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'The Black Version' of movies plays out at Groundlings Theatre

Imagine 'Grease' set in Compton and played for laughs. That and other films get an improv twist in the popular show.

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All it takes to sell "The Black Version," the consistently overbooked comedy show now running at the Groundlings Theatre, is to state the concept: Audience members shout out titles of iconic movies, the director picks her favorite, and a cast of veteran black comics improvises, with scant regard for political correctness, the "black version" of it.

People start laughing in anticipation alone — "like we're winning before we even started," says cast member Keegan-Michael Key.

Consider their most recent show, a parody of "Grease." Don't expect the adolescent crooning and swooning of Danny and Sandy as they negotiate the all-American halls of Rydell High.

In the much cruder "black version," retitled "Sulfur-8" after a hair care product, Darrell and Shantell are Compton High students who share a meal of fried chicken and biscuits at a Popeyes and, over the course of their fraught courtship, encounter trigger-happy gang members, evil baby mommas and gun-toting golf caddies. All this while singing their own versions of the well-known songs. The title number becomes an R&B ode to Sulfur-8 — "only one thing make your hair taste so great," one cast member improvises, remarkably in tune as part of a respectable four-part harmony.

From the first show a year ago, "The Black Version" has been a winner for the Groundlings Theatre, drawing crowds creator Jordan Black says he never encountered during his seven years at the company (he left in 2007).

Part of the reason for its success might be the novelty of seeing seven black improvisers on the stage at one time. There isn't as much improv talent in the black comedy world, Black says, because most of the role models are stand-up comics like Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock.

Wayne Brady, who appeared on the old improv TV show "Whose Line Is it Anyway?," has been a special guest on two of the last 15 or so performances of "The Black Version," including "Grease."

"It's been one of my favorite live improv shows that I've been involved in a long time," Brady says, and he plans to do more.

The brainchild of Black — a running joke is that the show was named after him — the show began in 2007 as a series of Web shorts. Back then, Black and his friends, many of whom are now part of the show's regular cast, including Gary Anthony Williams ("Boston Legal"), Daniele Gaiher ("Mad TV") and Phil LaMarr ("The Pee Wee Herman Show"), only parodied specific scenes, such as Meg Ryan's famous fake orgasm in "When Harry Met Sally."

When the opportunity presented itself, Black and director Karen Maruyama brought the show to the Groundlings, where it's been playing two or three times a month for the last year. Past movies have included "Back to Future," inevitably retitled "Black to the Future," and "Silence of the Lambs," better known as "Why You Eating People?" — and others such as "Star Wars," "Forrest Gump," "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory," "Top Gun" and "E.T.," their first.

Once a movie is chosen, there's no time for brainstorming — Maruyama summons the comics to the stage, sets the scene, sometimes asks the audience for a suggestion or two, and then they begin.

To some, "The Black Version" might seem an endorsement of stereotypes — the ghetto-talking pimp, for instance — but Black sees it as, in some sense, freeing.

"There's no room for political correctness in art," he says. "These things exist, people talk about these things, but they talk about them behind closed doors. What we're doing is bringing them all out into the open, which is, I think, a big part of why the show is successful. It gives people a chance to relax about race for a second, because we don't talk about race, particularly in Los Angeles."

Black, who also teaches at Groundlings, has noticed that some of his black students "get onstage and don't want to be black." The fear, he says, might be rooted in a notion that playing to stereotypes unfairly represents black people.

"Instantly, you have people in the audience going, 'That's not us.' No, that's not you, but there are some people who behave that way and act that way, and that's the truth. It's OK to comment on that," Black says. "Not every white person acts like Jim Carrey, but he doesn't have to worry about representing his whole race. I refuse to worry about that."

Black and his cast take particular joy in luring audiences into certain racially familiar situations and then, in a flash, flipping them on their head, especially in the more open-ended second half of the show, in which the cast presents the would-be DVD extras of the black version they've just improvised, featuring Shakespeare, Stevie Wonder and Oprah Winfrey, among others.

Maruyama, the cast's Japanese American director who the cast has declared an "honorary" black, agrees that "The Black Version's" kind of comedy gives ethnic comics a certain freedom denied them in more traditional venues. She knows where to draw the line — sometimes an audience suggestion will border on racism — but she's normally too busy having fun to worry about offending people. A comic herself — like Black, she got her start at Groundlings, and also worked alongside Brady as a featured guest on "Whose Line?" — Maruyama has an ear for the funniest crowd suggestions. Don't shout out "Weekend at Bernie's" or "Kindergarten Cop," or you will be publicly shamed.

Everybody in the cast emphasizes the fun of putting on the show, saying that improvisation, though it might sound difficult, is no real work for trained professionals. Williams mourned the day he had to miss a performance for another job; Key calls it "one of the joys of my life."

Black is hoping to take "The Black Version" on tour, possibly to Las Vegas or New York, but is only "in talks" at the moment.

Williams has taken on the role of de facto publicist, and he has a marketing approach to new audiences. "If all of Los Angeles does not see this show," he says, "I will declare the entire place racist."

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