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That Old Black Magic

Hollywood is still *Bamboozled* when it comes to race

ONE PERSON'S FANTASY IS ANOTHER'S STEREOTYPE. ESPECIALLY WHEN THAT ONE person is running a Hollywood studio and the other is an African American sitting in the audience fuming. In real life Tiger Woods just wrapped up one of the greatest seasons in the history of golf, a season in which he won so often and by so much that he nearly picked up a couple of electoral votes in Florida. In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, one of the more embarrassing movies in recent history, Will Smith plays a magical black caddie who helps Matt Damon win a golf tournament and the heart of Charlize Theron. In 1930s Georgia, no less. You'd think Smith would have used his powers to, oh, I don't know, *stop a lynching or two*. Or maybe, at the very least, used them to bag Theron for himself. It's a sad day when the PGA is showcasing minority role models that are more inspirational than Hollywood's.

The movies have always had a problem with race. The first talking film, *The Jazz Singer*, was, of course, about a white guy in blackface. And don't get me started on *Driving Miss Daisy*, or the fact that the black guy who played the fourth Ghostbuster didn't get to do much of anything. But recently, Hollywood has been working especially hard to establish two onscreen stereotypes. The first is the Magical African-American Friend. Along with *Bagger Vance*, MAAFS appear in



YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND Smith helps Damon get his swing back in *Bagger Vance*; Cuba Gooding Jr. helps Robin Williams find redemption in *What Dreams May Come*

such films as *What Dreams May Come* (1998), the upcoming *Family Man* (co-starring Don Cheadle) and last year's prison drama *The Green Mile*. In that film, Michael Clarke Duncan plays a superstrong, superdumb MAAF on death row who cures one of his jailers (Tom Hanks) of a urinary-tract infection by laying a magical hand on his crotch. It's probably the only time Duncan will make it to third base on the big screen.

Which brings us to another Hollywood favorite, the Bigot with a Heart of Gold. In *Remember the Titans* (a formulaic film that soars on the strength of its performances) Will Patton plays a white football coach who at first resists integration, and then befriends head coach Denzel Washington. And in *Men of Honor* (another formulaic film enjoyable for its performances) Robert De Niro plays a BHG who at first tries to run Cuba Gooding Jr. out of the Navy diver program, and then champions his cause. Gooding's character is a real person. De Niro's is a fictional composite.

MAAFS exist because most Hollywood screenwriters don't know much about black people other than what they hear on records by white hip-hop star Eminem. So instead of getting life histories or love interests, black characters get magical powers. It doesn't even make financial sense. Smith saved the world in *Men in Black* and *Independence Day*, and those movies were huge hits; he carries Damon's clubs in *Bagger Vance*, and that movie, so far, has been a box-office flop. Smith is a bigger star than Damon, and yet it's Damon who wins the tournament and gets the girl, and it's Smith who needs to get a new agent. BHGS, on the other hand, exist to soften the punch of racially charged movies, to embody the notion that not all racists are bad people. They offer the possibility of grace to all the bigots in the audience. That last group might include a few movie executives. ■