



Tupac Shakur shines in *Gang Related*, his final film

Thug Thespian

HE MADE EXASPERATING MUSIC THAT TAPPED INTO OUR GENERATION'S PAIN AND MADNESS, BUT IT MAY HAVE BEEN IN MOVIES WHERE TUPAC SHAKUR BORE HIS SOUL

By Craig Barboza

Last summer, midway through shooting an action sequence on the set of *Gang Related*, the late Tupac Shakur couldn't hold it. Feeding off the adrenaline rush and oddity of the situation, he grabbed the man in front of him and, waving his gun wildly, he... chuckled. The burner was, yes, a prop and the dude an actor. "Man, I'm usually on the other side of the door!" Shakur enthused of the scenario in which he and co-star Jim Belushi, playing crooked detectives, bust into an apartment and ambush two suspects, swiftly laying them facedown. "This time I got the power."

Indeed, *Gang Related*, an \$8-million urban thriller involving stolen police evidence, a dead DEA agent and the crackbrained cover-up that ensues, was to be Shakur's last role before big

studio productions and seven-figure salaries. The movie's cast, including Lela Rochon (an exotic dancer) and James Earl Jones (a Cochran-like legal attorney), was even looking forward to Shakur doing the musical score. But as it turned out, *Gang Related* was Shakur's final role, period. He died just seven days after production wrapped, fatally wounded in a Las Vegas drive-by.

Like Ice Cube, Shakur took acting jobs early on for the power and visibility. His music, he always said, mattered most. Moviemaking was tedious and the loochie, in the beginning at least, pocket size. Still, it was in movies—not music—that Pac finely molded his machismo and, say those close to him, ultimately bore his soul. In his screen debut, 1992's *Juice*, the then 19-year-old gave a tough, smolder-

ing performance as Bishop, a deeply self-destructive brother whose search for respect leads him to murder and betrayal. Confronting his crew at one point in the movie (for which he earned just \$15,000), he exploded, saying: "You gotta snatch some collars and let them motherfuckas know you're gonna take them out, anytime you feel like it. You gotta get the ground beneath your feet, pot-nah, get the wind behind your back and go out in a blaze if you got to. Otherwise you ain't shit."

The success of *Juice* landed Shakur the lead opposite Janet Jackson in *Poetic Justice*, a street-romance directed by John Singleton. The movie convinced Hollywood he was an actor of broad range, with an incendiary style and flair for seduction. He was on his way to becoming a

major film star. If he could only stay out of the headlines... Instead, he virtually lived *in* them. Following the production of *Above the Rim* in '94, Shakur was shot five times in the lobby of a recording studio, then, the following day, convicted on charges of sodomizing and sexually abusing a woman in his Manhattan hotel room.

It was at New York's Clinton Correctional Facility that the second stage of Shakur's film career began, when a close friend and president of Def Pictures, Preston Holmes, contacted him to say he was interested in setting up a studio deal whereby Pac would create and develop projects with another writer when he got out. To Holmes' surprise, Shakur already had some very specific ideas and was even working on a few screenplays. There was an ensemble piece to star the hottest young Black talent (people like Jada Pinkett, Omar Epps, Larenz Tate, himself); another was to be set in a mental facility (not unlike *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*); and one film would dramatize Nat Turner's slave revolt (with Shakur in the title role). "That one caught me off guard," admits Holmes, whose last conversation with Shakur was about confirming the deal. "When he told me, I said, 'Oh really?' And he said, 'Yeah, man. Why you think I have 1831 tattooed on my back? That's for Nat. I been studying this brother. That's a bad motherfucka.'"

After Shakur's release from jail in October of '95, film began to take on a larger role in his life. In just a matter of months, he'd starred in three

flicks could (he thought) earn him some quick cash. But of the \$750,000 he was now commanding a picture, *Death Row*, he told Holmes, was taking "most if not all of it."

In the last months of his life Shakur was under extreme duress and it was beginning to carry over into his acting, say those who worked with him. At times it was subtle, at times more pronounced.

In *Gang Related*, too, he's a nervous wreck, dominated by his partner in crime.

"I think he drew on things," says Lynn Bigelow, producer of *Gang Related*, quick to point out an emotional moment in her film. "I watch that alley scene, when he's nervous and he's saying, 'I owe people some money. I just want to leave town.' I think there were some things that really ring



Crooked Cops? Shakur and Jim Belushi as Rodriguez and Divinci in *Gang Related*



Shakur, Belushi and Lela Rochon taking care of business

true. He felt like he was owned by people and he really wanted to get away. And he was great in that scene, very natural."

That Shakur was a gifted and promising actor goes without argument. Whether audiences, however, were ready to see another side of the star is altogether another question. After all, *Gridlock'd*, a Def Pictures release that presented a sensitive, more vulnerable Shakur, was a flop at the box office, taking in under \$5 million. And *Gang Related*, a heavily flawed movie, suffering from an unsatisfying narrative and reticent direction, will likely fare no better. According to Holmes, "There were a lot of people who wanted to remember Tupac as the thug life nigga. They did not want to see him as anything else."

At a time when there is a growing number of Black movie stars—Denzel Washington, Samuel Jackson, Cuba Gooding Jr.—but none who appeal to the core Black audience, the 18- to 24-year-old demographic that is Def Pictures' target audience—the loss of Tupac Shakur is all the more tragic. "None of those guys mentioned even make movies for that market," says Holmes. "The reason why we wanted to be in business with this guy for the long-term was because he spoke to that audience like nobody did," says Holmes. "Nobody had both the street credibility and skills that Tupac had." His absence from the big screen will, perhaps, leave a greater void than it does on airwaves. ☺

full-length features, including *Bullet*, a movie with Mickey Rourke that went straight to home video. A major reason for all this movie work was, not surprisingly, money. With *Death Row* reportedly owning his home in Malibu and hitting him up for legal expenses, doing a string of low-budget

But Shakur, always one to incorporate his frame of mind, exploited those feelings, using them to impart his characters' psychological dimensions. You can see it in *Gridlock'd*, his first movie back in which Shakur, as an addicted performance-artist, seems overwhelmed by irreconcilable pressures.