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**Merging film art and activism;
*New venture pursues social commentary and greater role for minorities in movie industry***

By Katti Gray
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When weighty real-world issues of race, liberty and power are about to be examined on the big screen, hiring Wesley Snipes, a bankable movie star, can prove strategic.

Snipes will take on the role of Toussaint Louverture, the black coachman-turned-fighter who drove white slavers from a colonized Haiti. Placing a box-office commando on the marquee of "Toussaint," the first film from the new partnership of actor Danny Glover and screenwriter Joslyn Barnes, all but guarantees an audience. But that achievement is only part of what the filmmakers aim for with their production company, Louverture Films.

In line with its overarching mission of merging art and activism, "Toussaint" will be shot in southern Africa to help boost that region's fledgling film industry, Glover and Barnes said. Hiring blacks, other minorities and people on the margins of film for each of their projects - so far six are planned - will give more people jobs in the movie business. And crafting storylines that navigate the terrain of culture, color and the have-nots' demand for their fair share, Glover and Barnes hope, will lend "Toussaint" and other Louverture projects a seriousness to match the intensity of these times.

"There are so many contemporary issues wrapped up in this film: The mixing of races - and I put that word, 'race', in quotes. The legacy of imperialism and how it's rearing its ugly head again. These ideas of equity, we are still struggling with that," said Barnes, who co-wrote the script.

"When we talk about freedom and self-determination and sovereignty, those issues come up," said Glover, who, with "Toussaint," will be directing his most ambitious project ever. "What often is not acknowledged is race and how certain groups are not tolerated or how indigenous people are annihilated. Whether its regime change or the attempt to overthrow a government, the main agenda is to diminish people's expectations of themselves and their possibilities."

These are not new concerns for them, Glover and Barnes explained as they sat in Louverture's Chelsea offices. His parents helped restructure their postal union after it was forced to admit blacks in 1940s San Francisco, Glover's hometown. He would grow up to organize student protests at San Francisco State University in the 1960s and spend a year in an all-black commune. Though never an official member of the Black Panther Party, Glover says he helped oversee its newsletter and free-breakfast program for poor kids.

Glover has also been active with Washington-based TransAfrica Forum for more than 15 years and in 2001 became board chairman for the group, noted for leading the charge for U.S.

corporate divestiture from apartheid-era South Africa and for lobbying on behalf of other nations of the African diaspora.

"You come with an idea of what you want to do in the world. In increments, you get to that place," said Glover, who is 58.

Barnes, 40, grew up in New York, Africa and Europe. She left college aiming to write screenplays, and when that didn't pan out in the manner she wished, she got hired at the United Nations, where, among other duties, she advised nongovernmental organizations on development in poor countries.

She met Glover in 2000 on a West African movie set and would eventually leave the UN to help lay the groundwork for Louverture Films, which was officially launched in early March. Already the partners have a formidable list of projects they plan to develop, including "God's Bits of Woods," based on African filmmaker Ousmane Sembene's work depicting the 1947 Dakar-Niger railway strike, and "No Fear," Barnes' script about South African Marsha Coleman-Adebayo, who exposed corruption by U.S. firms operating in South Africa.

The filmmakers would not discuss the projected budget for their first movie, whose backers so far include several private donors and the South African government. But by their estimation, the independent film "Touissant" is destined to be big. They are courting Angela Bassett to play Louverture's wife, Suzanne.

"You can imagine the resources that are marshaled together to do a film like 'Troy' or 'Alexander.' We're saying we're capable of marshaling the same resources to tell the story, and it's not a rehashing of popular lore," said Glover, who has directed, produced and financed several smaller television and movie projects, including "To Sleep With Anger" and Spike Lee's "Get on the Bus."

The Louverture story combines elements of race, power, and the human and economic costs of the fight for freedom. And Glover and Barnes are passionate about it. "There are so many layers all colliding at some point," Glover said. "This is a group of people who'd been enslaved by the French. ..."

"The mixed-race class, the mulatto class" in Haiti, Barnes said, interjecting, "became aware of the Declaration of the Rights of Man penned after the French Revolution. They went ... [to France] to argue their case, and the ideas spread throughout the slave underclass. ... By 1791, the power of the merchant class was obscure. They were rolling in slave wealth in the wealthiest colony in the history of the world."

Slavery "provided France with seventy percent of its foreign revenue," Glover added. "With the rest of Europe afraid of France, they all went after Haiti. All of them got together to crush the slave revolt, with the help of the United States."

The 1789 revolution for which Louverture was the spark and strategist landed him in a prison on the French-Swiss border shortly before the rebellion ended victoriously in 1804. Louverture died in jail.

In a near-perpetual downward spiral since that revolt, Haiti remains the West's poorest nation, strangled by internecine massacre and an almost complete deforestation, which is part of the reason "Toussaint" will be filmed, starting in April 2006, in lush Mozambique and neighboring South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal.

Before Barnes and Glover took on the Louverture story, Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, Paul Robeson and Anthony Quinn each had tried to bring it to the screen.

About five years ago, Glover and Barnes met in Senegal while filming "Battu," an adaptation of Senegalese author Aminata Sow Fall's "The Beggar's Strike" that Barnes wrote." Glover told them of his interest in Louverture and the writers spent four years developing a screenplay, relying heavily on Louverture's letters and other documents at the Archives Nationales in Paris and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem.

"In any script, you have to have a story. And the story is based on relationships and the arc of the characters," Glover said, citing what he says is the current screenplay's fullness. "How do you deal with the encounters and the obstacles, the characters' own internal contradictions ..."

"To give such epic sweep?" Barnes said, finishing where Glover left off, " And make the story accessible to a contemporary audience?"

Glover, whose activist bona fides rest largely in his championing of black causes, does not apologize for having non-black screenwriters. While the cast and crew for "Toussaint mainly will be made up of blacks and other minorities, the world of his dreams is a kind of multihued collaborative.

"The fact that they're in touch with themselves and their humanity, that's what is important to me," Glover said of the screenwriters. "If you use this experience as a way of building bridges, whether across gender or culture or race, this becomes a template."

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