

GAY LAW 101: YOU GOTTA FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS!

Advocate

WWW.ADVOCATE.COM
MAY 8, 2007

40th
ANNIVERSARY

UGLY BETTY'S

Rebecca Romijn

**"I guess
I'm drawn
to sexually
ambiguous
characters!"**

BLACK MEN ON TV

There's life after
Noah's Arc

HOT GAY DADS

20-somethings
bringing up baby

BRILLIANT CAREERS

Lawyers you can love

\$3.99 USA • \$5.99 CAN • £2.99 UK



#085

08

CULTURE

Black IS back

To many, the cancellation of *Noah's Arc* meant the end of black gay men on television. Kellee Terrell reveals that the brothers are just getting started

When the cable channel Logo unexpectedly announced in January that it was canceling *Noah's Arc*, one of the network's most successful shows, and turning it into a feature film, all hell broke loose. The black gay blogosphere erupted with comments accusing against the network of racism, calling the film a consolation prize, and urging a Logo boycott. In the words of one fan on Keith-Boykin.com: "If the [characters] were drug addicts, gay black prostitutes that called themselves 'niggas' every week, I am sure the show would have lasted."

Noah's Arc creator Patrik-Ian Polk downplays the controversy. "I am excited," he says of the film. "This could take the show to a different audience, especially people who don't have Logo or haven't heard of the show." But some fans will believe it only when they see it.

The show follows a group of gay black men navigating careers and relationships in Los Angeles. Doug Spearman, the gay actor who plays Chance in the show, even admits to mixed feelings about the film. "It's like the goodbye tour. Like the last scene in *Dreamgirls*, where they are all onstage together," he says, laughing. "I haven't quite wrapped my mind around the movie yet. I know that the network is excited, but I am



Dirty Laundry
writer-director
Maurice Jamal

like, *Why a movie and not a series?*"

Eventually, everything in Hollywood must come to an end. But after a mere 17 episodes, many—particularly, many gay black men—thought *Noah's Arc* was just getting started.

The feature film *Brokeback Mountain* and television shows *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* have been a boon to gay visibility, but their almost entirely white casts have left people of color behind. There has been a smattering of complex gay African-American characters on television, such as Keith on *Six Feet Under* and Omar on *The Wire*, both on HBO. But the majority of roles, especially in predominantly African-American comedies, still fall under one-dimensional stereotypes: Mandingo objects of sexual desire, sissies sashaying in the hair salon, and down-low "brothas" spreading HIV.

Cultural critic and blogger Keith Boykin says those paradigms of black gay characters speak of both racism and homophobia. "That's why it is so important for black LGBT filmmakers and TV producers

to make their own work," he explains. "We are the only ones who are going to tell the story the right way."

"Before *Noah's Arc*, there were no gay black TV shows," he adds. "So if nothing else, it created the possibility in the minds of the public and the industry that this is something that can happen and be supported."

Now that the show is gone, all eyes are focused on two new projects, Maurice Jamal's film *Dirty Laundry* and the Here TV series *The DL Chronicles*.

Dirty Laundry, written and directed by Maurice Jamal (*The Ski Trip*, *Chappelle's Show*), is set in a small rural town in Georgia. The dramedy follows a Southern churchgoing black family dealing with return of a prodigal gay son, Patrick (Rockmond Dunbar), who has been living in New York City for the past 10 years. Forced to face his mother, Evelyn (Loretta Devine), and the secrets of his past, including a son he never knew, the film tackles acceptance, love, and the power of family. Scheduled for release in August by Code-

black Entertainment, *Dirty Laundry* has its clichés (like the sassy Southern mama who threatens to beat her son with an iron skillet), but what makes this film unprecedented is the fusion of homosexuality and the “traditional” black family.

“Historically, we are behind the mainstream community incorporating homosexuality in our culture,” says the film’s executive producer Nathan Hale Williams. “We are in your family, your church, and yet many of us sit in silence.” And Williams says black audiences are ready to embrace just this type of film. “Black folks are hungry for good stories.”

The Human Rights Campaign called the film “historically significant” and in April 2006 sponsored a five-month cross-country sneak-preview tour in 10 cities to help create buzz. “Before you can have a *Brokeback Mountain*, you need a *Birdcage*,” says Jamal. “This is our black *Birdcage*.”

In May, *The DL Chronicles*, independently produced by Deondray Gossett and Quincy LeNear, premieres on Logo rival Here TV. Despite the title, LeNear and Gossett dismiss the racial connection. “The DL is nothing more than being in the closet, and there are all kinds of men in the closet,” says LeNear. “Our work just has an African-American slant.” Gossett adds: “The meaning of the DL is much broader than what you have read; it doesn’t always have to be about HIV or a man deceiving a woman.”

The DL closet exploded about six years ago—when coverage in *The New York Times*, plotlines on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and of course, an exposé on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, featuring authors J.L. King and Terry McMillan, introduced the concept to a wide audience—and pegged it as a black phenomenon. “We love Oprah, don’t get us wrong,” says Gossett. “But the only opinion being offered was a victim-predator. No one offered a reason why [the down low exists].”

Each 30-minute episode of *The DL Chronicles* is narrated by a different character, each telling his own tale of the DL. In the first episode we hear the familiar story of a failing marriage between workaholic husband Wes Thomas (Darren Schnase) and his sexually deprived wife, Sarah (Jessica Beshir). Add a flirtatious gay brother-in-law and a drunken evening, and well, you know what happens. The second episode is told by closeted talent agent Robert Hall (Terrell Tilford), who falls for a younger man, health store manager Austin Wade (Kareem Ferguson). Austin sees

Robert on the street with a woman, who turns out to be Robert’s daughter. Each episode illustrates a different perspective on the DL, and each features a lengthy, erotic love scene between the two men involved.

The series was a coming-out for LeNear and Gossett, who like the men on the show were in a closeted relationship—with each other. “We were out to our family and some of our friends, but people in the industry had no clue,” Gossett says. “There was a part of me that wanted to keep it that way, maintain that status, but in order to do this project honestly, we were going to have to come out.”

Although *Dirty Laundry* and *The DL Chronicles* have burst through the celluloid closet, creating more multifaceted gay content about people of color remains a struggle. “Getting things done in Hollywood is difficult in general,” explains Polk. “So if you add being black on top and then add being gay, then getting things done becomes even harder. It’s very important that the people in decision making positions [at the networks] care about diversity too.”

When Jamal showed *Dirty Laundry*’s script to a certain studio, which he does not identify, execs wanted to make the story all white. “There’s a white character in the film, and they kept saying ‘Let’s develop him more,’” he remembers. Jamal turned

THE ADVOCATE Poll

Is the concept of the down low inherently racist?

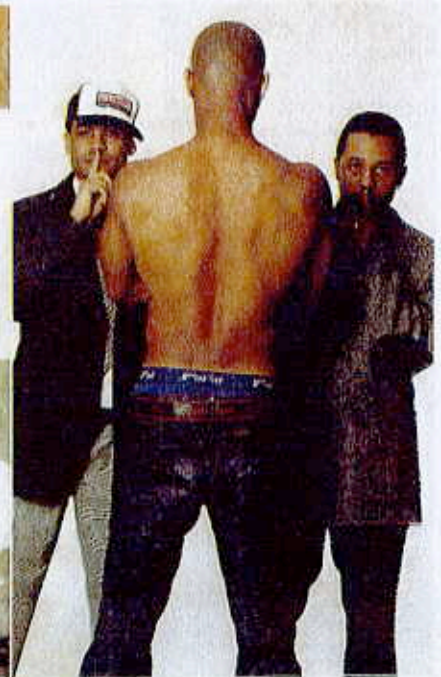
Sign on to The Advocate’s Web site beginning April 24 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the June 19 issue.

down their \$250,000 offer and raised the money himself. “I am not in this for the money,” he says. “If I allow that to be the main focus, I’ll start making shit like *Soul Plane 2: Back in Business*.”

Two shows and a film isn’t enough, but it is a nudge in the right direction, says Boykin. Still, while the younger generation could appreciate *Noah’s Arc*, some didn’t think it spoke to their experience of gay black life. So actor Dwight O’Neal, 23, and his 18-year-old writing partner Steven Emmanuel have created a series called *Christopher Street*. Independently produced, the show tells stories of four friends in their early 20s dealing with big drama in New York City, such as coming out, maneuvering relationships, HIV and AIDS, abuse, and self-love. *Christopher Street* hasn’t been picked up by a network yet, but O’Neal is hopeful—especially when he sees how far Gossett and LeNear have come.

Works like *Dirty Laundry* and *The DL Chronicles* prove that gayness is not always white and blackness is not always in the closet. ■

Terrell is an editorial assistant for magazines Real Health and Poz.



Clockwise from top: *Dirty Laundry*, *The DL Chronicles*, *Christopher Street*

DIRTY LAUNDRY: COURTESY MANHATTEN JAMAL DL CHRONICLES: COURTESY HERE TV CHRISTOPHER STREET: COURTESY CHRISTOPHERSTREET.TV.COM