

The Promised Land

The scene is corporate America. A pedigreed lawyer is fighting for survival at a top law firm, trying to keep her job and her lifestyle. BAM! A stranger hooks her up with a few clients and she's on easy street until



she discovers an ugly secret... what ensues is a delectable mix of *El Mariachi* and *The Firm*. It's the debut film, *The Promised Land*, written, directed and produced by Monika Harris.

Dedicated is one word that describes Harris. A graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, 28-year-old Harris was determined to get her film made. She raised \$65,000 from family and friends to begin shooting. She ran out of funds in post-production and had friends wire her more money because she couldn't wait for checks to clear. She also took jobs as a paralegal, a secretary, and even telemarketed male sex stimulants.

The film maker penned the campy thriller using her own experience as background. "The recession had hit, WHAMMO! I tried keeping up with friends from school, but you needed a Lojack to find them sometimes. They changed firms like they changed underwear," said Harris.

by Sibylla Nash

Her foray into the legal profession sent her

idealistic notions spinning. "When I got out of school, I thought everyone had the same opportunity," she recalled, but she soon learned the promised land of the 90s was a dog-eat-dog corporate world where you get to the top by any means necessary. "Getting ahead in America is not about being driven or being smart, it's about who you know," said Harris.

Who you know is definitely what opens doors a lot faster in Hollywood. Hollywood can be a closed community to outsiders, it's the 90s and only now are we experiencing a plethora of African American movies, although most of these movies are from a male point of view.

"As a Black woman, you have a better chance of being struck by lightning than getting your film out there and distributed," said Harris, only half joking.

Right now, *The Promised Land* is on the festival circuit. Harris hopes it will play at the Sundance Film Festival next year. The success of independent films *Sankofa* and *Sweet Potato Ride* provide inspiration for Harris.

"*Sankofa* is totally inspirational to young people like me who feel totally locked out if you don't have a film that's hip enough or 'hood enough. Being in the 'hood is a story that needs to be told, but it's been told too much," says Harris.

To other independent filmmakers pursuing their craft, Harris gives this advice: "Making a film is like going to war, you have to make it a do or die thing. I had to say if I didn't do it - no one else would."

The Promised Land stars Lela Rochon and Phil Morris. Rochon can also be seen in *Waiting to Exhale* with Angela Bassett and Whitney Houston due out this November. TP