

## STREET CRACKS

## Townsend charges to top

By Larry O'Connor  
staff writer

Hollywood no longer asks Robert Townsend if it's cash or charge.

With him, they know it's comedy.

Of course, Tinseltown needed some convincing.

The bright young actor, comedian and filmmaker had to drain his bank account and charge \$40,000 on his credit cards in order to finance his first movie, "Hollywood Shuffle."

Townsend wrote, produced, directed and starred in the comedy hit, which has since grossed \$10 million.

After the success of "Hollywood Shuffle," and his latest film "Mighty Quinn," Townsend's stock is on the rise as a writer and actor, but stand-up comedy is still one of his main pursuits.

"I really enjoy what I do," said Townsend, who will perform on Saturday at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit, "and I try to share Robert. That's really the toughest part, sharing Robert, sharing my views, what I believe in."

It's like being naked.

Returning to the comedy stage makes the circle complete for Townsend. He began polishing his stand-up routine in New York after graduating from Hunter College.

HE BLAZED the comedy trails with another upstart comedian. His name: Eddie Murphy.

In fact, Townsend and Murphy

were the two finalists in an audition for a spot on "Saturday Night Live." Murphy not only got the part, but went on to instant stardom. Townsend later produced Murphy's concert movie, "Raw."

Townsend was left behind to toil on the nightclub circuit. Undaunted, he began working on other aspects of his career, such as writing and acting.

The latter proved fruitful, landing him parts in such films as "American Flyers" and "Soldier's Story" along with Denzel Washington (who co-stars in "Mighty Quinn").

Nonetheless, Townsend was frustrated by Hollywood and the limited roles there were for blacks in movies. "Hollywood Shuffle" was a semi-autobiographical painting of that.

The film was not only humorous, but proved a point. And perhaps the work of Townsend and Spike Lee will open the door for other black filmmakers as well.

"I think it has had an effect," Townsend said, "and I have seen some changes. There's still not enough."

"I think Spike Lee and myself want to do something about the images that we disagree with. Making films is the only way to change that."

Already, Townsend is busily working on the script for another film. During the phone interview, the whirl of the computer printing the manuscript for "Heartbeats" could be

heard in the background.

THE FILM is about a black singing group similar to stand-up groups like the Spinners and Four Tops and focuses on the friendship that develops between the members.

Stand-up comedy somehow finds a place in it all. Although he's not used to film and television work, the stage is the glue that holds it all together for Townsend.

"It's therapeutic," he said. "When you get out there and you start working your chops, I discover a lot of things about me that I didn't know before."

"I let my guard down and I discover all these things. It's great."

Townsend's calling card is being able to find humor in any situation, whether as a struggling actor/comedian in New York or growing up one of four children on the tough west-side of Chicago.

At 16, he became a member of The Experimental Black Actors Guild, and later, Second City. Townsend was started on the laugh path.

Townsend lists a wide variety of comedic influences, from Lily Tomlin to Danny Raye, from Richard Pryor to Bill Cosby. The latter might be used to compare both Townsend and fellow comedian Eddie Murphy in their early days.

"I wasn't as clean as Cosby," Townsend said. "I was a little blue,



Despite his success as an actor and filmmaker, stand-up comedy is still one of Robert Townsend's main pursuits.

but Eddie was on the edge."

In times of shock comedy, such as Sam Kinison, Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, Townsend takes a less abrasive approach to humor. He

keeps it clean because, "I think my mother would kill me if she heard me talking like that."

IN THE END, Townsend believes whatever works best depends on the individual.

"I love Richard Pryor. I dig what he does," Townsend said. "But I can't do it. If I try I'll hear, 'Robert why did you curse? It doesn't look good on you, man.'"

"Then there's confrontational type of humor. . . I'm not into the black

versus white thing," he added. "I get uncomfortable in that arena. But Richard Pryor will say, 'white people are crazy. . . He'll pour it out.'"

"There's a different zone there. I'm more of an artsy comedian, like a picture. In the end, you know who I am."

Robert Townsend will perform at 8 p.m. Saturday, March 11, at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. Tickets are \$21.50 and \$18.50. For information, call 872-1000.

## COMEDY CLUBS

Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send us the information: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

## ● CHAPLIN'S EAST

Heywood Banks will appear Wednesday through Saturday, March 8-11, at Chaplin's East, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and

8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 792-1902.

## ● CHAPLIN'S WEST

Glen Farrington will perform on Tuesday through Saturday, March 7-11, at Chaplin's West, 16890 Telegraph Road, south of Six Mile, Detroit. For information, call 533-8866.

## ● COMEDY SPORTZ

Comedy Sportz at the Heidelberg will have improvisational comedy at

8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 995-8888.

## ● TED HOLUM

Ted Holum will perform Wednesday through Saturday, March 8-11, at Joey's Comedy Club, 35071 Plymouth, west of Wayne Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Thursday

is no smoking night. For information, call 261-0555.

## ● COMEDY CASTLE

Dennis Wolfberg will appear Tuesday through Saturday, March 7-11, at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 2593 Woodward, Berkley. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 542-9900.

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