

## Dead Presidents

The Hughes twins made a splash (at a mere 21 years of age) with their first feature film *Menace II Society* (1993), a bleak, semi-obligatory contribution to the growing genre of films in the 'hood. Their stated aim in the new *Dead Presidents* (the title refers to faces on dollar bills) was to take on recent American history and to show its stultifying effect on a young black man with potential. It aims at being a coming-of-age film about post-Vietnam malaise and loss of hope, but its characters, to this reviewer, simply can't bear the weight of the filmmakers' intentions.

In this case study, the homeboy is Anthony Curtis (Larentz Tate, from *Menace*), a decent kid from the Bronx who learns how to kill in Vietnam and then learns that trying to be legit leads nowhere. The only way to collect "dead presidents" (dollar bills) is to resort to the big score. This cautionary tale for one black man is meant to stand in for the legions of others who have been unable to make it in a corrupt, racist society that shuts them out. This is not just another 'hood film, according to its makers, but a story meant to possess wider reverberations.

This makes it sound like a "thesis" film, and I'm afraid it suffers from just that aspect. Unfortunately, the wide-eyed, sweet-faced Anthony shows little real personal development or growth; he is simply the puzzled personage at the heart of a string of random incidents. You don't see so much a character being formed in the roughly five years the film spans but rather a character acted upon. Missing is the nexus of family life (Anthony's parents and his successful older brother are introduced but are perfunctory at best) and any sense of the wider society he moves in--except for some easy whacks at the dated 1970's. What is shown instead is plenty of degradation and death for numerous black characters, from Anthony's best friend Skip (Chris Tucker) to his first mentor Kirby (Keith David).

Also, be aware: some of the violent scenes in *Dead Presidents* are truly stomach-churning, such as a patrol's ambush in Vietnam and a final, nasty shoot-out during a botched robbery. This film merits its hard "R" rating.

(October 1995)