

Harlem Nights ★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

Eddie Murphy has a lot riding on *Harlem Nights*. As the movie's writer, director, executive producer, and star, Murphy will shoulder all of the blame if *Harlem Nights* fails. But at the same time, he'll receive all of the credit if it succeeds. Should you sacrifice your hard-earned cash to support Murphy's risky gamble? Well, that depends on whom you trust more: me or Eddie Murphy.

Here's what Murphy thinks: "I think the audience is expecting a good time. They gonna get sexy. They gonna get funny. They gonna get drama. They gonna get all of that. I think it's the best movie I've done." (Paramount Radio Network)

Here's what I think: *Harlem Nights* is charmless, unoriginal, disappointing, and almost without question, the worst film of the actor's career (I haven't seen *Best Defense*). And guess who's to blame?

The movie's problem is not Murphy's direction: *Harlem Nights* is a fairly good looking film. No, the project was probably doomed even before the cameras rolled. Murphy's awful script is the culprit. Let's count the mistakes he makes in his first attempt at screenwriting:

1) Murphy shatters the record for the most profanity in a motion picture. Yes, he even outdoes his own work in *Raw*. Practically every line of dialogue in *Harlem Nights* contains at least one four letter word. And after 15 minutes, it gets irritating.

2) Murphy wastes the talents of his fine cast. Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, Michael Lerner, and Della Reese face the impossible task of carving out credible characters from a script riddled with stereotypes. Each of them shines occasionally, but basically what we have are good performers stuck in a bad vehicle.

3) The movie demeans women by depicting them solely as sexual objects and as pawns in power struggles between men. Murphy has admitted in interviews that he is weary of women in his private life, which is really neither here nor there. But when Murphy puts his bitter feelings on 3,000 movie screens across the country, it's another matter altogether. You're forced to swallow some pretty gruesome stuff. For instance, Murphy punches Reese in the stomach. And he shoots Jasmine Guy in the head. This is a mean-spirited

movie, folks! Lovely newcomer Lela Rochon gets off easy in her role as a common whore, but only because she doesn't have any scenes with Murphy. Thank God: he might have run her over with a bulldozer.

4) Murphy has written for himself perhaps his blandest role to date. The lovable Eddie Murphy charisma emerges only once or twice during the film. Murphy would rather give his character a spiffy wardrobe than a spiffy personality. Sometimes it seems as if Murphy made *Harlem Nights* just so he could wear fancy suits and look debonair.

5) The plot is a shameless rip-off of *The Sting*. If you're going to make another sting movie, you've got to do something original. Murphy's tale of warring nightclub owners in Harlem (circa 1938) fails to add anything new to the formula.

6) To get laughs, Murphy makes fun of stuttering. You know a comedy is digging deep when it resorts to ridiculing the handicapped.

7) Murphy's idea of drama is a scene in which his character apologizes for the first time in his life. For what? For shooting Reese's little toe off!

Needless to say, Murphy shows little, if any, promise or imagination as a screenwriter.

In all fairness, however, a few rays of sunshine do manage to break through the gloomy cloud surrounding the movie. Danny Aiello is fun to watch as a dirty cop on the take. Aiello stands out in the large, ensemble cast: he obviously relishes the opportunity to play such a nasty character (a racist detective with mob ties). Aiello's zesty performance gives *Harlem Nights* some much needed spice.

Another bright spot is Arsenio Hall, who has a hilarious, show-stopping cameo as a cry-baby gangster; Hall virtually steals the spotlight from Murphy. In fact, Hall's ten minutes on screen are the funniest ten minutes in the movie. Unfortunately, his character is completely irrelevant to the plot; Murphy should have given Hall a much bigger role.

Of course, I've already mentioned that I didn't care for Murphy's character, but I have to admit that I did love his neckties. They are simply spectacular—almost worth the price of admission.