

Urban film genre develops

Category moves beyond direct-to-video

By [STUART LEVINE](#)

Gang and crime shoot-'em-ups are out, comedy and complex family dramas are in.

So it goes in the so-called "urban" genre, a broad category of independent films featuring predominantly African-American and Latino casts and behind-the-scenes talent.

For the past decade, the storylines of these features -- which typically earn the bulk of their revenue through DVD sales and rentals -- mostly focused on murder and mayhem.

Examples include 2002's "The Playaz Court," a drama starring rapper Sticky Fingaz about a pickup basketball-game argument that escalates into characters popping caps into one another.

Or take 2003's "I Accidentally Domed Your Son," a Lionsgate-distributed "comedy" starring multiplatinum rapper Kurupt, about a group of young men who accidentally shoot the son of a Mafia don in the head.

However, thanks to the box office success of films such as "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," "Big Momma's House" and "Daddy Day Care," producers of straight-to-DVD urban films have realized you don't have to show blood to make a buck.

"The DVD market for these films is growing tremendously, and it justifies bigger budgets and better production values," says director Sylvain White, whose film "Stomp the Yard" arrives on DVD May 15. "Our goal is to create high-quality multicultural movies. There are lots of low-budget films out there that are redundant and not very good."

"Part of the problem was that the studios associated gangster and hip-hop with the urban market," says Jeff Clanagan, CEO of Codeblack Entertainment, which produces about 25 titles that are either straight-to-DVD or have a small theatrical window before moving to disc.

"There was an overflow of that type of product that hit the market, but now there's a consciousness for faith-based and comedies. That's what's working."

"We're not interested in that stuff anymore," agrees David Bixler, senior VP of acquisitions at Fox Home Entertainment. "It burnt out the audiences. We'd much rather have good comedies and family films. There's a hunger for projects that reflect the lifestyles of the African-American community."

This evolution hasn't come cheaply. Clanagan says that just a few years ago production budgets for straight-to-vid urban films ranged mostly between \$100,000-\$200,000.

But in the age of sell-through DVD, where retail space is more scarce, the old can't-miss indie strategy of simply putting together an alluring box to stick on the shelf at Blockbuster no longer works.

"You have to have the right cast," Clanagan explains. "There are certain people who may not be big stars by Hollywood standards but in the African-American and Latin communities, they're huge."

Without bankable stars, it's tough to convince consumers to purchase a copy off the shelf at Wal-Mart or order online.

The need to acquire this talent has sent average budgets for urban features towards the \$1 million mark, Clanagan says.

Among the more notable talents headlining this genre are Allen Payne, who starred in Tyler Perry's TV series "House of Payne," and Darrin Henson ("Stomp the Yard"). Both are big draws, as are the female cast members of CW's "Girlfriends."

"You need names that we all recognize, but you also look for a really talented actor that might not be as well known," Bixler adds.

At Fox, which opens many urban films in just a few theaters before releasing them on DVD ("Constellation," starring Billy Dee Williams and Gabrielle Union, arrives May 22 on DVD following its short theatrical run in February), success also depends on working with the right producers.

Such filmmakers -- think veteran director-producer-actor Bill Duke and Reuben Cannon ("Daddy's Little Girls") -- need a good sense of the urban marketplace and what audiences are looking for.

Adds Jeff Fink, chief marketing officer at Image Entertainment: "Urban doesn't always appeal just to the African-American audience. The urban label has branched out and is now multicultural -- white, Latino, African-American. There are no real boundaries as to whom urban content appeals to."

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