

We caught Robert Townsend's "Living The Shuffle," which is running at The Marsh, a theater located in Berkeley. Cameron Opartkietikul wrote a perceptive review in The Daily Californian, Feb.24,2020.

"In the show, audiences are blasted through Townsend's life story as he showcases significant, character-building moments through a series of vignettes. Townsend incites reactions of awe and ponderance as he dominates the empty stage, performing vivid reenactments and impersonations of experiences he's had in his filmmaking career. Through these revitalizations, Townsend brings viewers into his past, allowing them to see life from his perspective.

"Townsend decodes his essence as an artist and how it's deeply ingrained in his everyday walk — from stealing Shakespeare records from the library to crafting his film without the controversial influence of white Hollywood, meeting Frank Sinatra at a dinner with mafia members to finally climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. Townsend reveals the vulnerable tribulations of being a Black actor in Hollywood from 30 years ago to now; his experience is all the more relevant and applicable today. "Living the Shuffle" is an influential testimony to how far he's come, from the dangerous West Side of Chicago in the 1950s, drawing from the many lessons he's learned along the way. "

It's a great show which I thoroughly enjoyed. After the show, we went to a Mexican restaurant with Robert Mailer Anderson, a novelist and film-maker and Nicola Anderson, a teacher. The next day, I took Robert to the legendary Oakland breakfast spot, Lois The Pie Queen, where Tennessee and I interviewed him. When patrons recognized him, he was mobbed. Everybody wanted autographs, selfies.

Carla Blank: Are you your own writer and director, and do you design your projections? And if so do you use video documentation to help develop the work?

Robert Townsend: Do I use video documentation? Sometimes I will videotape myself but when ideas come to me they just start flowing and I just start writing them down. When I write I only listen to jazz.

Ishmael Reed: Who are your favorite jazz musicians?

Robert Townsend: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious, and Oscar Peterson.

Carla Blank: Is the work still changing from performance to performance and if so in what ways?

Robert Townsend: My work is changing. You know, each time I do the show it starts to tell me what I want to add to my show, so I'm in ten performances now. So because there are only ten

performances there are more statements I want to make about Hollywood and what it is to be a man and Black in America.

Ishmael Reed: Some of the technology has become less expensive. I asked the videographer, Robert Polidori, who shot our film, “Personal Problems,” compare the costs of the equipment that we spent in 1981, how much would state of the art equipment cost today. He said that you could rent expensive equipment per day for very little in comparison to 1981 prices.

Robert Townsend: Right. Right now because of digital cameras and editing on computers and what have you, the entry level to make a movie is way cheap, so it’s just really about pure creativity and what you can come up within your mind and what stories you want to tell because back when I did “Hollywood Shuffle” I had to shoot with 35-millimeter film and then you had to process the film and then you had to get what you call the eight plates and an old fashioned machine to rip the film. Now the only thing that will stop this generation of filmmakers is fear because some people don’t have the courage and some people don’t have the talent to execute it in the making of a low budget film the right way. I went to Catholic school in Chicago and somebody had printed a one-way ticket to Africa and all the things you can get on this one-way ticket like all the fried food, and watermelon that you could eat. You could play basketball all day, and I’m going to tell you it was racist all day, but it made me laugh. I was one of fifteen Black kids at this all White Catholic school but at least it was creative and it made me laugh.

Ishmael Reed: Let me ask you this. Did you hear the joke that the only way to get Black people to vote is to put a voting booth in a Popeye’s?

Robert Townsend: That’s funny. You have all of these Black people fighting over chicken and I went to Popeye’s five times and the line was around the block.

Ishmael Reed: Well this is a remark made by the African actress Cynthia Erivo, who plays “Harriet Tubman,” in which, during slavery, the only villain was the Black guy. I don’t know if you’ve seen it. Erivo retweeted the Popeye joke.

Robert Townsend: Oh, yes, yes, yes, I have seen it.

Ishmael Reed: But I mean the slave master saves Harriet Tubman from the Black boogeyman and I did a lot of research on Harriet Tubman for my play, “The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda,” and I didn’t run across such a character. Our actress, Roz Fox, received an AUDELCO Award for her performance, which unlike the Oscars was awarded by Black actors who know when you’re shuckin’ and jivin’.

Robert Townsend: The way that Hollywood tells our stories there’s always that twist for them to get that green light.

Ishmael Reed: Is that for the mall? Are they catering to White audiences when they shape Black characters? Relying on the same stereotypes that comfort the box office.

Robert Townsend: It’s not about us. It’s really not about us. I’d love to say it’s about us, but it’s not because we already know this. If you’re watching a movie and you’re saying, “Oh, we’re going to get treated like crap, “okay we’re going to get talked to,” “okay, we’re going to get called so many niggers in the movie,” we know this--

Ishmael Reed: Tarantino?

Robert Townsend: Yes.

Ishmael Reed: Do you think traditional African Americans will ever play roles in Hollywood again? I mean you have Martin Luther King played by a guy with a British accent (David Oyelowo).

Robert Townsend: There is a certain essence to Martin Luther King that the actor (David Oyelowo) didn't understand.

Ishmael Reed: Well, do they find traditional African Americans difficult to deal with. When we interviewed Lou Gossett he said that Hollywood found him demanding.

Robert Townsend: Black British actors are well trained. They take their craft very seriously, where here we don't have the great acting teachers, like the Stella Adler and Ivana Chubbuck. That's why British actors are getting all of the roles.

Ishmael Reed: Well what do you suggest traditional African Americans actors do? My director Rome Neal and I have used a lot of them over the years and they're excellent.

Robert Townsend: Those who are on top of their craft work a lot, but I think it's not that many. There's only a handful of leading men and women, who Hollywood finds marketable. So the bottom line is money, so if you want to make your money back--everybody wants Denzel, everybody wants Kevin Hart, everybody wants, you know whichever that hot comedian is. They want to put butts in the seats.

Ishmael Reed: Is that tokenism?

Robert Townsend: I wouldn't say tokenism. I say it's about people protecting their investment. So if I'm going to put \$8,000,000 in your movie how am I going to get my \$8,000,000 back? So if I say, "I got so and so who is a rapper and they're going to star in the film" that rapper may have a big audience. Right now everything is about social media, so it's about how many people follow me, I've got 5,000,000 people, I've got 2,000,000 people so if they figure your 5,000,000, my 5,000,000, this 2,000,000, this 400,000 come together, we can run numbers and say, "We're going to generate \$7,000,000 this weekend."

Ishmael Reed: Why don't wealthy Hollywood actors have the initiative that you have to make their films as you did with "Hollywood Shuffle?"

Robert Townsend: Some people have the hustle gene and some people don't. You know, how they complain, "Oh, the White man's stopping us. We can't--" You figure out how to hustle. I think a lot of people don't know how to hustle.

Ishmael Reed: Let me ask you this. You know the race films. You had 500 films up until the 1950s that were made by Black independent filmmakers.

Robert Townsend: Right. Like Oscar Micheaux.

Ishmael Reed: There were a whole bunch of them. They had studios in every city, in the Midwest, the South, all over, and it came to the end because of the expenses of the technology and Sidney Portier got decent roles in Hollywood.

Robert Townsend: Here's the thing. We're in an interesting time because now everybody has a camera. But everybody doesn't have the talent to make movies and make them well. Like everybody can make something but a lot of the stuff is not well written, not well cast, not well-

produced, all of that. We have 500,000 people with cameras now. But what will you watch and what will have your attention? So now, anybody can make a movie, but people have to have talent. Like, you just flipped the script when you talked about Lin-Manuel (Miranda) and how you came at it, but that's part of your gift as an artist and you can flip it and see something that nobody else sees. We have an abundance of people shooting stuff these days, but there's not enough interesting stuff that will engage.

Ishmael Reed: So you admire Sidney Poitier.

Robert Townsend: Yes, I do.

Ishmael Reed: How does he get over and the other guys don't? He faces a lot of criticism from Black critics and writers.

Robert Townsend: Here's the thing with Mr. Poitier. He did something that for the rest of his life he should be honored and revered because he showed us on the screen that we were men and men that had a voice when other men of color didn't have a voice.

Ishmael Reed: The critics are saying that he's been neutered.

Robert Townsend: Well here's the thing. There is a part that early on in his career, because he was the first, he was walking the high wire. So it's like he had to be everything for everybody. But what I took away was that there was a Black man on the screen that was not bowing his head. But he told me this--here's where he flipped. He said he had done all these movies and there was a part where he never got the girl, then he did for "For Love of Ivy"(1968). Then he started to make a shift. Then he said that he was going through it and that Fred Williamson had written an article in The New York Times and said he was an Uncle Tom. That hurt him. Like I said in the show, he didn't accept every movie that came out.

Ishmael Reed: "On the Waterfront"(1953) is a masterpiece.

Robert Townsend: Yes. So here's my thing--is that when Fred wrote that article that's when he said he lay in bed for two weeks and when he came out of it he said, "You know what? I'm going to make all these movies for working-class people." That's when he decided to do "Uptown Saturday Night," "Let's Do It Again." And he said, "I want to make working people laugh. I'm going to put it all together" and that was the shift. He went into comedy and he and Bill Cosby did this comedy but they were speaking to regular people. His whole world shifted. Jackie Robinson had to put up with crap, too. You saw all the amazing actors that he gave shots to, so that was his major shift.

Ishmael Reed: In "Why No Confederate Statues in Mexico" I have an essay about "They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!" (1970) in which I say that the character Virgil Tibbs foreshadows Obama. When did you start getting the idea for your show here? It's autobiographical but it's mixed with a lot of other stuff.

Robert Townsend: You know it's funny that Don Reed, who is producing the show with me, does a one-man show all of the time and so his one-man show inspired me. You know right now my life is I act, I write, I direct and I produce, so I wear all of these hats. But I'm a performer in my heart of hearts and I was like, you know what, I want to do my one-man show and part of the reason I chose Berkeley was because of Don but also because of you, Richard Pryor, Cecil

Brown because this is where Richard was reborn and this is a part of me that I worship Richard Pryor.

Ishmael Reed: He took my Western, “Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,” and gave the idea to the producers of “Blazing Saddles”.

Robert Townsend: I heard that. Is that the truth?

Ishmael Reed: That’s the truth. That’s why he’s always gushing about how I’m such a great guy and everything. Guilt. He was one of the writers for “Blazing Saddles.” (1974). One of the first books I published with my company, called “Francisco,” which was about a young woman who played the baby-sitter on the Diahann Carroll Show, “Julia,” and in the book, which was published in 1974, she said that a friend of hers who worked with her was reading my book, (“Yellow Back (Radio Broke Down”), in the studio. When Stanley Crouch brought up the theft in the Village Voice Andrew Bergman, who gets the story credit, wrote a letter to the Voice denying the theft. He didn’t mention that Pryor was one of the writers. Richard wanted to play the lead role in the movie and was denied. That was the beginning of his decline in Hollywood.

Robert Townsend: Who was the author?

Ishmael Reed: Allison Mills. Toni Morrison and William Demby praised the book. I published her second novel, “Maggie 3.” She married the late Francisco Newman, about whom she wrote “Francisco.” She became a Christian minister and went on to make Christian films. I think that this was an unfortunate direction for her art. She raised 5 children all of whom are achievers.

Robert Townsend: Okay. I don’t know her. Wow. Here’s the thing. Richard was a genius but I saw this chapter here is where he shifted like you said earlier. I know there was an impact you had on him, you know what I mean? There’s a nucleus here.

Ishmael Reed: It’s like the old tap-dancing competition. The Challenge. That’s how Black male art progresses. I got some steps. The other guy has better steps. A challenge. But it can be cruel, brutal. Right? Richard Pryor picked up our cutting-edge satirical combative style. We told him that he couldn’t bring that corny Las Vegas stuff up here.

Robert Townsend: The Challenge. When Coltrane was forced to play with Miles it made everybody step up their game to the next level. So like just hearing you speak is sharpening me right now because I go, “you’re the king of kings,” you know what I’m saying? It’s like, here’s the thing. For me, to do “Shuffle,” you’ve got to be fearless, you’ve got to be crazy, and you’ve got to take no, and you’ve got to take chips to fall where they may lay.

Ishmael Reed: So what are you going to do with the show?

Robert Townsend: You know what? Ultimately, I want to take it to Broadway. I want to share it with the world because I’m making real statements about everything and as I continue to shape it I’m going to make the statements that much more crystalized and clear. It’s the journey of an artist, but it’s kind of a walk through history and Hollywood told from the point of a view through a man who has lived it all. You know what I mean?

Ishmael Reed: Sounds great. Thanks.