

Easing Into Old L.A. : With ‘Devil in a Blue Dress,’ director Carl Franklin checks out postwar black Los Angeles, where cool jazz flows from steamy nightspots and corruption threatens behind every lamppost.



BY PATRICK GOLDSTEIN
SEPT. 24, 1995 12 AM PT

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Surrounded by a swarm of noisy school kids, Carl Franklin is having his picture taken outside the Griffith Observatory at the foot of a statue commemorating the grand eminences of astronomy. The kids don't give Franklin a second glance--the cerebral film director's not the sort of guy who stands out in a crowd.

Wearing a checkered blue shirt and sandals with a goatee and shades, he looks like a high school Marxist history teacher on holiday. You'd certainly never peg him for one of Hollywood's hot talents of the moment, the director of "Devil in a Blue Dress," which uses the observatory as a locale for one of the film's key scenes. Opening Friday, the film stars Denzel Washington as Easy Rawlins, the Walter Mosley-created African American private detective who finds himself embroiled in mystery and mayhem on the mean streets of 1948-era Los Angeles.

As for the kids, their attention is focused on the statue's imposing bust of Galileo. "Ever heard of him?" one of the boys asks. "Oh, sure," his schoolmate knowingly replies. "He's the guy who discovered 'Frankenstein.'" "

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Filmgoers have little sense of history, especially the teen-age audience that drives the movie business. If they draw a blank on Galileo, imagine what they don't know about postwar black Los Angeles. It's a dilemma that strikes close to home with Franklin,

who studied history at the University of California at Berkeley and is just as likely to tout a favorite documentary about Noam Chomsky as a new feature film. So it's no wonder that the 46-year-old director admits he was "terrified" at the prospect of test-

screening his first major studio film for a raucous young audience.

" 'Devil in a Blue Dress' has a complex plot, which is hard on young moviegoers who are used to 'Dumb and Dumber' and MTV," explains Franklin, who first came to prominence after winning rave reviews for the 1992 cult-favorite film "One False Move." "They want a quicker story, with more flash. But by the time it was over, I was relieved. I think as the story began to unfold, they started to enjoy it."

The movie opens with Rawlins, having lost his job as an airplane mechanic, scrambling to find work so he can make the next payment on his house. When a shady character named DeWitt Albright offers him \$100 to locate a beautiful missing woman, Easy takes the bait, only to find himself drawn into a seamy web of political chicanery and corruption. As the stakes get higher, Rawlins sends for Mouse, a childhood pal from Houston with a gold tooth and an itchy trigger finger.

In a lot of ways, Mouse is a prototype for today's amoral young gangbangers--he shoots first, asks questions later. History isn't his subject. Franklin initially toyed with the idea of casting Ice Cube in the role, though he eventually settled on Don Cheadle, a gifted actor he'd worked with years before.

"Oh, yeah, Mouse is the guy the kids like," Franklin says with a laugh. "They could relate to him. He's our fantasy character. In a time when most people feel powerless, he gives you a sense of power. Easy is always dealing with all these complicated questions of morality. But with Mouse, if you're a bad guy, you pay the price."

For Denzel Washington, playing Easy Rawlins was a chance to see a real black character in a specific historical context. "We'd never really seen South-Central Los Angeles from that time, so it was fresh territory," the actor explains. "Plus, it was real--Easy's a regular guy who's in over his head in a crazy situation. When I'm down at the station, being questioned by the police, I'm scared. It's how you'd react in real life--you're not so tough when you got a Billy club up the side of your head."

By the end of filming late last year, Franklin and Washington had begun calling each other an odd assortment of mordant nicknames, favorites among them being Pain, Hurt and Slice. The private code originated with the director's interest in the brilliant black writer Chester Himes, who died, largely forgotten and in exile, more than a decade ago. To give his star a sense of place for the film, Franklin had Washington read various Himes texts, including crime thrillers like "Cotton Comes to Harlem" and his bitter autobiography, "The Quality of Hurt."

Himes' accounts of his troubles gave the director and actor a black-comic bond--in both senses of the phrase. "We had this ongoing Chester Himes thing where we'd try to find new ways to hurt each other's feelings," recalls Washington. "I'd say to Carl, 'Brother, I saw some of your work yesterday and it was terrible!' And then he'd say to me, 'That's just what I was thinking about your work, brother!'" "

It's hard to imagine Washington using such razor's-edge humor with a white director, which raises the question--would "Devil in a Blue Dress" have played differently if it hadn't been made by an African American director? "I think that being black, Carl definitely brings things to the movie that a white director couldn't," Washington says. "But I'm sure someone like Jonathan Demme [who produced the film] could've brought his own set of special things, too."

"Having Carl make the movie made it unique, but I don't know if that's Carl being black--or just being Carl. I think the theme of the movie was really personal for Carl. He really understood that it was a story about a man overcoming his fears."

It isn't easy for Franklin to feel comfortable discussing his personal life, but once he opens up, you sense his deeply felt kinship to the film's underlying theme. The director grew up in Richmond, a poor town near Oakland. His stepfather was a carpenter and an alcoholic, though not always in that order.

"It was a scary situation," Franklin says quietly. "He was very loving, but when he drank he was a different person. It was worst on the weekends. If he was drunk on Friday night, he'd beat my mother up and it would go on all weekend. As a kid, it made me very terrified because these grown-ups twice your size are yelling at each other. It felt like the end of the world."

When Franklin grew older, he took action. He says he still has the baseball bat--a Louisville slugger--that he broke over his stepfather's head one weekend. The family tumult made Franklin suspicious and paranoid, but it also taught him how to read character, a skill he has put to good use as a director.

"I learned to notice little signs, to read people by their body language," he explains. "It was a way for me to figure out--is my stepfather going to be really drunk tonight? Is this going to be a really bad fight?"

"In a way, there was a lot of drama in the family, because my stepfather wasn't one-dimensional. He was very intelligent. But growing up in segregated Texas, he'd been prevented from realizing a lot of his dreams. So when I fought him it was real painful, because we both ended up being ashamed afterward."

In Franklin's films, violence is messy and unpredictable, as in real life. "To me, violence registers in a different way because I've felt very deeply the emotions that were a part of it," Franklin says. "To me, Easy getting hit with a baseball bat is a lot more painful than having someone spray a room with an Uzi. When Easy has a knife at his neck, he respects that knife. That's what is scary about it--he knows it's real."

It's not just the violence that feels real in "Devil in a Blue Dress." Armed with a \$21-million budget, 10 times what he's had on any previous film, Franklin painstakingly re-created the heady atmosphere of 1948-era black Los Angeles, offering moviegoers a rare glimpse of the legendary environs of Central Avenue. A prosperous business district by day, the area was a neon-lit magnet for jazz fans, socialites and hustlers by night, packed with lowdown speak-easies as well as fancy supper clubs like the Rubaiyat Room, Cafe Zombie and the Club Alabam.

All the hot spots were torn down years ago. So the "Devil" production team reconstructed the black cultural mecca along a four-block stretch of Main Street in downtown Los Angeles, using extras dressed in period garb, vintage autos and a restored Red Car trolley.

Photos of Central Avenue's exterior were hard to find. So to help him capture the area's look, Franklin organized a lunch at the venerable Harold & Belle's restaurant on Jefferson Boulevard with a group of older jazz musicians, sorting through their memories for ideas he could use in the film.

This sort of cultural archeology comes naturally for the one time history major. Franklin arrived at Berkeley at the height of the '60s protest movement, when the campus was awash in radical politics.

"One minute everyone would be having a sit-in to support bringing Eldridge Cleaver to campus, the next minute it would be a march for the 'Free Huey' movement," he says. "It was something to see, watching all the speakers on Sproul Plaza. When it was springtime at Berkeley and the weather was good, it was like an invitation to bring in the National Guard."

Franklin says he was affiliated "for a minute" with the Black Panthers, but largely stayed on the sidelines. Like many young blacks of his generation, he was the first member of his family to attend college. "It was like a dream to me. I wasn't really sophisticated enough to join a particular movement."

One of the lessons Franklin learned at Berkeley was about the value of contributions made by different cultures, something he believes is missing in today's Hollywood films. "America is a very conservative, puritanical country and I think Hollywood has always reflected that. It's only natural that you tell stories that feature your dreams, but for most people in Hollywood, those are white male dreams. That's why it's important to let other artists in, so they can bring their dreams with them."

In Washington's eyes, Franklin brought an unusually meditative quality to his material. "He's really a history professor trapped in a movie director's body," says the actor. "You know he's always going to get deep into things."

Before filming began, Franklin lent Washington some 1940s family photos that his casting director, Victoria Thomas, had brought in for research purposes. One picture showed two young black teen-agers standing on a front porch, looking like they had their whole future ahead of them.

"It's hard to say what's so powerful about a photo like that--it's just a vibe you get," Washington says. "But when I saw those kids, I ran over to Don Cheadle, who plays Mouse, and I said, 'Man, look at this picture. This is us!'" "

To industry insiders, who love to tag films with a convenient label, "Devil in a Blue Dress" has been described as "a black 'Chinatown.'" Like the Robert Towne-written classic, "Devil" has a detective hero who finds himself immersed in a web of dark, unseen forces, including ambitious politicians with something to hide and a mysterious femme fatale with hidden family secrets.

But to Franklin, the film has a more old-fashioned hook--it's a story about a black man coming of age, trying to get his piece of the American dream. "Easy has to make a pact with the devil to save his house, which to him represents everything about the opportunities he was fighting for during World War II. By the end of the story, Easy has learned the world is a very complicated place, where you can't wait for things to come to you. You have to go out and get them."

Jesse Beaton, Franklin's longtime producer, gave him "Devil" to read shortly after the book first appeared in 1990. But it wasn't until 1992, when producer-director Jonathan Demme obtained the rights and teamed up with Franklin and Beaton, that the project began to take shape. Franklin adapted the screenplay himself, streamlining the story, but sticking closely to its original tone and preserving most of its characters.

From early on, it was obvious that of the short list of bankable black actors, Denzel Washington was the right man to play Easy Rawlins. "Denzel is deceptive," Franklin says. "You always see him play these highbrow guys--doctors and lawyers--but he's actually a very down-home guy. And I think he brought a lot of that earthiness and charm to Easy's character."

Before Franklin emerged as a director, he was a working actor himself, spending nearly 15 years in theater, TV and film. After he left Berkeley, he made his stage debut as a Greek slave in a production of "Timon of Athens" with Joseph Papp's Public Theatre. Better theater roles awaited, including what Franklin regards as his high-water mark as an actor, his appearance in the Mark Taper Forum production of "In the Belly of the Beast."

To pay the bills, Franklin worked in television, co-starring with Stacy Keach in a mid-'70s series called "Caribe" and appearing in a recurring role on "The A-Team." But, overall, there were few good parts for a black actor with dramatic arts training.

"When I came up, the only legitimate dramatic actor was Sidney Poitier, the bankable star was Richard Pryor and the other choice roles were action parts that went to Jim Brown," Franklin recalls. "Even someone as good as Billy Dee Williams had a couple of great moments and then couldn't get a decent part."

In the fall of 1986, inspired by seeing the new wave of inventive low-budget films--Wayne Wang's "Chan Is Missing" was a particular favorite--Franklin enrolled in the directing program at the American Film Institute. He won awards for his master's thesis film, "Punk," which earned him work directing a pair of features with Roger Corman's Concorde Films. In 1991, he directed "One False Move," a low-budget thriller for IRS Films, which sat on the shelf for a year before gaining a theatrical release.

Virtually broke, Franklin took a job teaching at AFI just to make ends meet. It was only when "One False Move" earned a host of critical plaudits that Franklin's career finally took off, bolstered by the warm reaction to his acclaimed HBO miniseries "Laurel Avenue."

Franklin says that he has no firm plans for his next project. What matters most to him is not the budget but the subject matter. Like many directors, he's found that working on a shoestring budget often stokes your creative juices. "When you have four shots left on your shot list and only 35 minutes left of daylight, it really heightens your concentration," he says. "When your back is against the wall, that's when you really get to the essence of the story."

Franklin grins. "A lot of times people will say, 'Hey, what a great idea you had for getting that shot.' And I'll tell 'em, 'I had no choice. It was my only idea!'" "