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METEOR POWER

*Robert Townsend
as superhero*

Robert Townsend doesn't enter a room; he bursts into one. He's an easy guy to like—he's got charisma, a smooth gait, a quick smile and an encyclopedic range

of voices and impressions that he can turn on and off.

The world is Townsend's stage; the material, whatever his frenetic imagination conjures. He's the '90s version of the "hyphenated American," though his designations are apt to read thus: director-actor-writer-comedian. Townsend is an avatar of the new black cinema, or Black New Wave—directors like Spike Lee, Keenan Ivory Wayans, John Singleton and Matty Rich, who insist on dramatizing highly personal stories about the dynamics and rhythms of African-American life. What separates them from their "blaxploitation"-era peers such as Michael Schultz or Gordon Parks is an entrepreneurial bent that serves to empower a guerrilla mentality.

His first film, *Hollywood Shuffle*, a 1987 satire about Hollywood's negative reinforcement of black stereotypes, Townsend financed with his credit cards. Townsend is now set to deliver a one-two punch, in the form of his fourth film, *The Meteor Man*, and his ambitious new variety show, *Townsend Television*, a blend of live action and film. Fox television has ordered 13 episodes.

Townsend, born in 1957, grew up in the dehumanizing war zones of Chicago's West Side, with a front-row perspective on decay and misery. But, sure

ETC.

By Miles Harvey

The healthiest option

A Congressional Budget Office (CBO) study offers the latest evidence that the single-payer national health plan would cover the most Americans for the least cost.

The study examines four health reform packages that were introduced to Congress last year, including former Illinois Democratic Rep. Marty Russo's single-payer plan and a managed-competition proposal sponsored by Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN).

Single-payer would be similar to Canada's government-administered national health program; managed competition would leave the big insurance companies in charge of the system.

It should be noted that the Cooper plan is not the same as the health reform package currently being formulated by the Clinton administration. And there are differences between the Russo bill and this year's congressional proposal for single-payer, the Wellstone-McDermott bill. Nonetheless, the CBO study makes a compelling case for the single-payer concept.

According to the CBO, the Russo bill would have cut overall health-care spending by \$319 billion over six years. This would amount to nearly \$4,000 for every U.S. family. The Cooper bill would have increased spending by \$214 billion over the same period.

In addition, the CBO rates the Russo bill's cost-control mechanisms highest and reports that the single-payer approach is the only one that would have led to significant administrative savings.

Furthermore, the CBO projects that in the year 2000 there would be no uninsured Americans under the Russo bill, but 25 million would have no insurance under the Cooper plan. And only the Russo bill would guarantee currently insured Americans better access to benefits and freedom to choose doctors. Better yet, single-payer advocates claim that the Wellstone-McDermott bill improves the Russo bill in the areas of cost-control and revenue-generation.

Wedding-gate

When you think of Dick Nixon, you think of love. Well, maybe you don't, but somebody sure does. The Richard M. Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, Calif., is available for wedding ceremonies and receptions—and business is booming.

"There are some people who appreciate and respect the closeness of the Nixon family and have always admired them. I know that's a consideration for some couples," wedding organizer Kevin Cartwright told the Associated Press. "Mostly though, it's just a magnificent garden setting."

Included in that setting is "the actual gazebo used during Tricia Nixon and Edward Cox' White House Rose Garden wedding," according to *Nixonland*, the newsletter of the 37th president's library. Receptions and ceremonies are \$750 apiece, with a package deal price of \$1,000 for both.

There's also a fee of \$2.95 per guest. "That's based on the group rate for museum tours," explains Cartwright.

of his talent, he was desperate to find an outlet for his expression. He studied with the Experimental Black Actors Guild and the improvisational Second City collective. While attending college in New Jersey, he trained under the Negro Ensemble Company and Stella Adler. He performed stand up. Then he moved to Los Angeles and landed roles in Walter Hill's *The Warriors* and Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story*.

Returning to his native turf to discuss his work, Townsend was reflective. "If you can survive the licks, it just takes courage to confront whatever demons are attacking you," he says. "As a kid I was really weird. I've always had crazy ideas. I didn't buy into what the newspapers were saying about what I should be doing as an African-American. The concept of a kid as superhero always stayed with me. I can live out any of the fantasies that are in my head. I just have to write out the script and I can create whatever I want."

The Meteor Man, which opens in August, carries the director's trademark concerns and preoccupations. The film's sociopolitical context is interwoven with an inventive tale of an anonymous, carefree inner-city teacher, played by Townsend, who's endowed with extraordinary powers after being struck by a meteor. Townsend the director reverses the usual iconography—the white superhero axis of Batman and Superman—and weaves a cautionary tale about the modern American city. This superhero has the intonations, rhythms and personality of what many sociologists consider an endangered species, the urban black male. "I didn't want the film to be about the superpowers but more about what's going on in the neighborhood and the community," he says. "The bigger message is that the community has to take it back for themselves and not rely on the superhero."

The villains are the stylish and brutal Golden Lords, a nefarious gang whose black leather and gold-chain uniform is set off by blond Afros. *The Meteor Man's* satiric thrust is a far cry from the doom-laden naturalism of the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* and other inner-city gangster films. "There's gotta be a balance. Why is there the profanity? Why do we always have to talk down? I come with a PG film and I say kids should remain kids as long as possible. It's a shame that, in 1993, I'm the first superhero landing—and the only PG film in the next two and a half years. *Menace II Society*—there's 12 more of them coming. I can talk like that film: 'Yo, what's up, cuz? What's up?' Now I'm real. Now I'm black. If you've ever lived in the ghetto, you know it's not like that; that's part of the reality, but it's not like that. In *The Meteor Man*, I'm not considered valid because I'm articulate. I'm not jiving, I'm not shucking. I don't ever want to do stereotypes; none of my films will ever be shot in coon-arama," says Townsend, meaning the kind of exaggerated, wide-eyed stares of the ignoble past.

Townsend has the television show; he's written a script for *The Meteor Man* sequel and he wants to do a project about Duke Ellington. In Hollywood, control is destiny. "What happened in the past, [black] filmmakers started making movies they didn't put their heart and souls into. After you start selling your art short and becoming a whore to your craft, nobody wants to go see your movies. There were films Michael Schultz did because he was offered a lot of money; they didn't have good stories. The audience began to say, I can't get with this.

"I may only do 10 films in my lifetime, but I want each of them to be worthy enough to be seen again and again. If you have any audience out there that genuinely enjoys what you do and you have enough integrity, the audience will be there for a long time. People will walk out of *Meteor Man* saying, 'Robert didn't cheat us.'"

—Patrick Z. McGavin

THE FIRST STONE

INSLAW BREAKERS

By Joel Bleifuss

According to a recent Justice Department report, the Justice Department is innocent of any wrongdoing in the Inslaw affair. This absolution by Judge Nicholas Bua, who undertook the investigation at the behest of former Attorney General William Barr, contradicts the findings of two federal judges.

The scandal revolves around allegations that Justice Department employees under the direction of Attorney General Edwin Meese stole a software program from Inslaw, Inc., a Washington-based computer software company, and then conspired to send it into bankruptcy. At the center of this scandal is a software program called Promis, a statistical database that was designed to help federal prosecutors track the cases that come before them. What makes Promis unique as a case-management system is the program's ability, if properly coded, to integrate different databases.

Inslaw's owners, Bill Hamilton and Nancy Burke Hamilton, maintain that after stealing their software, the Justice Department distributed it among the various agencies of the U.S. intelligence community. They also assert that the software was doctored to allow electronic eavesdropping—thus creating a computerized Trojan horse that, once sold to and adopted by foreign intelligence agencies, would allow the National Security Agency trap-door access into foreign intelligence files.

It has been further alleged that after the Meese Justice Department stole the software, Attorneys General Dick Thornburgh and William Barr spent their tenure at the Justice Department mounting a cover-up.

Two federal judges ruled that the theft occurred, and the House Judiciary Committee investigation determined that there was evidence of a high-level cover-up. Then came retired federal Judge Nicholas Bua, who was hired by Attorney General Barr in November 1991 to do another investigation.

Bua filed his report with Attorney General Janet Reno in

March 1993. On May 29, a *Washington Post* editorial explained that the Bua report was "being studied and edited to remove information relating to national security." On June 17, Reno released a version of the report, with grand jury testimony redacted.

In his report Bua concluded, "The evidence we have compiled to date does not support a finding that DOJ employees intentionally deceived or defrauded Inslaw." If so, why did Bua, on Dec. 2, 1992, telephone Inslaw attorney Elliot Richardson, Richard Nixon's former attorney general, with an offer to settle the case for \$25 million—more than 3.5 times the amount awarded by the first federal judge who ruled in Inslaw's favor? Richardson told me they had three conversations on the subject and that he has the notes.

That is one of the numerous anomalies surrounding the Bua investigation that Reno would have to reconcile should she decide to accept the report as the final word on this sordid affair.

Upon releasing the report, Reno gave interested parties until July 31 to file their response. On July 12, Inslaw issued its analysis of the Bua report.

That 80-page rebuttal, authored by, among others, Richardson and the Hamiltons, enumerates procedural problems with the investigation and factual mistakes in the report. What follows are several of the Bua report's most glaring omissions.

- Bua apparently failed to question under oath *all* of the current and many of the former Justice Department employees who allegedly participated in or have knowledge of the software theft and the subsequent cover-up. In other words, the conspirators were allowed to lie with impunity to the Justice Department investigator.

- Bua's investigation could have determined whether or not the Justice Department stole Inslaw's software by analyzing the computer program the FBI uses to manage its cases. Inslaw has alleged that the FBI is one of the government agencies that is illegally using the software. Such a code comparison, which takes about four hours, would have settled that question once and for all. This was not done.

For an expert opinion, Bua turned to Dorothy Denning, a professor at Georgetown University's computer science department with ties to the intelligence community. Among other things, Denning said a comparison would have been "a waste of her time and the government's money."

The Inslaw rebuttal tersely dismisses Denning as a believable witness: "Denning's analysis makes no sense whatsoever."

- The Bua investigation did unearth startling evidence that bolsters the extremely serious allegation that in 1988 the Justice Department interfered with the appointment