Redemption Song

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Alex Waters has several strikes against him -- he's a young black man in jail, and he has AIDS. When he first appears onscreen in director Jordan Walker-Pearlman's fine debut feature film, *The Visit,* Waters (played by Hill Harper of *Get on the Bus* and *He Got Game*) seethes with hostility. For the umpteenth time, prison therapist Dr. Coles (Phylicia Rashad) is trying to get him to talk about whether he contracted AIDS in prison. Waters snorts, "I'm not that easy, sister. I don't know what kind of girl you think I am."

And though Waters says he didn't commit the rape that landed him in jail, "You admit to crimes that you were never arrested for," Coles says. "Isn't this justice?" Such exchanges are typical of *The Visit*'s rejection of easy moral judgments and the ambiguity of Waters' role as an offender or victim. "It's implied that he was raped in prison, but it's not necessarily the reason he has AIDS," Walker-Pearlman insists. "To me, it was very important not to say how. It shouldn't matter to the audience. What should matter is how he and others around him are responding."

Emaciated, worn down by the side effects of drugs whose names he isn't told, longing for loved ones who are ashamed to comfort him, Waters represented a fair set of acting challenges to Harper. For career reasons, more than one industry naysayer tried to talk him out of taking the role of a PWA in a low-budget movie.

But it wasn't Harper's first brush with the subject. As a Harvard law student in the early '90s, Harper worked at an HIV legal clinic. While there, he wrote and acted in *One Red Rose,* a short film about an HIV positive woman that aired on Showtime. To play Waters, Harper conducted exhaustive interviews with PWAs and restricted himself to one meal a day. (He dropped 25 pounds over the course of shooting.) And to heighten Waters' growing sense of isolation, Walker-Pearlman quarantined the actor from the cast and crew. "It added tension among the actors," Harper says. "There was a liberating element. When you realize that you're alone in the journey, you don't give a fuck. That can manifest itself in pure, vile anger and venom. It can also manifest itself in love and honesty."

The Visit does have moments of awkward pacing and an occasional surplus of dramatic zeal. But the acting is rich with risk-taking, theatrical in its spontaneity. It's gratifying to see this cast -- a who's who of beloved, under-appreciated African-American actors from TV and film -- play way past type. As the therapist torn between her duty to the parole board and her sympathy for Waters, Rashad radiates star-warmth through her mask of self-restraint. Marla Gibbs (best known as Florence, the maid on *The Jeffersons*) is a treat to watch as Alex's mom, and Billy Dee Williams

as Waters' rock of a father is nothing less than a revelation.

In the end, Waters and his family undergo a transformation that seems realistic and recognizable, but leaves an emotional impact long after the house lights go up. *The Visit* (out in February from Urbanworld Films) is a film less about AIDS than about human paradox -- about how shame can lead to dignity, how bliss can be found in the saddest of circumstances. Waters isn't a redemption-yarn character who gets a Hollywood ending. *The Visit*'s triumph is that it doesn't try to make him one.

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