

# 'Black Dynamite' movie review: A sincere and hilarious homage to Blaxploitation cinema

**'Black Dynamite! He's super cool and he know kung fu; drives a \$5,000 car and wears a \$100 suit. And when it comes to the ladies, he's out of sight!'**

As the above quote from the film's trailer suggests, the eponymous hero of the picture is machismo made flesh – at least according to the 1970's ideal. *Black Dynamite* (2009) is a paragon (parody/homage) to Blaxploitation cinema, a sub-genre of exploitation films that emerged during the 70's, primarily aimed at the urban Black community and featuring a predominantly Black cast. Typically the films would involve subversive plots and characters on the wrong side of the law - hustlers, pimps, and crooks. The heroes were more anti-heroes, fighting (by literal use of violence) corruption, racism, and often, white authority. Another staple of the genre were the funk and soul infused soundtracks. Artists such as Curtis Mayfield and Isaac Hayes in particular are synonymous with two of the genre's landmark films, *Shaft* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972).

The genre garnered plenty of controversy at the time concerning race relations. Whilst advocates felt the films empowered and gave a voice to Black people, others felt they merely propagated cultural stereotypes.

The Blaxploitation genre eventually teetered out towards the end of the 70s, but its influence can still be seen to this day in the musical stylings and personas of artists such as Snoop Dogg, 50 cent, and Madcon; and more significantly in the works of such notable filmmakers as Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee, and John Singleton; although the latter two take a more critical and thought-provoking view of the genre's conventions rather than the glorifying view of Tarantino.

Back to the film in question – *Black Dynamite* follows the titular character, a former CIA agent and quintessential badass, as he sets about finding and dishing out his high-kicking, nunchaku-wielding flavour of vengeance upon his brother's killers, who he soon discovers are merely the tip of a much larger and outrageous plot that threatens to rob the entire African-American male populace of their "power". Together with his rag-tag crew of militants, *Black Dynamite* carves a trail of mayhem and destruction through the streets, leading him to a humorously epic showdown with the very embodiment of The Man.

*Black Dynamite* is played with gusto and flair by the criminally underused actor and martial artist, Michael Jai White. White is perhaps best known to the masses for his role in *Spawn* (1997); the first mainstream Hollywood superhero film to feature an African-American lead. Once again quoting a line from the trailer, *Black Dynamite* is '*Badder than Shaft, Superfly and the Mack put together!*' Indeed White's character is a hybrid of the more well-known heroes of Blaxploitation cinema; equal parts *Shaft*, Black Belt Jones, *The Mack*, and with a

generous sprinkle of Dolemite. Dynamite kicks ass and makes it look easy, nearly always beginning or ending a scene/beat down to the non-diegetic vocal eruptions of “*Dy-no-mite! Dy-no-mite!*”. White came up with the idea for Black Dynamite whilst apparently listening to “Super Bad” by James Brown. He subsequently took his idea to filmmaker Scott Sanders, whom he had previously worked with on the film *Thick as Thieves* (1998), where Sanders was director. The two of them then set about putting together a mock-trailer, which they then presented to producer Jon Steingart, and the rest is history.

The supporting cast also take to their roles with equal fervour, with appearances from several US comedians including Arsenio Hall, Nicole Sullivan, Cedric Yarbrough, and Tommy Davidson. The staples of Blaxploitation cinema are all there, you’ve got the pimps and the ho’s, the gangsters, the crooked white officials, and of course the eye candy.

Black Dynamite revels in the conventions of the Blaxploitation genre, both in terms of the mise-en-scène and the musical score, composed by Adrian Younge. The film gets it all right, utilizing effects, sounds, props, and sets appropriate for the time period in which the original films were made. There is however one minor exception with the misjudged use of modern CGI.

The cast and crew clearly know the genre well, and that knowledge and enthusiasm shines through in every scene and line of dialogue. There have been other films post the 70s era that have tried to capture the essence of Blaxploitation films, such as *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988) and *Undercover Brother* (2002), but none were done so quite as effectively and wholeheartedly as Black Dynamite.

Black Dynamite is hugely entertaining. The laughs are fast and frequent, the acting is gloriously hammy, the fight scenes are simultaneously funny and bone crunching, and the story is wonderfully ludicrous. Knowledge of Blaxploitation cinema is not crucial to the enjoyment of Black Dynamite, but there are plenty of nods and winks to the films of old for those who are familiar with the genre.

In closing – *‘If you crave satisfaction, then dig this action!’*