

'Jumping the Broom' takes a different comedic turn

The producers of the African American comedy aim to show that positive, uplifting black films can be successful in the Hollywood arena.



Paula Patton, left, and Angela Bassett star in "Jumping the Broom." (Jonathan Wenk, TriStar Pictures / May 5, 2011)

By Greg Braxton, Los Angeles Times

May 5, 2011

The makers of "Jumping the Broom" are looking for a leap of faith.

One of those *other* films opening this weekend against the powerhouse "Thor," the African American comedy about two socioeconomically opposite families who clash when they meet at a lavish wedding appears at first glance to be a lightweight contender. The low-budget Tristar Pictures release has no A-list stars, is not in 3-D and lacks any characters with the superhero strength of the hammer-wielding Norse god.

But the creative forces behind "Jumping the Broom" have their own hammer to throw down, determined to prove that black films with educated and ambitious characters belong in the mainstream Hollywood arena, even though most studios have dialed down development of films with predominantly African American casts.

They also want to demonstrate that black filmmakers can produce an alternative to the broader comedies, as well as the popular Tyler Perry brand, that have become perhaps the most dominant — and controversial — African American voices in popular culture.

"We attempted to raise the bar a little," said Bishop T.D. Jakes, one of "Broom's" producers. "There are images [of black people] that need equal time. That is not to negate the other images, because they exist in all communities."

"Jumping the Broom," which is also facing off Friday against another wedding-themed comedy, "Something Borrowed," is arriving two weeks after Perry's "Madea's Big Happy Family." And even before its release, it has

earned the dubious distinction of being the first — and perhaps only — major black-themed film this year in which the central male character is not dressed as an overweight, outrageous black woman. "Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son" with Martin Lawrence has come and gone, the "Madea" movie is fading fast (the film's box office dropped off more than 60% in its second week) and "The Skank Robbers," featuring Lawrence and Jamie Foxx as ugly female bank robbers, is still on the horizon.

In "Jumping the Broom," the only characters wearing dresses are female, and there is no slapstick. The cast is photogenic and the locations are picturesque (though set on the East Coast, the movie was primarily shot in Nova Scotia, Canada). While many of the characters have active libidos, religion plays a significant role, particularly in some unexpected dramatic plot twists (Jakes is the founder and senior pastor of the Potter's House, a 30,000-member church in Dallas, which partially financed the roughly \$7-million film).

"We really wanted to do a smart, classy comedy that African Americans could feel real good about," said producer Tracey E. Edmonds, who said the filmmakers kept a tight rein on the story and characters to keep the tone of the film from going over the comedic top.

"We also wanted to show how much black men love their women," she said. "In a lot of films, black men are shown treating women in inappropriate and improper ways. Our films really showcase African American love."

The film reunites Angela Bassett and Loretta Devine from the landmark "Waiting to Exhale," and costars Paula Patton, Laz Alonso, Mike Epps and Julie Bowen ("Modern Family"). The principal story line revolves around the vibrant characters played by Patton and Alonso, two professionals in love who discover that the road to the altar is filled with potholes, especially since her family is fabulously wealthy and his family is solidly blue-collar.

"Broom" is also serving as a new — and more positive — reboot for Our Stories Films, the African American-owned film studio co-founded by Robert L. Johnson, who created Black Entertainment Television. The company, which was launched with considerable fanfare in 2006, was established to produce a steady stream of black-themed films. Edmonds, who had produced several films, including "Soul Food," was hired to run the production company as president and chief operating officer.

However, its first release, the 2007 raucous golf comedy "Who's Your Caddy?" was a critical and box office disaster. Several black critics and others in African American creative circles found the film raunchy and offensive, and a less-than-encouraging start for what Our Stories Films was supposed to represent. The backlash to the film, and an increasingly jittery economy, all but shuttered the company for years — "Jumping the Broom" is only its second release. And it's a far cry in tone from its first.

Edmonds said "Jumping the Broom" is much more representative of the types of films Our Stories wants to produce. "Caddy," she says, was a film the company picked up midway through production. "Broom" is all theirs.

"We developed 'Jumping the Broom' from scratch," she said. "It's about making uplifting, positive films. I'm very proud of this movie. I know there's a lot of competition out there, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed and hoping this kind of movie can work."

Especially at a time, she said, when the marketplace for African American films has suffered because most studios are reluctant to produce and distribute such fare. "Things have gone backwards instead of forward," she said. "Hopefully, 'Jumping the Broom' will open up the doors and create many more opportunities."

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