



Festival Fare

May 1, 2000 By Angelo Ragaza

Look out for *Punks*. Touted as a gay *Waiting to Exhale*, the romantic comedy made a splash at Sundance in February, prompting *Variety* to call it “giddy and infectious” and “high-spirited enough to win over gay men of all colors.” With music mogul **Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds** behind the production, *Punks*, like *Exhale*, packs some big names on its soundtrack, like Janet Jackson and Diana Ross. But rather than sideblind the audience with a gratuitous quip about Haitians with AIDS, *Punks* treats HIV as a natural part of the gay black West Hollywood scene. Says writer-director Patrick Ian Polk, “I just wanted to show HIV in a way that hadn’t been done before. I tried to approach it in a humorous way.” *Punks* shows poz character Hill taking his meds and weathering a health scare, while commitment-phobe Marcus uses HIV as an excuse not to let love rule. When Polk started shopping *Punks*, the movie backers weren’t feeling it, but Edmonds “loved it and decided to finance it,” Polk recalls. *Punks* may soon follow other successful black romantic comedies like *The Best Man* and *Soul Food* into a theater near you.

In another genre, *STATS* (*Sex, Teens, AIDS—Take ‘Em Serious*), an upbeat educational video, hit the Hollywood Black Film Festival last February. With youthful energy written all over it, *STATS* shows African-American teens navigating the minefield of HIV, teen pregnancy and date rape, all against a bouncy hip-hop soundtrack.

Commissioned by the March of Dimes, *STATS* is the work of MEE, a Philadelphia-based production company devoted to serving audiences of color. “When you talk about trying to hit minority communities, you have to communicate in a way that people take ownership of the message,” says MEE vice-president alicia jackson. “You have to go beyond traditional forms and have a dialogue.” True to the word, *STATS* is being distributed nationwide to 900 chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha, a black fraternity, for use in a mentoring program between brothers, alumni and young men.