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Student Research Week Awards Ceremony

April 7, 2003 at 5:30pm
Chemistry Building Rm. 100



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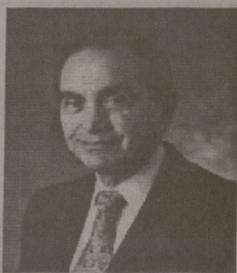
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WITH

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Director, producer, co-writer and star Chris Rock, right, shares a laugh with co-star Bernie Mac on the set of "Head of State."

Rock in the box office

By Isaac Guzman
KRT CAMPUS

In Chris Rock's mind, the first black man to be elected president won't fantasize about Inauguration Day, reviewing the troops or proposing legislation that advances social justice. Instead, he'll be obsessed with a singular image: being assassinated while delivering a speech in front of the American flag.

That's the recurring nightmare of presidential candidate Mays Gilliam, Rock's character in "Head of State," a new political satire that marks the comedian's directorial debut. Despite the undercurrent of tragedy implicit in the scene, it's a huge laugh-getter.

Like a lot of Rock's material, the joke's so funny that it takes a few moments before it begins to resonate. By the time you've remembered that that scene recalls the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and the Kennedys, Rock has already moved on to the next gag.

That's because Rock, despite his reputation for provocative comedy, doesn't really want "Head of State" to be anything more than a lark. While the film addresses everything from racism and economic inequity to the empty sloganeering of political campaigns, it spends even more time on co-star Bernie Mac—who plays Mays' brother and running mate—and his nasty predilection for smacking people upside the head.

"The audience out there wants their politics very simple and very practical," says Rock, 37. "Are we at war? Are we not at war? How's the money going? Am I going to have a job? That's what the people want to know. They don't really get into policy things."

"So I'm not trying to push a message," he adds. "If you get a message out of it, it's great. But for the movie to succeed, it had to be a comedy first."

The premise of "Head of State" is fairly simple. Mays Gilliam is a Washington, D.C., alderman with a good heart, but the political instincts of a boy scout. When the Democratic presidential nominee dies in a plane crash with just 10 weeks left in a campaign he was losing, the party deems Mays a sure-to-lose stand-in who might attract minority voters to future Democratic hopefuls.

Mays, of course, chafes under the conservative guidelines set up by his handlers and heads out on his own. He doffs suit and tie and dons diamond earrings and a succession of Sean Jean, Mecca and Fubu track suits. His campaign posters make him look like a hard-bling rapper and his rhetorical refrain becomes, "I'm running for president. Ya heard?"

In 1997, Rock ran a prickly, almost painful current of comedic voltage through our social grid with his HBO special "Bring the Pain." Its highlight was a routine that's become known as "Niggas vs. Black People."

In less than five minutes, Rock managed to sum up decades of pentup racial tension and frustration, simultaneously skewering the black bourgeoisie while excoriating the renegade spirit promulgated by some elements of the hip-hop generation. For his white audience, the bit subtly demanded that they reassess their own prejudices.

"When he details the difference between normal black people and these buffoons out there,

that was one of the most important moments in popular culture in the last 40 years," says S. Crouch, the African-American cultural critic and New York Daily News columnist. "It has to do with racism, it has to do with irresponsible, aggressive types who do not characterize an ethnic group."

For that brief flash of genius and his uproarious offerings of his weekly, satirical HBO series, Rock was christened "The Funniest Man in America" by much of the media. In Hollywood, those accolades never paid them did for Rock's hero and mentor, Eddie Murphy, or for contemporaries such as Sandler and Jim Carrey.

In 1998, it looked like his sidekick in "Lethal Weapon 4" might elevate Rock to Smith-like status. But he followed that with other roles in films such as "Dogma" and "Betty." In 2001, he starred in and co-wrote "To Earth," which found only middling success, was followed by the flopping of "Pootie Tang" spinoff from his HBO series.

"Two or three years ago, people were saying that it was either going to be Chris Rock or Chris Rock who could go into the mold of Eddie Murphy," says James Ulmer, creator of the "Scale," a ranking of Hollywood stars according to their box-office draw. "But the market is racist and there are only a limited number of slots for stars. And so far, Chris Rock has proved himself."

If some of Rock's roles have been a disappointment to his fans, "Head of State" is probably his best at giving them what they want. A part in which he's required to give speeches plays to his standup strengths and then a moment during his working class "It Ain't Easy" address—when anyone who ever struggled with math probably will wish he

"So I'm not trying to push a message. If you get a message out of it, it's great. But for the movie to succeed, it had to be a comedy first."

— Chris Rock
star of "Head of State"

was running for office.

Rock, meanwhile, always has been what Hollywood has to offer him. He deems business's preference for what he calls "B movies," films in which a naive, poor black actor is "discovered" by whites and finally over mainstream society with a combination of their help and his own street smarts.

"People do what works and no black actor has ever worked better than Eddie Murphy," Rock says. "So a movie like 'Trading Places' is great, when you do it on the highest level with Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd. John Landis at their peak. But if you do a cheap version of it, you really have something that's not so cool."

Rock still hasn't decided what he'll do after "Head of State" opens on March 28.

First he plans to spend several months at home with his 8-month-old daughter, Mays Simone, and his wife, Malaak Compton Rock. In addition to recent fatherhood, Rock's other big change last year was moving from hometown Brooklyn to suburban New Jersey.

"I was getting to be kind of a big fish in my neighborhood," Rock says. "Plus, I just wanted space. I had a baby coming. You want a yard. The whole rest of the country has a yard. I'm not asking for my own basketball court, but a hoop over my garage is fine. Is that much? That's not 'MTV Cribs,' is it? C'mon."



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Wed. April 9th 8:00am-10:00am @ Zachry
Thur. April 10th 8:00am-10:00am @ Vet School

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