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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

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 referential 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.

ISHMAEL REED VISITS NCSU, DISCUSSES DRAMA



PERSONAL PROBLEMS, a topic close to everyone's heart, is a new video work that will be screened and discussed on Mon. April 2 at the Student Center Ballroom at 8pm. by guest artist, Ishmael Reed, who conceived, co-wrote, and appears in the drama.

Reed, who is a prolific writer of novels (**MUMBO**, **THE LAST DAYS OF LOUISIANA**, **RED**, and **THE TERRIBLE TWOS** are examples), poetry, and essays has always been charmed by conventional Western forms such as the novel. He injects the familiar forms with his satiric, surrealistic wit. Now entering video with **PERSONAL PROBLEMS**, Reed has again chosen a conventional form, that of the soap opera. He was attracted to the format for two reasons. It is an American invention and it remains a relatively untampered form since it is not taken seriously by critics. Consistent to his eclectic literary designs, Reed and cast/crew of **PERSONAL PROBLEMS** have developed a realistic portrayal of middle-class Black Americans which is in sharp contrast to the traditional fabrications of Black Americans such as

THE JEFFERSONS on TV and film. It has been lauded as the first real portrayal of working class blacks.

The soap opera, shot in and around New York City, escapes the traditional claustrophobic interior locations of TV soaps. The typical one-dimensional sound is leashed to a layering of background sounds adding to the naturalistic style. Furthermore, the dialogue among the characters is sparkling due to much of it being improvised by an exceptional cast.

The main character in **PERSONAL PROBLEMS** is Johnnie Mae Brown, played by South Carolina writer/actress Verte Mae Grosvenor, who is a nurse at Harlem Hospital. Her daily life is mixed with marital arguments, a live-in father-in-law, a free-loading brother, and a lover. Walter Cotton, the show's producer, is Johnnie Mae's unfaithful husband. His father is played by one-time movie idol Jim Wright. Johnnie Mae's lover is portrayed by musician/composer Sam Waymon.

In one humorous scene, Johnnie Mae and two of her women friends meet at a sidewalk cafe to discuss the impossibility

of life and men. In a scene following the father's death, four of the men friends share a bottle of Scotch concealed in a paperbag as they walk together and celebrate their survival and their grief with bittersweet comradery.

Directed by Emmy Award-winner Bill Gunn, **PERSONAL PROBLEMS** is a collaborate effort by Black writers, actors, and crew. "It's a people's form," explains Reed. "You get all points of view not just of one writer. That's what's left out of commercial television of commercial points of view of the lives of other Americans."

Ishmael Reed's tour of six Southern cities is sponsored by the University Student Center, the South Carolina Arts Commission, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Japan Foundation. For further information, please call 737-2451.

FILM

'Personal Problems' looks at a black family

A People's Soap Opera

By Karen Sharpe

IN THESE DAYS of Reaganomic depression, as many people are priced out of theaters and book stores, the soap opera is more popular than ever, emerging even into prime time television viewing. But the soap opera has rarely dealt with the daily dilemmas that most of us face, nor has it been used experimentally, nor has it portrayed minorities as they are. Until now.

"Personal Problems," Parts 1 and 2, to be shown at the Roxie Cinema on Tuesday, marks a unique and welcome departure from the sensationalized, formulaized, whitewashed commercial soap. The seemingly unlikely originator is Bay Area poet/novelist/essayist/publisher Ishmael Reed, whose most popular work is his novel, "Mumbo Jumbo." Reed takes the soap opera form and gives it new subject matter (a black family) and a new style (naturalism).

The focus is on a middle-class black family in New

"Personal Problems," a soap opera about a black family, will be screened at the Roxie Cinema Tuesday.



By John O'Hare

ISHMAEL REED: SOAP WITH NATURALISM

Black Soap/Continued

York: Johnnie Mae Brown, a nurse's aide at Harlem Hospital (played by actress-writer Verta Mae Grosvenor, an actress and writer); her husband Charles who works for the transit authority (played by playwright/actor-producer Walter Cotton, who also served as the film's producer); and his father, Father Brown, played by one-time matinee idol Jim Wright.

The Browns are down-to-earth and unsentimental as they deal with the existential problems of exhausting jobs which 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, and medical authorities who don't give satisfactory answers. While the Browns' problems are universal, how they express themselves and the nuances of how they approach their experiences show that they are Afro-American and not just any-American.

"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



SAM WAYMON AND JOHNNIE MAE BROWN

never wrote the script down." Reed became interested in collaboration and collective writing efforts when he worked with Carl Weber (who in turn had worked with Bertolt Brecht in Germany). "It's a people's form," explains Reed. "You get all points of view, not just of one writer. That's what's left out of commercial television — different points of view of the lives of other Americans."

There is a scene in Part One in which Johnnie Mae and two of her women friends are sitting in an outdoor downtown cafe. Traffic noises at times obscure what the women are saying. This is not the result of any technical difficulty but of director Bill Gunn, best known for his award-winning film, "Ganga and Hess." Explains Reed, "He thought the traffic noise makes a commentary on urban civilization. Industrial noise has been considered avant-garde music since the 1920's."

Gunn, heavily influenced by European filmmakers, uses other verite techniques. Some scenes are slowed down to real life time as distinct from encapsulated TV time dictated by ratings-generating crises. While the pacing of "Personal Problems" has been criticized, Reed justifies it. "Who's to determine what details are important in a naturalistic situation? We didn't have to be selective in showing a storyline moving, a lot of action, catastrophes, the kind of junk-food formula you find in commercial television. We wanted people to enjoy the shots, the images we were creating, like you'd pause and study a painting." Their aim, says Reed, "was to come as close to reality as possible."

While this video verite marks for Reed a departure from the satire and surrealism of his literary works, it is consistent with his use of popular forms: "Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down" is a Western, "The Last Days of Louisiana Red," a detective story. (In fact, soap operas were the first stories that Reed heard as a child growing up in Tennessee. Every day his aunt put on the radio to listen to "her stories".) "I consider myself a middle-class person," explains Reed, "because I'm adequately clothed, sheltered and I have enough to eat. I accept that as a definition of the middle-class life." He sees the average person as being "in the middle, and I think that's where we're trying to focus our attention. Most people," he adds, "are not left-wing or right-wing — they're just innocent bystanders."

"What I hope the viewer will be left with," confides Reed, "is a better understanding of Afro-American life which you don't get in the commercial media."

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 (Verna 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 starker 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 (*Ganga and Hess*) directed. (DS) (EZTV, 8543 Santa Monica Bl., No. 11, 657, 1532, Thru Sun at 8)

L.A. WEEKLY July 6-12, 1984

EZTV Where you can see new works by independent videomakers in a casual, intimate setting. 8543 Santa Monica Blvd., W. Hollywood; 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."

video verite

8:00 pm
THURS.-SUN.

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

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