

# Competish metes out tough terms

## Five features eligible for ABFF's Grand Jury Prize

By MARY SUTTER

The American Black Film Festival will screen 30 features and docs this year, most of them indie U.S. productions reflecting a wide range of subject matter.

Opening will be Lee Daniels' helming debut, "Shadowboxer," starring Cuba Gooding Jr. and Helen Mirren.

The film preemmed last fall at Toronto -- "too soon," says Daniels, whose producing resume includes "Monster's Ball" and "The Woodsman." (ABFF auds will see a more polished version of the pic.) Besides being premature, the Canadian bow also made "Shadowboxer" ineligible for competish under the ABFF's rather stringent guidelines.

Just five features are eligible for the ABFF's Grand Jury Prize -- to qualify, pics must have a U.S. fest preem and a person of African descent in a lead role.

This year's eligible films include: Sudz Sutherland's "Doomstown," a Canadian production about a man from a poor neighborhood who must choose between revenge and justice; Anthony Lover's examination of sibling ties in "My Brother," in which Vanessa Williams stars as a mother who makes life-altering choices for her two sons; and "Rollin' with the Nines," a British production from Julian Gilbey that follows a hip-hop group's descent into the violent world its members had hoped to escape.

Also competing for Grand Jury honors are Yatasha Womack-directed romantic comedy "The Engagement: My Phamily BBQ," in which a Jewish boy introduces his family to that of his black Baptist fiancée; and J.D. Cochran's "Paved with Good Intentions," which follows the fallout from a murder-suicide provoked by a corporate scandal.

Both pics are also eligible for the Audience Award, which is restricted to U.S. features written, directed or produced by someone of African descent.

Other pics in the category include: Lawrence Page's "Confessions," in which a successful doctor leads a double life; Maurice Jamal's modern take on the prodigal son story whose protag returns to his secret-laden Southern family in "Dirty Laundry"; frosh helmer Russ Parr's drama about four struggling comedians, "The Last Stand"; and Ty Hodges' "Miles From Home," about a homeless teen torn between a life of sex, money and drugs and a chance for something else.

The competitive docu selection of four pics includes Korey Green and Addison Henderson's "The Forgotten City," an exploration of inner-city problems and politics through the prism of Buffalo, N.Y.; and Byron Hurt's "Beyond Beats and Rhymes," which looks at machismo in rap and hip-hop culture.

Fest sponsor HBO, meanwhile, will feature five finalists for its shorts award.

Outside of competition, the festival will screen some crowdpleasers. Notable is "Homie Spumoni," starring Donald Faison, Joey Fatone, Whoopi Goldberg and Jamie Lynn Sigler. The comedy, written and directed by Mike Cerrone, features Faison (TV's "Scrubs") as a young black man, adopted and raised by an Italian-American couple, in the midst of coming to terms with his racial heritage and his birth parents. The fest will wrap with Preston A. Whitmore's hoops-themed "Crossover."