

# PREVIEW

Andrea Stuart on Hollywood's streetwise screen success

## Murphy's Lore



In *Harlem Nights*, Eddie Murphy plays alongside his idol Richard Pryor

'Eeh-eh-eh-eh-eh.' For a man whose laugh is arguably the most famous in Hollywood, Eddie Murphy doesn't laugh very much. But if Eddie saves his smiles for the camera, his films usually have his studio, Paramount, laughing all the way to the bank.

It has yet to be seen, however, whether *Harlem Nights*, his latest offering, will be blessed with the Midas touch that has made his name a veritable mantra for American movie executives. So far things haven't been going well; the picture has been panned in the US, and in this country the film's distributor, UIP, is determinedly downplaying its launch in late May. And - perhaps this is an omen - Murphy has just lost a multi-million dollar lawsuit in the

US for plagiarism over the storyline of an earlier film.

*Harlem Nights* marks Eddie's directorial debut, starring his idol Richard Pryor and his best friend and costar from *Coming To America*, Arsenio Hall. On paper, it should be the proverbial sure-fire hit. But it seems that American audiences have had difficulty adjusting to a character somewhat removed from the well-loved persona Eddie has established in past films. In *Harlem Nights*, he plays for the first time a kind of 'baddie' instead of the more familiar cheeky, irreverent but lovable bad-boy of *Beverly Hills Cop (I and II)*.

Eddie Murphy's screen persona, like Chaplin's tramp, is the quintessential outsider/underdog. And indeed, each of his films' most memorable

moments play on the central metaphor of a man who just shouldn't be wherever the hell he is (a bit like being a black man in white America, maybe). In *Trading Places* he is the poor black street-hustler who changes places with a rich white yuppie; while in his most electrifying scene in *48 Hours* he pretends to be a black cop in a racist white bar ('I'm your worst nightmare - a nigger with a badge!').

Murphy's screen image plays on a universal and irresistible transformation fantasy updated with a funky soundtrack and some of the bluest language in film. It is a fantasy with particular resonance in the context of the American dream - that of the irrepressible 'little man', albeit a black one, who through sheer *chutzpah* and

guile beats the system and in the meantime teaches those tight-asses in authority a thing or two about humanity and 'real' values.

If *Harlem Nights* dies at the box-office, it will be virtually the first of Mr Murphy's projects to do so. From the moment he stole the show from veteran Hollywood leading man, Nick Nolte, in his first film *48 Hours*, Murphy has been the undisputed King of Comedy. His films have grossed more than a billion dollars and *Beverly Hills Cop*, the movie that launched his career into the stratosphere alongside Sly Stallone and Clint Eastwood, is the highest-earning comedy of all time.

With Eddie Murphy, otherwise known as 'Eddie Money', 'Big Money' or just plain 'Money' to his friends, it hasn't been just a case of everything he touches turning to gold; more a case of turning to platinum (including his single *Party All The Time*, which got to No 2 in the American charts). Even his turkeys, like *Golden Child* - 'a piece of shit' is how Murphy described it - can't help making mullah, in that instance \$100m-worth.

This unprecedented cross-over appeal has meant inevitably that his films have been heavily scrutinised. Black critics and right-on white folk have often responded to his efforts with undisguised hostility. Apart from blanket criticisms about his misogyny and 'gay-bashing', they have accused him of pandering to Hollywood stereotypes; 'Making the sorts of films about black people that Hollywood loves to sell,' the director Euzhan Palcy says.

Others have been even less restrained. The Afro-American journalist Armond White described Murphy's film *Coming To America* as a 'betrayal of every instance of politics, history, sex and ethnic culture that black people have ever known'.

Heavy shit. On the accusations of his homophobia and sexism Murphy is relatively sanguine. It is clear that he doesn't have a lot of faith in women ('My first reaction is

to be distrustful - especially of women') and he has declared that of the rumours spread about him (which include accusations of womanising, sexual harassment and drug abuse), those he finds personally most offensive are the insinuations that he might be gay.

But when it comes to betraying 'his people' Murphy loses his cool. He points out, rightly, how popular his films are with black audiences and that his studio is the most

black people to hear yet another tale of the mega-talented, politically-cred, black comic/musician/actor who ends up drunk, lonely and impoverished in some tenement walk-up because he got shafted yet again by the money-men. 'One of my major fears,' Murphy told *Rolling Stone* magazine, 'has always been that I'd get that call: "Your accountant's gone with all your money!" That kind of shit is spooky. So I know where every dime of my money is and nobody can sign checks for me.'

In this sense Eddie represents the new wave of black entertainers like Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey or Michael Jackson whose names dominate the Forbes 100 Best-Paid Entertainers List (Michael Jackson topped the charts as the highest-paid entertainer, of any colour, in any part of the world). Having learned from the bitter experiences of their predecessors that talent isn't nearly enough, they also recognise that Hollywood is colour-blind only if the colour in question is green; the colour of money.

But Murphy's success represents more than just a new mood among black entertainers. His career also reflects changes within the black community itself. Despite his wise-ass, street-smart characters, Murphy is no Richard Pryor. He wasn't born into a dead-end family with a prostitute mother and an absent father. Though he has had his troubles - a period of poverty after his father, a policeman, was murdered by one of his mistresses (hell hath no fury...) - Eddie Murphy, brought up in far-from-urban Long Island, is a product of the emerging black middle class.

This background permeates his comedy. It isn't the angst-ridden urban cry of a ghetto child like Pryor. It isn't even the edgy, politically-conscious satire we associate with the even more middle-class Spike Lee. No, Eddie's comedy is mainstream because in many ways his experience is mainstream. It crosses over because at 29 Murphy is one

of the first children of the black tv generation whose style and aspirations are culled from a racially amorphous, if cliched, source; he is a black suburban boy who spent his solitary childhood in front of the tv dreaming about being Elvis.

And he has been brought up in an American society where, for better or worse, black lives, courtesy of *The Cosby Show* and any number of other American sit-coms (those black lives that don't fall into the bottomless void of America's ever-expanding underclass, that is), are more accessible now than they

have ever been.

As a child nurtured on tv's cross-over dreams, Eddie Murphy's lifelong ambition to be Mr Entertainment, a latter-day Sammy Davis Jr, must have seemed simple - even a little hackneyed. But as a grown-up these dreams increasingly represent a dilemma, one that keeps all his mega black-pack buddies awake at nights, one for which there are no easy answers: how does one, as a black artist, achieve the autonomy and economic clout that only the mainstream can offer, without compromising your community?•

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racially integrated of all the Hollywood film factories.

He admirably restrains himself from mentioning (as others are fond of doing) that without his commercial success it is unlikely that fellow members of the 'black-pack', including film-makers Spike Lee, Robert *Hollywood Shuffle* Townsend and Keenen Ivory Wayans, would have had a chance.

But it is money, the filthy lucre, that provides the key to understanding the Murphy phenomenon. He has said of his profession that 'we are all whores', but if this is the case, then Eddie is the whore with the highest price. Having renegotiated his initial deal with Paramount into a hugely lucrative package, 'Big Money' Murphy is well on his way to becoming a multinational.

What Murphy has been able to do, up till now, is to merge the luck of being the right man - the right black man - in the right place at the right time, with an uncanny instinct for a money-making formula: he knows how to run a business.

And it is this talent in 'the art of the deal' that underlies Murphy's appeal - at least for many black people. This boy knows how to play the game. And he wins in life just like he wins in the movies. Most whites cannot imagine how demoralising it is for



**Spike Lee: Typical of the new class of Hollywood black-pack**