

Los Angeles Reader. Friday, July 6, 1984

## CINEMA

Compiled by Dan Sallitt

**Personal Problems.** Novelist Ishmael Reed conceived this two-part 1981 improvisational video about the day-to-day problems of a middle-class black family in New York City. Johnnie Mae Brown (Verta Mae Grosvenor), a nurse's aide at Harlem Hospital, is troubled by her sullen and uncommunicative husband (Walter Cotton), her uncertain relationship with her lover, the visit of two shady relatives who crowd their small apartment, and the bitterness of her in-laws over her father-in-law's death. The free-form narrative and dialogue are meant to increase the realism of the video, but it's dangerous to see improvisation as an infallible servant of authenticity: In nearly every scene the actors take the central concept and ram it home at such unnatural length that the effect is much stagier than scripted dialogue. Similarly, the shapeless story line is often wearying, though a few penetrating scenes pop up here and there: a harrowing confrontation with red tape in the hospital emergency room, or the gradual transformation of a lecherous old relative into a three-dimensional character. Bill Gunn (*Ganja and Hess*) directed. (DS) (EZTV, 8543 Santa Monica Bl, No. 11, 657-1532. Thru Sun at 8) ...

*L.A. WEEKLY July 6-12, 1984*

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**EZTV** Where you can see new works by independent videomakers in a casual, intimate setting. 8543 Santa Monica Blvd., W. Hilywd.; Thurs.-Sun., 7:30 p.m.; \$4 donation. Call 657-1532.

Thurs.-Sun., July 5-8 — **Personal Problems** (1983, Bill Gunn). "Oakland-based author poet Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*) has transformed the soap opera form into a naturalistic 'video verite' depiction of the plight of a middle class family in New York City."

ISHMAEL REED  
1984 Southern Circuit

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PERSONAL PROBLEMS. 1983. 16mm. Color. Sound. 112m.

Executive Producers: Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon  
Producer: Walter Cotton  
Director: Bill Gunn  
Videographer: Roberto Polidori  
Composer: Carman Moore

Johnnie Mae Brown: Verta Mae Grosvenor  
Charles Brown: Walter Cotton  
Father Brown: Jim Wright  
Bubba: Thomas Blackwell  
Raymon: Sam Waymon  
Sharon: Michelle Wallace  
Doggie Dog Diner Manager: Ishmael Reed

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When Ishmael Reed was growing up in Tennessee, his aunt would tune in the soap operas on the radio every afternoon. These were the first stories that Reed heard. It's interesting that the established writer who blends traditional literary forms with unpredictable satiric wit (YELLOW BACK RADIO BROKE-DOWN is a Western, THE LAST DAYS OF LOUISIANA RED a detective story, THE TERRIBLE TWOS a children's story genre) would enter a new medium--video with another traditional form, the soap opera; and add refreshing twists in subject matter (a black family) and style (naturalistic) that transcends the predictable TV image of blacks.

PERSONAL PROBLEMS focuses on a middle-class black family in New York City: Johnnie Mae Brown, a nurse's aide at Harlem Hospital (superbly played by South Carolinian Verta Mae Grosvenor, an actress and writer); her husband Charles who works for the transit authority (played by playwright, actor and producer Walter Cotton); and his father, Father Brown (played by veteran actor and one-time matinee idol Jim Wright).

Because PERSONAL PROBLEMS was written to show blacks as they really are, one won't find the usual media stereotypes. The Browns are down-to-earth and unsentimental as they deal with problems of exhausting jobs that provide too little money, freeloading relatives who don't buy more toilet paper when it runs out, extramarital lovers who offer escape and concomitant confusion, medical authorities who don't give satisfactory answers, life's triteness which gnaws away at happiness.

While the Brown's problems are universal, how they express themselves and the way they approach their experiences show that they are black Americans and not just "any Americans."

And the style, too, is unconventional. Conversations move with a freeflowing nonlinear naturalness that reflects the improvisational technique used to create the script.

"The treatment, written by Al Young and myself," says Reed, "was very loose and only one page long for each episode. The actors created life out of that. They created those characters, became those characters. We never wrote the script down."

Reed became interested in collaboration and collective writing efforts when he worked with Carl Weber. (Weber, who had worked with Bertolt Brecht in Germany, used the same techniques of having actors contribute to the script.)

"It's a people's form," explains Reed. "You get all points of view, not just one writer's. That's what's left out of commercial television--different points of view about the lives of other Americans."

-Karen Sharpe. SAN FRANCISCO FOCUS. October 1982.

The 1984 Southern Circuit is a program co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the South Carolina Arts Commission, local sponsors, and the Japan Foundation.



8543 Santa Monica Bl., #11  
West Hollywood, CA 90069  
213: 657-1532

## VIDEO GALLERY

PROGRAM FOR THURSDAY - SUNDAY, JULY 5-8

8:00PM:

PERSONAL PROBLEMS (1983, 120 min.)

Oakland-based author/poet Ishmael Reed ("Mumbo Jumbo") has transformed the soap opera form into a naturalistic "video verite" depiction of the plight of a middle class family in New York City.

The characters include a nurse's aide at Harlem Hospital (Verta Mae Grosvenor), her transit authority-employed husband (playwright/actor Walter Cotton), and her live-in father-in-law (Jim Wright).

Written to show blacks as they really are, PERSONAL PROBLEMS eschews the usual television stereotypes in a very down-to-earth and unsentimental treatment. The characters deal with exhausting jobs that provide too little money, freeloading relatives who don't buy more toilet paper when it runs out, extramarital lovers who offer escape and concomitant confusion, medical authorities who don't give satisfactory answers, and life's general triteness that gnaws away at happiness.

The original treatment was written by Ishmael Reed and Al Young, then expanded improvisationally by the cast. Emmy award winner Bill Gunn ("Ganga and Hess") directed. Walter Cotton produced.

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Screenings are at EZTV Video Gallery, 8543 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood. A \$4.00 donation is requested. Call 657-1532 for further information.

REED & CANNON COMMUNICATIONS  
870 - 53rd Street  
Oakland, CA 94608

April 26, 1984 415-428-0116

*Jackie Cain*

EZTV Video Gallery  
8543 Santa Monica Blvd, #11  
West Hollywood, CA 90069

Dear EZTV:

I have a two hour full length video soap opera that's 3/4".

You might be interested in showing it in your gallery.

I know that a lot of people in Los Angeles would show up.

Let me know.

Enclosed is some promotional material.

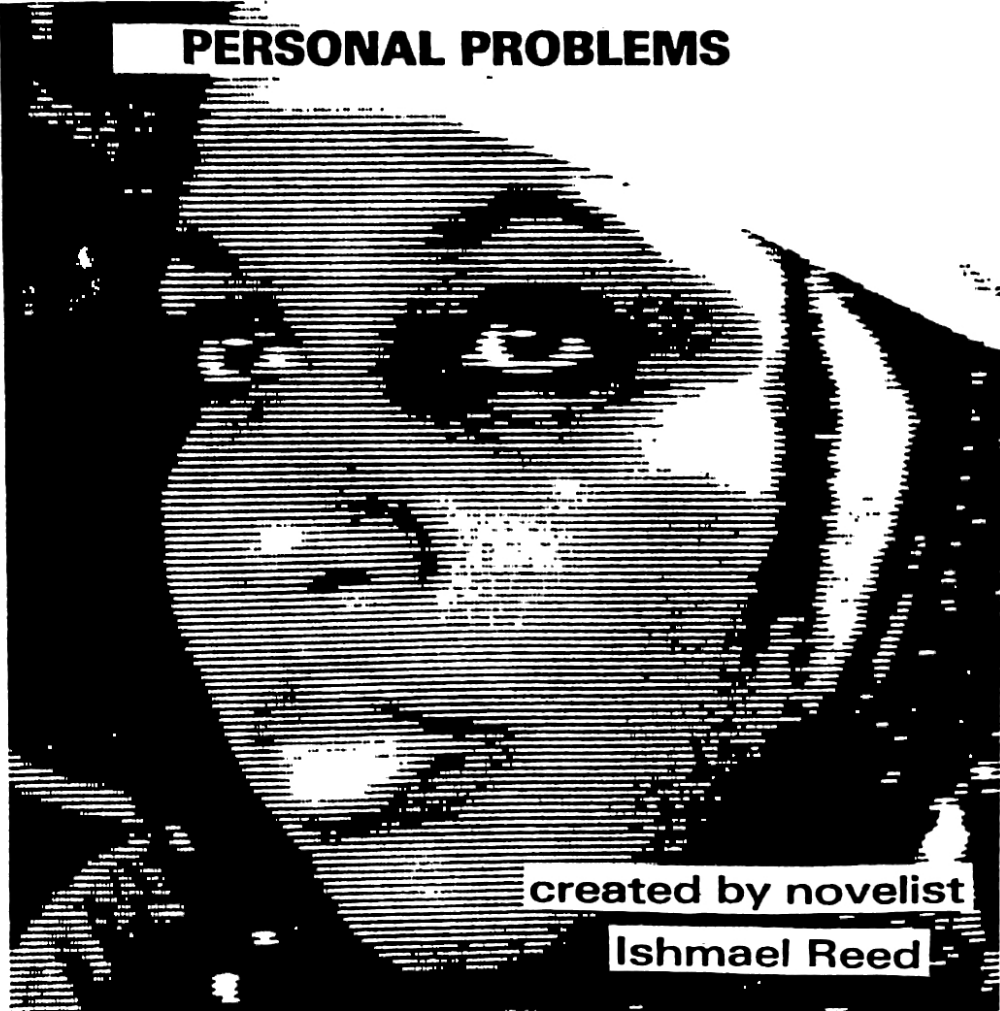
Sincerely,

Ishmael Reed

8:00 pm  
THURS.-SUN.

video verite

**PERSONAL PROBLEMS**



created by novelist

**Ishmael Reed**

directed by Bill Gunn ("Ganga and Hess")

Confronting life's general triteness  
that gnaws away at happiness

**EZTV**

VIDEO GALLERY

8543 Santa Monica Bl., #11  
West Hollywood  
(1 1/2 blks. West of La Cienega)  
.657-1532