

Breakthrough Black and Latino Roles on the Big Screen



2007 has not exactly been a [banner year](#) for the portrayal of gay characters on the silver screen in the U.S. Indeed, the small screen has become the go-to medium for quality gay characters, from the wonderful array of portrayals on [Ugly Betty](#) and [Brothers & Sisters](#) to the [budding gay teen romance](#) on *As the World Turns*. But if there is a relative drought of mainstream gay characters in film, the current landscape for big-screen presentations of black and Latino gay characters is practically barren. In fact, except for the upcoming release of Maurice Jamal's *Dirty Laundry*, "it's barely a landscape," notes veteran television producer Kevin E. Taylor. "It's a window garden at best."

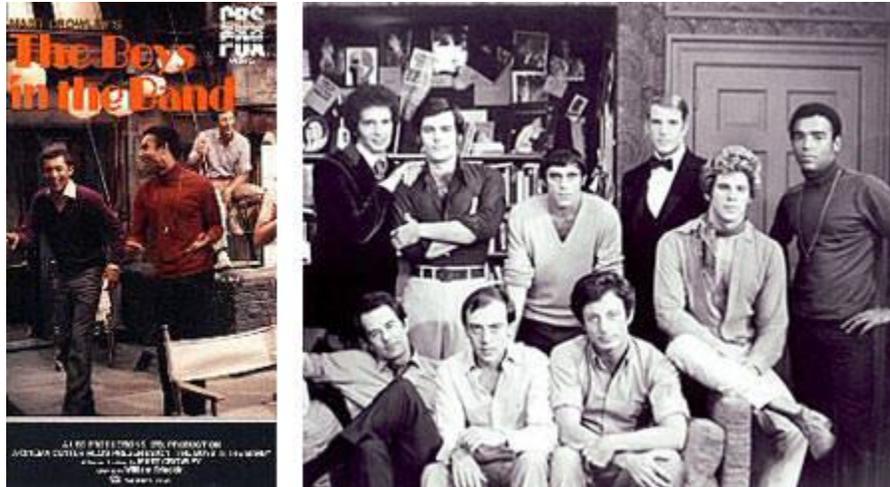
With so few representations of gay men of color currently at the box office, we decided it was time for a look back at the breakthrough gay roles for black and Latino men in film (an examination of breakthrough Asian roles will follow in another article). We sought out some of today's most well-known black and Hispanic writers, producers, and social critics for their take on which roles about gay African American and Hispanic men were the most noteworthy.

"ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN"

The earliest major depiction of a substantial black gay character in American film was "Bernard" in *The Boys in the Band* from the 1970 screen adaptation of the off-Broadway play of the same name directed by William Friedkin. Bernard was the lone black gay character in the film and he pined away for the handsome and wealthy blond boy who lives in the house where his mother worked as a maid.

"Where do we start with Bernard's character? How many stereotypes were there?" asks the New Jersey-based [Kevin E. Taylor](#), an award-winning producer with Black Entertainment and author of [Jaded](#), a black gay romantic novel.

Like the other characters in the film, Bernard was played by the same actor who originated the role on the stage — in this case Reuben Greene. His character “was everything stereotypical about black gay men trying to blend into the white gay community in the post-liberation era,” critiques Taylor. “And what a portrayal. Quiet. Sterile. Scared.”



“He just wanted to be around,” says Taylor. “Nothing much to say or do. Treated like fodder, he was barely there.” Critics also point to the film’s dialogue, which contains several instances of racial taunts directed at the one black character in the ensemble. “But Bernard stays at the party!” says Taylor. “He stayed there...trying...hoping...pleading...to be seen and appreciated and hopefully...loved. The early ‘Bernards’ were always on the outside looking in.”

Bernard’s role in *The Boys in the Band* introduced what would become the template for many other black gay film characters in mainstream productions — the so-called sassy sidekick. According to Taylor, this stereotype was “defiant and proud, but desexualized. A sassy eunuch.”

While the typecast might be expected in the 1970s, it has continued to this day in gay-themed American films, according to j. brotherlove, the Atlanta-based LGBT social critic and *Southern Voice* columnist who blogs at thebrotherlove.com. “It’s extremely difficult to think of a good portrayal of a black gay character in film, and that is disturbing.”

Unfortunately, the explosive growth in black-centered film productions that began in the seventies has not translated into a growth in gay characters in either terms of quality or quantity. “Mainstream black films are notoriously irresponsible in depicting LGBT persons of color,” says j. brotherlove, describing most of these roles as the proverbial “snap queen,” or “truck-driving, man-hating lesbian, or some other form of comic relief.”

One of these roles was Antonio Fargas’ almost iconic portrayal of Lindy the drag queen in the 1976 cult classic *Car Wash*. “Oddly enough, I loved Fargas’ character for just that same reason,” BET’s Kevin E. Taylor fondly recalls. “I had met him and knew him many times. I had seen him in the ‘hood. He was a take-no-prisoners kind of queen who had learned to survive the black homo-hatred and misunderstanding.”

Another early mainstream black film from the same year also had another gay character. *Norman . . . is That You?* featured young actor Michael Warren in the title role (he would later star in NBC's *Hill Street Blues*) as the son of Redd Foxx. His role marked the first time a black gay character was the protagonist of a major movie. Norman was in love with a stereotypical, limp-wristed gay man, which served as fodder for Foxx's numerous jokes. The tagline of the silly blaxploitation comedy says it all: "There's a sexual revolution going on and all the leaders are in my family!"

"GET ON THE BUS"

It wouldn't be until the 1990s that complex, multi-dimensional depictions of American black gay men were fully realized on the silver screen. The role most often mentioned is that of Kyle (Isaiah Washington) in Spike Lee's 1996 historical film *Get on the Bus*. The plot follows a group of black gay men on a cross-country trip to the Million Man March. The characters Kyle and Randall were a committed couple and a stark contrast to the current prevailing stereotypes of black gay men.



"[Isaiah Washington's](#) character really stood out to me," says Los Angeles-based novelist [Fred Smith](#). "Kyle was multi-layered *and* in the midst of a highly homophobic environment on the way to the Million Man March. I felt empathy and pain for the character and his life experience."

The novelist says the role of Kyle brought some much-needed depth to the presentation of black gay men on film and depicted them as "working professionals, family men, community members, and active with issues" that are not necessarily gay or gay-related.

"Their love story was brilliant," agrees Kevin E. Taylor. "They were involved with the black community and dared assume the public acceptance for their relationship as they traveled a new road. Not just to Washington, DC for the Million Man March, but the new road for black gay men." Taylor pauses. "I cried after seeing them."

Isaiah Washington's role in *Get on the Bus* was notable because, at the time, he spoke out forcefully against homophobia. That made his recent problems [on the set at Grey's Anatomy](#) and at the Golden Globes all the more confusing, says television host and author Keith Boykin. "The f-word-using Isaiah Washington is not the same man I first saw on the screen playing an openly gay man in Spike Lee's groundbreaking 1996 film. Nor is it the same man who wrote an article in *Essence* a few years ago where he condemned homophobia."

"PUNKS"

Two films are mentioned most often as featuring the most poignant roles for black gay male characters: *Punks* (2000) and *Brother to Brother* (2004). “Both offered magnificent portrayals of black gay characters,” says Kevin E. Taylor. “But if I had to pick one role as the most important” for black gay characters on film, “for me it would probably be Rockmond Dunbar in *Punks*.”

The film was the 2000 debut written and directed by [Patrik-Jan Polk](#) who would later create the groundbreaking [Noah's Arc](#) series on Logo. The movie shared a similar plot: Three black gay men and their Latino gay friend are looking for love in Los Angeles. Hot-bodied Darby (Rockmond Dunbar) moves in next door to Marcus (Seth Gilliam). To complicate matters, Darby had a girlfriend but seemed to be falling for Marcus.

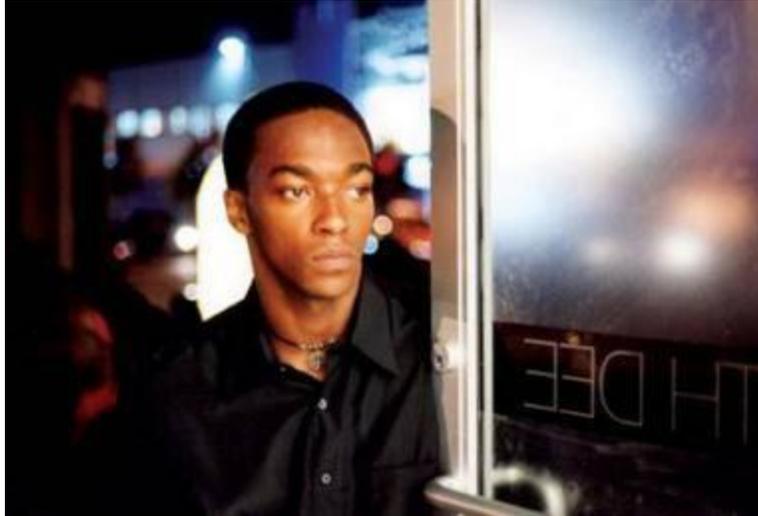
“The whole ‘is he or isn't he?’ mystique about his character was real,” explains Fred Smith. “Much in the way we try to figure out new people in our various environments. But what was most exciting about their [relationship] is that we got to see them interact and have that slow build-up to friendship and possibly more.”

“I couldn't help but swoon over Rockmond Dunbar's character,” admits Kevin E. Taylor, laughing. “He was just so tender and vulnerable in his own discovery of his affection for another man. Especially that part when he tells Seth Gilliam, ‘Stop putting yourself down. You're beautiful.’ He was simply brilliant.”

THE “MOST IMPORTANT” BLACK GAY ROLE?

Rodney Evans' *Brother to Brother* (2005) captures the glory days of the Harlem Renaissance through the eyes of a celebrated gay poet who lived it and a young Columbia University student, Perry (Anthony Mackie), who is researching the era for a term paper. The film has been acclaimed as an example of historical fiction by introducing the story of poet Bruce Nugent, the older character in the film. (Prior to the film, the real Nugent and his poetry were little known to modern audiences, having been eclipsed over the years most notably by one of his contemporaries, the internationally known black gay poet Langston Hughes.)

“This is possibly the most important film I've seen in the past 10 years depicting black gay characters,” j. brotherlove explains. “At its core, the film is an unapologetic look at a young gay man struggling to find himself. However, it also proved that films centered on black gay characters could take on literary issues, transcend time, bridge generations, and do not have to be centered on HIV/AIDS.”



Like many other movies that offer roles for black gay men — both mainstream and gay — *Brother to Brother* features characters involved in inter-racial relationships. Most of these roles have been panned by critics because “it’s usually a mismatch, or the black character is simply an object of lust,” notes Kevin E. Taylor. “Here is an example: It’s like casting Taye Diggs opposite Will Truman (Eric McCormack). That pairing was so unlikely... even Jack and Karen didn’t believe it, and the relationship was quickly written out of *Will & Grace*.”

On the other hand, Taylor and many other black gay critics applaud Anthony Mackie’s role in *Brother to Brother*. “It made sense for Perry to experiment with sex as he fumbled his way through self-discovery,” explains *Southern Voice*’s j. brotherlove. “It also yielded an important scene about black skin as a sexual object, which goes unaddressed in white gay films.”

A NEW CAMP CLASSIC

The Ski Trip, the 2004 romantic comedy by director [Maurice Jamal](#), deserves a spot on this list of breakthrough gay black film roles. Corey, the movie’s protagonist, an overweight black gay man who just turned 30, was equal parts Woody Allen and Pedro Almodóvar. Campy, romantic comedies may be somewhat more common for mainstream gay audiences, including *Another Gay Movie* (2006) or *Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds* (2006), but the genre has rarely been explored with black gay characters.

“Initially some of the critics panned *The Ski Trip*,” says Jamal, who wrote, starred in and directed the film. “I mean there were some reviews that were so brutal I thought they had to be written by a jilted ex-boyfriend! But there really hadn’t been a film like that before. Very urban, very camp, with bold, politically incorrect characters.” Jamal says that mainstream black films, and even the burgeoning black queer cinema, have a tendency to cast characters into “a very small box.” His script, says Jamal, “really pushed those boundaries.”

The Ski Trip was also the first feature-length film broadcast on gay-themed cable channel Logo (AfterElton.com’s parent company). As a result of its presentation on Logo, the film “has become the most widely seen black queer film in history. I am incredibly proud of that,” Jamal adds.

FEW CHOICES FOR GAY LATINOS

It's probably no coincidence that many of the same frustrations expressed by critics of black queer cinema are also heard about portrayals of gay Latino men in film roles. If the landscape was barren or a "window garden" for black men ... it's a virtual desert for Latinos.

"You'd have to start by saying there are actually very few instances where Latino gay life has been depicted in American film," says Andrés Duque, the well-known New York City-based advocate for Latino LGBT issues. His weblog, [Blabbeando](#), is the top destination for Latino gay and lesbian news from the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean.

"If you look at the list, some of the movies that have had some impact in American movie theaters, these are not even US productions. *Broken Sky* (2006) is Mexican, *Burnt Money* (2000) and *Epitafios* are Argentinian, *Don't Tell Anyone* (1998) is Peruvian, *Fresa y Chocolate* (1994) is Cuban. That leaves only about a dozen or so that were produced with American financing and none of them certainly indicates a trend that our lives are necessarily going to be represented on the screen in the future."

Since the vast majority of American movies are written, produced and directed by non-Latinos, Duque believes that explains why "in so many cases the Latino gay character is presented as 'the other,' someone who is not part of the core context and whose background might be underdeveloped or non-existent."

[Johnny Diaz](#) is a reporter for *The Boston Globe* and previously was on staff at The Miami Herald where he shared in the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Elian González controversy. [His first novel](#), *Boston Boys Club* (Kensington), follows a trio of friends as they navigate life and love in Boston.

Diaz goes one step further than Duque and says he has not "seen any good, positive depictions" of gay Latinos from Hollywood. "Even on American television, the closest you have to a positive gay Latino role model is 13-year-old Justin on ABC's [Ugly Betty](#) or Jai Rodriguez on *Queer Eye*. No other guys immediately come to mind."

"Look at the character played by Hank Azaria in *The Bird Cage* (1996), or Antonio Banderas in the 1993 movie *Philadelphia*. All these actors could have been playing the same role."

For this reason, many gay Latinos often look to nearby Latin America or to Spain for their film role models. "Especially in movies by [Pedro Almodóvar](#), you see a range of gay Latino men," Diaz adds. "They are masculine and yet some are feminine, or drag queens. They are educated while others are street hustlers. They are tortured yet complicated souls. Latin American cinema, I think, shows more of a diversity of gay men compared to American films, which fall into long-held stereotypes. You'd think it would be the other way around, no?"



“BEFORE NIGHT FALLS”

Before Night Falls (2000) is the film adaptation of the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas autobiography of the same name. The story describes his life in Cuba, the sexual revolution of the 1970s and, later, his persecution and imprisonment under Fidel Castro. The critically acclaimed biopic was directed by neo-expressionist painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel, and Javier Bardem was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor.

[Emanuel Xavier](#) is one of the principal figures in the queer people of color literary arts and spoken word movement. The co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café has been nominated for a Lambda Literary Award, and acted in Maurice Jamal’s *The Ski Trip*.

“*Before Night Falls* is my favorite depiction of an openly gay Latino character in film,” Xavier tells AfterElton.com. “Reinaldo Arenas was most definitely worthy of a cinematic tribute, and Javier Bardem was an excellent choice to portray him.”

“Considering how many gay Latino men actually live in this country, Hollywood has a very long way to go,” the poet says, echoing the complaints of Andrés Duque and Johnny Diaz. “It’s interesting that countries supposedly plagued by religion are putting out the most provocative cinema [for gay Latino roles].”

“OUR LADY OF THE ASSASSINS”

Most of the mentioned films did not see wide distribution in the States. One film that did and has been well received was *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2000), directed by Barbet Schroeder and filmed in Colombia. The film portrays the relationship between an older man who falls in love with two teen assassins. The plot is worthy of a Greek tragedy, so we won’t give it away, and was filmed in HD video, creating a gritty style that approached *cinéma vérité*.



The movie was also shot in Andrés Duque's hometown of Medellín, Colombia. "The setting is a Latin American country and most of the actors Latino," Duque explains. "That changes the dynamics completely as their background becomes secondary to the story and they are allowed to develop more fully into complex characters."

Duque does not totally discount Hollywood's portrayals of Latino gay men. "*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) is notable for Latinos for John Leguizamo's turn as a drag queen," he notes. Ditto for *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the 1985 Brazilian-American production where actor William Hurt took home the Oscar... the [first time an actor won for playing gay](#).

Quinceañera (2006) won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Participation Award at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. The small, independent love story was directed by out couple Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland and tells the story of two Mexican-American cousins who become estranged from their families: Magdalena due to her pregnancy and Carlos due to his sexuality.

Carlos, the gay Latino character, "is the object of lust for a white gay couple in the film," Andrés Duque notes. "But there is nuance to this characterization. At least the actual producers, who are a gay white couple, have been candid in interviews in saying that it's a dynamic that they wanted to put in the film because they've seen it themselves, as a white gay couple moving into a mostly Latino neighborhood that is being gentrified. They not only acknowledge the objectification, but they go beyond it and expose it as well."

-
-
-



Another recent film well received by both critics and audiences is *On the Downlow*, a 2004 short film shot in Chicago. The title is “unfortunate,” Duque says, noting the film alludes to the [closeted aka “down low”](#) lifestyle. The short also uses street gangs as its backdrop — certainly a clichéd theme in Latino film — and yet it fuses both themes to craft a tender romance between the two rival gang members. It’s sort of a queer *Romeo and Juliet*, if you will.

“The way that it's handled is deft and moving and, in some ways, soars above some of the problems with the storyline, including it's ending,” Duque notes. “As for Latino on Latino gay love in movies, as homophobic as Latino culture is often pegged to be, when handled well, it never fails to move me.”

WANTED: AN AMERICAN ALMODÓVAR

There was one common thread expressed by gay black and Latino filmmakers, writers and producers who spoke to AfterElton.com for this article: The best is yet to come.

“The lack of gay Latinos in American films” is not an accident, says Johnny Diaz. Most of these films are created by non-Latinos who “are recycling stereotypes in Hollywood. We need our own American Pedro Almodóvar to start capturing the colors and the layers of who we are in the United States.”

Kevin E. Taylor agrees. “It really would be very nice to see an authentic story,” he remarks. “If I have to do it myself, I will. You know what ... I just might have to try to do it myself.”

Visit Rod McCullom at his website [Rod 2.0](#).