

# Smile, You're on Candidate Camera

## With an Insider's Eye, a Film Comedy Skewers Harlem Politics



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

By MIREYA NAVARRO

In the new movie "Vote for Me!" a Puerto Rican building superintendent decides to run for Congress after the representative from his district dies while giving a speech. That much is made up.

What ensues is a political satire, written and directed by Nelson A. Denis, a former state assemblyman from East Harlem. It seems to intentionally blur the line between reality and fiction to capture the spectacle of New York City politics. One character is a big-name Democratic Party candidate who bears a certain resemblance to Assemblyman Adam Clayton Powell IV, who defeated Mr. Denis in the 2000 Democratic primary. And a provocative black candidate in the film, although portrayed as a woman, may just remind New Yorkers of the Rev. Al Sharpton.

Then there are the cameos by New York politicians, like State Senator Olga A. Mendez, playing herself. Mr. Denis appears as a television anchor and provides the voice of an off-screen stand-up comedian who gives running commen-



Nelson A. Denis, above, talks with actors in his movie, "Vote for Me!" At left, Ricardo Barber, center, plays a political novice who runs for office.

tary throughout the film. (A sample: "The worst thing about political jokes is that some of them get elected.")

Mr. Denis, whose film will have its premiere at the TriBeCa Film Festival on Thursday, insists that his film is actually a love letter. He had no ax to grind or scores to settle, he said.

But what about the "dimwitted party hacks" or "blood-sucking consultants," by his own descriptions, depicted in his movie? "My idea was to entertain people

with a great movie and to create a film-making career," he said over a recent lunch of chicken with rice at La Fonda Boricua, a restaurant in East Harlem.

Fernando Ferrer, the former Bronx borough president and mayoral candidate, who is among the few friends of Mr. Denis who have seen the movie, said he found it "very funny." While the characters are caricatures, he said, many ele-

Continued on Page B7

# With Insider's Eye, a Film Comedy by an Ex-Candidate Skewers Harlem Politics

Continued From Page B1

ments ring true.

"There are echoes of it that are very close to reality," he said.

If that is so, voters may be in trouble.

"Vote for Me!" in a style reminiscent of "Do the Right Thing" by Spike Lee, but with a lighter touch, features scathing portrayals of candidates as opportunists, with absurd political debates, skirmishes by opposing campaigns, ethnic innuendo and bickering between black and Hispanic neighbors.

The low-budget movie — how low Mr. Denis did not want published so as not to undercut the amount he could get from distribution deals — revolves around the grass-roots campaign of Leo Machuchal, a character based on a 72-year-old employee who worked in Mr. Denis's Assembly office and who once beat up a drug dealer. Mr. Machuchal runs on a single issue — ridding his block of drugs — and with the campaign slogan "Viva Puerto Rico!"

Mr. Denis, 48, said the movie was autobiographical in its portrayal of the craziness and sometimes silliness of political campaigns. He had plenty of material to draw from: He ran 10 campaigns over 10 years for City Council, the Assembly and for district leader, and lost 8 of them. But he said the film's ultimate message was that any decent citizen with genuine intentions could run for office and ultimately do a better job than many elected officials.

Mr. Denis ran as a political outsider in East Harlem, a Democratic stronghold of mostly Hispanic and black voters known for rough-and-tumble politics and fierce electoral battles most often between African-American and Hispanic candidates, and between Hispanic candidates themselves.

In 1996, Mr. Denis, a Yale Law School graduate who ran a free legal clinic in El Barrio for several years, won a seat in the 68th State Assembly District and was re-elected two years

later. Mr. Denis said one of the accomplishments he was most proud of was working to increase public financing of new housing and private lending in the area to help reduce the number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots.

But when re-election time came around again in 2000, Mr. Denis lost the Democratic primary, and his seat, to Mr. Powell, the former city councilman and son of the storied Harlem congressman. Mr. Denis attacked Mr. Powell in the campaign for trading on his father's famous name. "Adam is running on fumes," he said in an article in The New York Times during the campaign. "There is no gas there."

Mr. Powell accused Mr. Denis of being an absentee legislator.

"We have someone in Nelson Denis who is missing in action," he said in the same article.

Political analysts said name recognition undoubtedly helped Mr. Powell, but some, like Mr. Ferrer, also noted that Mr. Denis seemed to lack the political instincts to stay in office.

From his résumé, politics seems to be a detour from Mr. Denis's more creative endeavors. He performed in college theater both at Yale and at Harvard, where he received a bachelor's degree in government. He has also belonged to writers' workshops at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and Intar Theater.

He has directed commercials for a cable channel in California and worked as an editorial writer for the Spanish-language newspaper El Diario/La Prensa in New York.

Mr. Denis has directed several short films, but "Vote for Me!" made from one of eight screenplays he has written, is his first feature film.

"It was a very New York story to me," said Nancy Schafer, the programmer for the TriBeCa Film Festival. "We wanted movies that highlight the diverse nature of New York and that really stood out."

With his artistic credentials, why dive into the cesspool portrayed in his movie and run for office? Mr. Denis, who was born in Washington Heights of Puerto Rican parents, said that as

an editorial writer he met many elected officials "lacking in information and real commitment to public service." He said he had wanted to be part of improving the neighborhood known as the cradle of Puerto Rican migration to the city.

After he lost, he said, he went back to practicing law but decided to sink all his savings into making "Vote for Me!" to offer an insider's look at New York-style politics and make sense of all those years he spent campaigning.

Many East Harlem residents worked as extras in the film during a four-week shooting in 2001 on East 115th Street. Mr. Denis said he used campaign volunteers, local musicians like the group Yerbabuena for the soundtrack and even his mother, Sarah, who all worked free.

Some East Harlem political denizens, like the Democratic district leader, Felix Rosado, said they hoped they were not targets of ridicule in the movie. Mr. Rosado supported Mr. Powell against Mr. Denis.

But told of the plot, Mr. Rosado said the nastiness in a movie could hardly top reality. "The reputation politicians have in the community is hard-earned — people say they are all crooks," Mr. Rosado said.

Assemblyman Powell, who Mr. Denis said served as the model for "Al Blanco," the candidate whose famous name is supposed to be a vote magnet, said he looked forward to seeing the movie.

"Political satire is a legitimate form of entertainment," he said when asked if he was worried about the portrayal.

But Mr. Powell said that even in filmmaking Mr. Denis came in second. Mr. Powell co-produced and made a cameo appearance on "Keep the Faith, Baby," a biography of his father that was broadcast on Showtime last year.

"I wish him as much success with this movie as I had with my movie," he said.

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