Festival Fare

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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.

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