



A PRYOR ENGAGEMENT

# Car Wash

## ‘Car Wash’: a contemporary review

At a time when many of the old-style forms of community-minded entertainment have virtually vanished from American cinema – a demise unwittingly highlighted by such Bogdanovich séances as *At Long Last Love* and *Nickelodeon* – the special euphoria of *Car Wash* carries a particularly welcome charge.

Harking back to the spirited flavour of some Thirties musicals, it remains specifically ‘local’ in its form of address, shaped by the contours of Afro-American culture and thus not always exportable in some of its nuances. The comedy of a barking dog in one of the customers’ cars, for instance, refers to the recent practice of whites training dogs for ‘protection’ against blacks, while the sharp satire of the Daddy Rich episode – directed conversely against the religiosity and middle-class values of the black community, with portraits of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King subtly integrated as relevant emblems – alludes to too many indigenous institutions and attitudes to be fully intelligible in an alien context. More generally, the proliferation of scatological gags, undoubtedly as ‘vulgar’ as the breaking of comparable taboos in *Numéro deux* [1975], along with the parodic stereotyping of white characters, supply potential obstacles of another kind; and it must be admitted that, as isolated units, the script and music of *Car Wash* are in the main unexceptional. Yet thanks to the overall brilliance of the direction and performances, these factors operate more as challenges successfully met than as obtrusive drawbacks.

The exhilarating synchronising of car-washing, dancing, editing and *mise en scène* to the title tune; the inspired delivery of insults and comebacks (‘Ain’t nothin’ lower than fly shit, man – not camel shit ... not chicken shit,’ or Lindy’s gay riposte to Duane: ‘Honey, I’m more man than you’ll ever be and more woman than you’ll ever get’); the graceful handling of slow-motion and fragmented editing to chart the descent of a bottle of urine (in the generally sophomoric Mad Bomber episode) and Calvin’s skateboard trajectories; the sly introduction of ‘white’ music to accompany and affectionately kid Marsha’s romantic yearnings; the ingenious Altmanesque use throughout of surrealist disc jockey patter – all testify to the emergence of Michael Schultz as an uncommonly assured and gifted director.

Proceeding nimbly through an open narrative form of recurring and developing gags, the film falters only when certain running themes and details begin to acquire the status of obligatory and non-comic mini-plots, as in the two perfunctory scenes allotted to Justin and Loretta. Even here, however, the banality of the dialogue (‘No college, no marriage’) assumes a song-like aspect which crops up elsewhere—for example, in exchanges between Mona and T.C. (‘What’ll it be?’ ‘You and me’), enhancing the musical feel of the film throughout.

If the resolution of various dramatic conflicts involves a deliberate postponement of certain issues – Justin promises to discuss leaving work with Loretta ‘next week’, just as Mr B promises to consider Lonnie’s request for a raise ‘tomorrow’ – the gradual exposition of the crucial roles of Lonnie

and Duane suggests a development of focus and emphasis that is less evasive. Initially shown as silent and sinister, and subsequently revealed as an ex-con, the former takes on an entirely different aspect when his children arrive, and by the end of the film, in his confrontation with Duane, clearly becomes the film's central father figure, a positive contrast to the pathos of the exasperated

Mr B. Duane, who has been typed from the start as the movie's only black militant, emerges more ambiguously – but no less decisively – as the most sensitive and traumatised character, in a comparable contrast to the ludicrous parody of Maoism represented by Irwin. Initially a figure of ridicule, he gradually becomes the film's only spokesman for protest and despair – his denouncing of Daddy Rich, shown in ambivalent terms, is the pivotal point – so that a subsequent scene in which he plays his saxophone reveals a side of him that culminates in his final tears, at which point he becomes, after Lonnie, the movie's most sympathetic figure.

On the one hand, this conclusion seems simplistic and superficial, a last-minute shift of gears from farce to drama. Yet at the same time, given the wealth of social insight that has gone before, it is a powerful summation as well. Thanks to the expertise of Schultz and his vast, various characters and incidents – the loudmouthed cab-driver and his hilarious liberal pretensions; the hysterical Mercedes driver with Vuitton bag and vomiting son; the grand arrival of Daddy Rich in a long gold limousine out of Tex Avery; the ecstatic encounters of T.C. with Disco Dan, Mona and his own glorified self-image; the 'Quittin' time' gag quoted from *Gone with the Wind*; the wonderful image of big Hippo on his little motorbike – the film creates a dense and coherent world supporting this conclusion. 'It's all fallin' apart, man,' Duane says, sobbing in Lonnie's arms; 'We'll work it out together,' Lonnie replies.

Conceivably the most sophisticated and accomplished 'black exploitation' film made to date, *Car Wash* expresses and embodies some of the complex truth of both sentiments, and for most of its running time is marvellously funny and inventive into the bargain.

**Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1977**

---

## CAR WASH

*Director:* Michael Schultz  
*Production Company:* Universal Pictures  
*Producers:* Art Linson, Gary Stromberg  
*Associate Producer:* Don Phillips  
*Unit Production Manager:* Bud Brill  
*1st Assistant Director:* Phil Bowles  
*Script Supervisor:* Barbara Amato  
*Casting:* Don Phillips  
*Screenplay:* Joel Schumacher  
*Director of Photography:* Frank Stanley  
*Special Effects:* Don Wolz  
*Editor:* Christopher Holmes  
*Art Director:* Robert Clatworthy  
*Set Decorator:* A.C. Montenaro  
*Costume Designer:* Daniel Paredes  
*Make-up:* Chuck Crafts  
*Hairstylist:* Robert Stevenson  
*Title Design:* Michael Hamilton  
*Titles/Opticals:* Universal Title  
*Music/Music Producer:* Norman Whitfield  
*Songs Performed by:* Rose Royce  
*Music Editor:* John Caper Jr  
*Sound:* Willie D. Burton  
*Sound:* Robert L. Hoyt  
*Sound Editor:* Peter Berkos

## Cast

Darrow Igus (*Floyd*)  
DeWayne Jessie (*Lloyd*)  
James Spinks (*Hippo*)  
Antonio Fargas (*Lindy*)  
The Pointer Sisters (*The Wilson Sisters*)  
Richard Pryor (*Daddy Rich*)  
George Carlin (*taxi driver*)  
Clarence Muse (*Snapper*)  
Franklyn Ajaye (*T.C.*)  
Tracy Reed (*Mona*)  
Bill Duke (*Duane*)  
Ivan Dixon (*Lonnie*)

Henry Kingi (*Goody*)  
Pepe Serna (*Chuco*)  
Ray Vitte (*Geronimo*)  
Jack Kehoe (*Scruggs*)  
Garrett Morris (*Slide*)  
Leon Pinkney (*Justin*)  
Ren Woods (*Loretta*)  
Lorraine Gary (*hysterical lady*)  
Lauren Jones (*hooker*)  
Leonard Jackson (*Earl*)  
Sully Boyar (*Mr B*)  
Professor Irwin Corey (*'Mad Bomber'*)  
Richard Brestoff (*Irwin*)  
Melanie Mayron (*Marsha*)  
Arthur French (*Charlie*)  
Michael Fennell (*Calvin*)  
Antonie Becker (*Charlene*)  
Erin Blunt (*Lonnie's son*)  
Carmine Caridi (*foolish father*)  
Reginald Farmer (*Daddy Rich's chauffeur*)  
Ricky Fellen (*hysterical lady's son*)  
Ben Fromer (*man behind*)  
Cynthia Hamowy (*bandaged man's wife*)  
John Linson (*foolish father's son*)  
Ed Metzger (*arresting cop*)  
Antar Mubarak (*Sonny Fredericks*)  
Derek Schultz (*foolish father's son*)  
Mike Slaney (*bandaged man*)  
Al Stallone (*Oldsmobile owner*)  
Jackie Toles (*Calvin's mother*)  
Janine Williams (*Lonnie's daughter*)  
Otis Sistrunk (*Otis*)  
Timothy Thomerson (*Ken*)  
Jason Bernard (*parole officer*)  
Jay Butler (*AM disc jockey*)  
J.J. Jackson (*2nd PM disc jockey*)  
Rod McGrew (*PM disc jockey*)  
Sarina C. Grant, Billy Bass (*newscasters*)

USA 1976  
97 mins

---

## A PRYOR ENGAGEMENT

### Richard Pryor: Live in Concert

Wed 1 Sep 20:50; Fri 1 Oct 18:00

### Some Call It Loving

Thu 2 Sep 20:40; Mon 20 Sep 18:00

(+ pre-recorded intro)

### Lady Sings the Blues

Sat 4 Sep 11:30; Wed 15 Sep 13:50; Mon 27 Sep 20:20

### The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings

Sat 4 Sep 20:30; Sat 25 Sep 14:45

### Blue Collar

Mon 6 Sep 14:30; Fri 17 Sep 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro);

Tue 5 Oct 17:35

### Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling

Tue 7 Sep 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro); Mon 4 Oct 20:45

### African Odysseys Presents: The Black History of Comedy

Fri 10 Sep 18:15

### Wattstax

Fri 10 Sep 21:00; Tue 14 Sep 18:00; Sat 18 Sep 20:10

### Car Wash

Sat 11 Sep 17:50; Tue 28 Sep 20:50

### Blazing Saddles

Sat 11 Sep 20:45; Wed 22 Sep 18:15

### Silver Streak

Sun 12 Sep 15:15; Wed 29 Sep 20:45

### Which Way Is Up?

Wed 15 Sep 21:00; Sun 26 Sep 18:10

### Richard Pryor: A Comedy Genius

Thu 16 Sep 18:15

### Stir Crazy

Sun 19 Sep 18:10; Fri 1 Oct 20:30

### Bustin' Loose

Mon 20 Sep 21:00; Sun 3 Oct 18:10

### Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip

Tue 21 Sep 18:00 (+ discussion); Mon 4 Oct 18:20

### Richard Pryor... Here and Now

Wed 22 Sep 20:45; Sat 2 Oct 18:00

### Brewster's Millions

Thu 23 Sep 20:45; Sun 3 Oct 15:15

A Pryor Engagement was originally programmed by Nellie Killian for BAMcinémathèque in 2013

This season is presented in partnership with We Are Parable