found that the industry has made little to no progress in presenting more nonwhite characters on film. "I feel like *Barbershop* is just as valid as any Judd Apatow movie," says Lee. "Everyone can relate to getting gussied up."

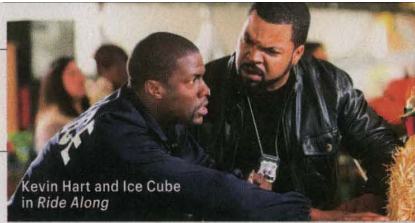
Which goes to prove a larger point—ultimately the appeal of these comedies is color-blind, or should be. "Everybody wants to laugh," says Key, who produces and costars in *Keanu*. "A dude slipping on a banana peel is a dude slipping on a banana peel. It doesn't matter if he's black or white."

The industry finally appears to be realizing, or at least discovering, that making movies that appeal to a broad range of people can only increase profits. "This is not Hollywood being purely altruistic," says Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst at comScore. "If audiences bring in enough money to make these movies profitable, Hollywood will keep making more of them." The *Barbershop* crew may have the last laugh.

Additional reporting by Devan Coggan and Ray Rahman



Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele in *Keanu*



Kevin Hart and Ice Cube in *Ride Along*

TOP 10 HIGHEST-GROSSING BLACK COMEDIES*

- 1 / RIDE ALONG (2014)**
STARS Kevin Hart, Ice Cube **OPENING WEEKEND** \$41,516,170 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$134,938,200
- 2 / THE NUTTY PROFESSOR (1996)**
STARS Eddie Murphy, Jada Pinkett Smith **OPENING WEEKEND** \$25,411,725 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$128,814,019
- 3 / NUTTY PROFESSOR II: THE KLUMPS (2000)**
STARS Eddie Murphy, Janet Jackson **OPENING WEEKEND** \$42,518,830 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$123,309,890
- 4 / BIG MOMMA'S HOUSE (2000)**
STARS Martin Lawrence, Nia Long **OPENING WEEKEND** \$25,661,041 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$117,559,438
- 5 / NORBIT (2007)**
STARS Eddie Murphy, Thandie Newton **OPENING WEEKEND** \$34,195,434 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$95,673,607
- 6 / THINK LIKE A MAN (2012)**
STARS Michael Ealy, Gabrielle Union, Meagan Good, Kevin Hart **OPENING WEEKEND** \$33,636,303 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$91,547,205
- 7 / RIDE ALONG 2 (2016)**
STARS Kevin Hart, Ice Cube **OPENING WEEKEND** \$35,243,095 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$90,835,030
- 8 / TYLER PERRY'S MADEA GOES TO JAIL (2009)**
STARS Tyler Perry, Derek Luke, Keshia Knight Pulliam **OPENING WEEKEND** \$41,030,947 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$90,508,336
- 9 / ARE WE THERE YET? (2005)**
STARS Ice Cube, Nia Long **OPENING WEEKEND** \$18,575,214 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$82,674,398
- 10 / WHITE MEN CAN'T JUMP (1992)**
STARS Wesley Snipes, Woody Harrelson, Rosie Perez **OPENING WEEKEND** \$14,711,124 **TOTAL BOX OFFICE** \$76,253,806

SOURCE: COMSCORE
*DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE GROSSES

THE LONGEST COMING-OUT STORY EVER TOLD



Mr. Burns and Smithers in the April 3 episode

After 27 seasons of innuendo, *The Simpsons* finally addressed the love life of Waylon Smithers, as Homer & Co. tried to find him a boyfriend to end that pointless pining for his boss, Mr. Burns. Here, showrunner Al Jean discusses Smithers' sexual awakening.

"[Late *Simpsons* exec producer] Sam Simon came up with the idea that Smithers was gay, and he said we should subtly imply in different epi-

sodes that Smithers loved Burns and let the viewers catch on. Which they did. Time passed and we realized everyone in Springfield probably knew Smithers was gay except for the man he loved.... [Writer] Rob LaZebnik pitched a story about Smithers wondering if he was ever going to get a reciprocal attraction from Burns, a man for whom the definition of 'gay' is still 'carefree.' I loved that we didn't

make a big deal of it, that the town knew he was gay and it wasn't unusual. They just wanted to find him somebody that was more of a match than Burns. The point of the episode is not because of who he is but because of who he loves—i.e., Burns—Smithers is doomed to some unhappiness. But in life that happens sometimes: What we want isn't exactly what will make us happy."

—AS TOLD TO DAN SNIERSON

RIDE ALONG: QUANTRELL COLEBERT; KEANU: STEVE DIEHL; THE SIMPSONS: FOX