

MOVIES

Race reversal misses

BY PATRICIA BIBBY
AP NEWSWYRETS

On the face of it, the premise of "White Man's Burden" would make for a fascinating study of race in America. In the film, starring John Travolta and Harry Belafonte, blacks are dominant and whites are oppressed.

This race reversal could inspire a provocative exploration of the psychology of racism. The first few minutes alone are rich with possibilities as you are forced to imagine life in another person's skin.

What emerges, however, is a disappointing effort that drives this gimmick into the ground while adding little to the discussion of race. Stereotypes aren't exploded, they are merely amplified to caricature extremes. And with a leaden plot that has so little energy, it actually seems to suck air from the audience. The only thing this film provokes is a yawn.

First-time director Desmond Nakano draws such broad strokes that if you reverse the roles once again, making blacks the oppressed and whites the oppressors, the portrayals would be nothing short of insulting.

Louis Pinnock (Travolta) is the picture of a noble working stiff. He labors hard at a candy factory (nice opening shots of chocolate and vanilla swirling around) and runs extra errands to ingratiate himself with the boss. He has a wife (Kelly Lynch) and two small children. They live in a run-down little hotel that's a stone's throw from a gang of brooding, white skinheads who play incessant heavy metal music.

Their world seems crowded, both physically and psychologically. It's stifling and soul-deadening. The encroaching urban noise pollution alone would drive most people to distraction. We're repeatedly fogged over the head with the idea that Louis is a good father. Providing for his children is his greatest pleasure and happiest virtue, we're told in no uncertain terms... over and over again to the point of overkill.

Belafonte is Thaddeus "Thom," the moneyed candy factory owner who lives in a Moorish mansion with peacocks on the lawn, in what could pass for Beverly Hills. He's also a racist fond of pointing out that white people are genetically inferior.

He is tended to by his white maid and has a wife who organizes charity fashion shows to benefit underprivileged white kids.



BOB MATHIAS

Provocative drama: John Travolta and Harry Belafonte star in a "White Man's Burden," a disturbing and provocative "what if" drama about a white man trying to succeed in a world in which the racial balance of power, as we know it, as been reversed.

Through a chance, brief encounter, Louis and Thaddeus' lives become inextricably linked. There's a misunderstanding that sets into motion a series of crushing blows for Louis, and his life begins to collapse around him.

One minute he's in the working world on the verge of a promotion, the next he's out of work fending off a heartless landlord threatening eviction. Unable to get a job, he becomes more desperate for cash.

This leads him, improbably, to take Thaddeus' hostage, which sets up the bulk of the action, or lack thereof, of the film. Louis rationalizes that it was Thaddeus' fault that he was fired, so Thaddeus should pay him for all the time he's missed on the job.

When this film drags itself listlessly to the finish line, with Kelly Lynch shutting the door on Belafonte, you'll probably be wishing it had been you shutting the

door on this film. "White Man's Burden" isn't totally without merit, however. There are fleeting moments when Nakano hits a racial trulism that resonates. For instance, at the end of the charity fashion show, a group of poor white kids is brought on stage so the crowd can feel amply superior to these little darlings.

There's another time when Belafonte tells Travolta something to the effect of "you're not like the rest, you're articulate." How many times have we heard that about people of other races?

But these are true notes lost amid a cacophony of false ones, not the least of which is Travolta's ridiculous urban-ghetto accent. When he declares that he was just "raising" someone a question, it's so ludicrous, it's funny.

Produced by Lawrence Bender, the Rysher Entertainment picture is distributed by Savoy Pictures.

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