

reel reviews



★★ Soul Man Plaza

I'm giving this movie two stars instead of one because *Soul Man* isn't just a dumb comedy hoping to make a quick buck. Producer Steve Tisch seems to be making a real effort to recreate the biting satire of his biggest hit, *Risky Business*.

Furthermore, its message appears to be heartfelt and one does get the feeling that *Soul Man* is lumbering toward a social consciousness. But the script is too tame and the jokes are too dull for this film to effectively tackle the large issues it raises.

The premise is certainly inventive. Mark Watson (C. Thomas Howell) has been accepted to Harvard but his father, in an attempt to turn his son into a man, has decided Mark should pay his own way through school.

In desperation, Mark concocts a crazy scheme to claim a scholar-

ship set aside for "the most qualified black applicant in Los Angeles." Since the only black student in L.A. accepted by Harvard is going somewhere else, Mark reasons that he won't be taking money away from anyone.

He pulls the stunt off with the help of some experimental tanning pills he gets from a friend. Mark swallows a handful of pills and his skin quickly turns coal-black. After dying his hair and getting an afro, even Gordon (Arye Gross), Mark's best friend, can't recognize him.

When he reaches Harvard, Mark begins to learn what it's "really" like to be black. He overhears racist jokes, gets beat up by dump rednecks, is hassled by the police and even begins dating a black student (Rae Dawn Chong) who has a little boy and a nighttime job to help cover her tuition.

Howell and Chong are OK as the two leads, and Gross has a certain glib charm as Gordon. But James Earl Jones, who plays Pro-

fessor Banks, does an embarrassing job of imitating Professor Kingsley, John Houseman's marvelous character from *The Paper Chase*. The rest of the cast is equally poor.

There are *so* many ways this movie could have been better. What if Mark decided that he was tired of being black and stopped taking the pills — only to find his skin didn't change color?

Or what if Mark found that everyone at Harvard treated him *too* nicely? What if teachers went out of their way to give him preferential treatment, never allowing Mark to prove himself academically? What if the other students were exceedingly nice — but no one wanted to be his friend?

But the script never goes beyond the obvious. There's a sad irony to this movie; the only funny jokes in *Soul Man* are the very racist slurs it tries to preach against.

by Michael Giltz