

Movie Review

"Soul Man"
 Directed by Steve Miner
 Starring C. Thomas Howell, Rae Dawn Chong and James Earl Jones
 ★★★

In Melvin Van Peebles' 1970 film, "Watermelon Man," a racist played by Godfrey Cambridge wakes up one morning to find he is black. Both the Cambridge character and the audience learned a lot about being black.

In Steve Miner's new film, "Soul Man," a typical kid played by C. Thomas Howell also undergoes the transfor-

into his role as a black man easily. He and his roommate move into an apartment owned by Mr. Dunbar (Leslie Nielson), a racist who can't wait to find an excuse to legally kick Watson out of the apartment. Dunbar's daughter, Whitney (Melora Hardin), takes an interest in Watson that is both sociological and sexual.

Watson meets Sarah Walker (Rae Dawn Chong) and falls madly in love. Sarah, however, is not impressed by Watson's arrogance. The harder he tries, the more

acter. If it weren't for his looks, Howell would have to find a job elsewhere.

Rae Dawn Chong, who starred in "Quest for Fire," "Commando" and "The Color Purple," does well in her role as Walker but we don't get to see much of her since Howell has teen idol status and is the focus. The film would be a little better if Chong was allowed to act on her own and not play second banana to Howell.

The best scenes in "Soul Man" are dominated by James Earl Jones. Jones, best known as the voice of Darth Vader in the "Star Wars" films, is a veteran of such great movies as "The Great White Hope," "Dr. Strangelove," "The Man" and television's "Roots" mini-series. Although Jones' character may seem to be a black version of the John Houseman character in "The Paper Chase," Jones is able to put his personal touch on the role.

Jones is at his best in the scene where Watson, after having been jailed for no obvious reason except his color, tries to make excuses for not turning in a paper and asks Banks for leniency since they are "brothers." Banks tells Watson that he is willing to help but Watson had better get used to working harder than white people if he wants to succeed in law or anything.

"Soul Man" has the potential to be a good film that delivers a powerful message, but it doesn't try to make a statement. Every time a social problem raises its ugly head, the action shifts over to a weak joke. Subtlety is nice, but the subject of racism has been ignored and mistreated so often that the filmgoing public needs to have the message hammered into its brains.

Review by Karl Pallmeyer

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mation from white to black. The Howell character claims to have learned a lot about being black but the audience isn't given a chance to share in this education.

"Soul Man" is the story of Mark Watson (Howell), a nice yuppie type who has just been accepted into Harvard Law School. He and his roommate, Gordon Beckerman (Arye Gross), are overjoyed at the chance to go to the most prestigious, and most expensive, law school in the country.

Watson's father (James B. Sicking) decides he will let his son pay his own way through college. But the younger Watson's credit rating is bad, so the only hope he has of paying his way through school is a scholarship reserved for black students.

One of Watson's strange friends, Seth Jameson (John Bland) has developed some pills that are supposed to produce an awesome tan. Watson takes enough of the pills to qualify for the scholarship.

At Harvard, Watson fits

she hates him. They are both enrolled in a class taught by professor Rutherford Banks (James Earl Jones) and are forced to see each other every day.

During the course of the movie, Watson has several clashes with prejudice. He also wins the affections of Walker and learns that she has to work in the school cafeteria to support herself and her child. Then he learns that she would have received the scholarship he went to such extremes to win, and he's forced to make a decision between his future at Harvard and righting the wrong he has caused.

With a few exceptions, "Soul Man" is a weak film. C. Thomas Howell, who proved he couldn't act in his earlier films "The Hitcher," "Grandview, USA," "Secret Admirer" and the pathetic "Red Dawn," is once again boring and unbelievable. His over-acting and detachment from the role of Watson doesn't convince the audience that they should care for the char-

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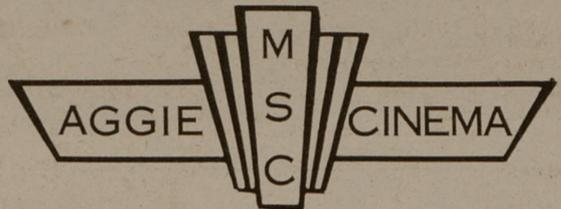
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