

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

## **Pryor to His Demise**

Richard Pryor passed away this morning, and while he's probably best remembered for his incendiary stand-up material (as evidenced in 1979's *Live in Concert*, 1982's *Live on the Sunset Strip*, and 1983's *Here and Now*) and his also-incendiary battle with an exploding freebase pipe, I'll always remember the guy as one of my favorite movie-time comedians. So on the day we say goodbye to one of my generation's most admired comedians, I say we take a look back and remember, y'know, all those funny movies....

He wasn't allowed to play the Cleavon Little role in *Blazing Saddles*, but he did earn a screenplay credit ... on one of the funniest movies ever made. Small roles in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), and *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974) led to bigger gigs in *Car Wash*, *Adios Amigo*, and *The Bingo Long Travelling All-Stars & Motor Kings* in 1976. 1976 would also see the first pairing between Pryor and another Mel Brooks pal, Gene Wilder. They co-starred in Arthur Hiller's *Silver Streak*, which is a movie I've always liked a whole lot. (Classic scene: Pryor blackfacing Wilder and convincing him to walk jive.) The late 70s saw Richard Pryor pop in a wide variety of movies: *Which Way Is Up?* and *Greased Lightning* in 1977, *Blue Collar*, *California Suite*, and *The Wiz* in 1978, and *The Muppet Movie* in 1979.

Pryor might have begun the 1980s with a pair of certifiable turkeys (*In God We Tru\$t* & *Wholly Moses!*), but it was a re-team with Gene Wilder (1980's *Stir Crazy*) that would make Richard Pryor adored by every 13-year-old in America. A few more missteps would follow (1981's *Bustin' Loose* & 1982's *Some Kind of Hero*), but Pryor teamed up with Jackie Gleason and Superman director Richard Donner to deliver *The Toy*, which made some solid coin despite being pretty darn awful. From there the comedian leaped into *Superman 3* (1983) and *Brewster's Millions* (1985) before tackling the thorny and autobiographical *Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life is Calling* in 1986.

The deviation from funnyman formula didn't sit too well with Pryor's fans, but his subsequent comedies (1987's *Critical Condition* & 1988's *Moving*) did nothing to win the fanbase over. Itching for some more of the old-school magic, Pryor teamed up with Gene Wilder for a third flick, the silly-yet-entertaining gimmick comedy *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*, which has since gone on to become a cable flick guilty pleasure of the highest order. 1989 also saw Richard Pryor starring alongside the best of black comedians (Eddie Murphy and Redd Foxx included) in the odd misfire known as *Harlem Nights*.

Aside from a nominal handful of throwaway cameos, Richard Pryor's last movie was *Another You*, a limp 1991 farce that saw the actor work with Gene Wilder for a fourth and final time. Even worse than the movie itself is the clear evidence that Mr. Pryor's MS was limiting his abilities in a massive way.

Richard Pryor died this morning at the age of 65, and while we're all silently grateful that the man's long-term suffering is at an end, we can't help but look back on all the great memories and feel some real sadness. Richard Pryor was one of the men who taught me what true comedy was, and his schtick, be it the family-friendly or the angry-raunchy kind, was always welcome in my home. He was a whole lot more than just some "funny guy." He was an absolute trailblazer, a pioneer, a guy who hoped to break down racial walls through the sheer power of giggles. He died too young, and he suffered too much, but I think the world is made just a little bit better by people like Richard Pryor. He shall be missed.

Posted by Scott Weinberg in Rants and Raves at 03:54