

DOING THE RIGHT THING? NOT YET

Black comic actors have never been more popular, but they continue to spread stereotypes, argues Spike Lee.

By PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

Spike Lee says an East Coast magazine reporter recently informed him that he'd done a poll of people in his office—"white people in his office," Lee pointedly adds—who were asked what they thought of the world's most outspoken black filmmaker. The unanimous verdict: Hey, Spike, we don't like you.

"They all said, this guy's got an Upper East Side townhouse, courtside tickets to the Knicks, he sends his kids to private school," says Lee, who's telling the story on the phone from his vacation home in Martha's Vineyard. "And yet he's still mad. They all go, 'What's Spike Lee got to be angry about?'"

If you did a poll of people in Hollywood, where Lee is equally unpopular—he's viewed by most executives as a self-aggrandizing bomb-thrower—you'd hear a similar refrain: After a summer that has been celebrated as a major box-office breakthrough for African American comic movie stars, most people's reaction in town is, what has Lee got to be angry about?

Among today's burgeoning ranks of teen moviegoers, black comics have as much heat as Eminem, Jay-Z, Wyclef Jean or any other reigning hip-hop star. "Scary Movie," directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans and co-starring his brothers Marlon and Shawn, has grossed nearly \$150 million. "Big Mama's House," starring Martin Lawrence, topped the \$115-million mark. Eddie Murphy's "Nutmeg Professor II: The Klumps" did \$115 million in six weeks of release. Even "The Original Kings of Comedy," a low-budget concert film directed by Lee that features four lesser-known black comics, has done surprisingly well, grossing almost \$30 million in its first three weeks of release.

Black comedy has turned green, as in the color of big-time movie star salaries. Murphy makes up to \$20 million a film. Lawrence is getting \$16 million for the upcoming "Black Knight." Chris Tucker, who co-starred in "Rush Hour," a \$145-million hit, is being paid \$20 million to star in the sequel. Marlon and Shawn Wayans are being wooed all over Hollywood and are getting a big salary hike for committing to a "Scary Movie" sequel.

Black comics have become so popular that when studios put together a wish list for youth-oriented comedy actors, the talent pool of African American actors is now deeper than white ones. The long list of black comics includes the Wayanses, Jamie Foxx, Orlando Jones, Chris Rock, Eddie Griffin, Dave Chappelle and "Saturday Night Live's" Tim Meadows, who has what could be a breakthrough role in "The Ladies Man," due in October from Paramount. Please see Blacks, Page 104



Spike Lee designed a satirical poster for his "Bamboozled" that's stoking controversy.