

Ex-con seeks job & dignity in depression era drama

Written by Kam Williams

Just paroled after doing a couple years on a chain gang, Homer Hobbs (Tyson Beckford) is eager for a fresh start. This is easier said than done, since he has several strikes against him, being an unskilled Black man with a record. This dilemma is compounded by the fact that it's the State of Georgia during the height of the Great Depression, so the unlucky ex-con is definitely dependent on the kindness of others for help until he can get on his feet.

He is fortunate enough to cross paths with a street hustler named Benny Potter (Reginald T. Dorsey) who brings him to a rooming house run by Gracie (Lynn Whitfield), a Bible-thumping landlady with the proverbial heart of gold. She, in turn, directs Homer to the local fashion hall where each Sunday evening brothers don their finest threads to compete in a men-only fashion ball with the \$5 grand prize going to the best-dressed gent.

While gearing up for the contest, Homer makes a couple of other friends in flophouse neighbors Clarence (Glynn Turman), a suicidal alcoholic close to bottoming-out, and Lucy (Linara Washington) a pretty seamstress hiding a host of personal problems. Needless to say, none of these Black folks is exactly flourishing, which is why the guys look forward to the title of swank with the most swagger in the weekly beauty contest.

So unfolds *Kings of the Evening*, a "historical" drama written and directed by Andrew Jones which was ostensibly inspired by *The Swenkas*, a South African movie released in 2004. Although this flick claims to have been "inspired by real events," it appears that those events actually took place in an impoverished Zulu Township outside Johannesburg in the 1990s, in the wake of the fall of apartheid, not in the U.S. back in the 1930s. For that is when *The Swenkas*, which features a suspiciously similar plotline was set.

Sorry, it's hard to get enthusiastic about an anachronistic rip-off which fails to credit its source, and seeks to imply that the idea of male beauty pageants originated with African-Americans way back when. Is the film otherwise worthwhile? Yes, it's earnest, entertaining and well meaning, but it still weirded me out, to be honest, since I'd seen the original. Not your grandfather's *Jim Crow South*.

Good (2 stars)

Rated PG for mature themes, violence, smoking and mild epithets.

Running time: 99 Minutes

Studio: Picture Palace Films

Distributor: Indican Pictures

To see a trailer for *Kings of the Evening*, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aphdt4u3afw>