Cuba Gooding, Jr., The 'Red Tails' Interview

Oscar-Winner opines on playing Tuskegee airman

Celebrity Interview

by Kam Williams

Cuba Gooding, Jr. was born in the Bronx, New York on January 2, 1968, to Shirley and Cuba, Sr., the lead singer of the R&B group The Main Ingredient But after his deadbeat dad abandoned the family in 1974, Jr. and his siblings were raised in L.A. by his struggling single-mom. He ended up attending four different high schools, but was still popular enough to be voted class president at three of them.

Cuba's showbiz career began in 1984 as a breakdancer during the closing ceremonies of the Summer Olympics. He subsequently landed several bit roles on TV and in movies before enjoying a meteoric rise after his spellbinding performance as Tre in Boyz n the Hood.

In 1997, he won an Academy Award for his memorable outing as Rod "Show me the money!" Tidwell in Jerry Maguire, and was named one of the 50 Most Beautiful People in the World by People Magazine the same year. He has also earned two NAACP Image Awards (for Radio and Gifted Hands), a Screen Actors Guild Award (for Jerry Maguire), and he even has his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

A born-again Christian since the age of 13, Cuba married his childhood sweetheart, Sara Kapfer, whom he started dating in high school. They have three kids, Spencer, Mason and Piper. Here, he talks about his latest outing as Major Emanuelle Stance in Red Tails, a World War II epoch about the legendary Tuskegee Airmen.

'When I heard that George Lucas was going to make a blockbuster about the Tuskegee Airmen, I was all over it'

Kam Williams: What made you so passionate about Red Tails?

CG: Well, I had first heard this story of the Tuskegee Airmen back in 1992 when I did that HBO movie. At the time, I was a young man just finishing his education, and it frustrated me that I hadn't learned anything about these African-American pilots who had escorted bombers during World War II. It was one of those things where I was going, "What the hell?! Why didn't I already know this?" So, to tackle that subject-matter for HBO was monumental in my life. Of course, I moved on in my career and did other things, but when I heard that George Lucas was going to make a blockbuster about the Tuskegee Airmen, I was all over it. How often do we in Hollywood get an opportunity to tell a black tale on a scale like this, an action adventure? I knew it was going to be visually stunning, so, I told him, "Hey, I have to be involved even just to coach the actors or if l have to do Kraft Services." When I met with [director] Anthony Hemingway, we just connected. It was the longest dinner, with tears and everything. He recognized that the passion I had to be a part of the movie was the same passion that these men had to do their part for their country. George even called and asked me to narrate his new documentary for the History Channel called "Double Victory" which chronicles both the Tuskegee Airmen's triumphs in the skies over Europe and the racism they had to deal with back in the States. So, it's been a fun ride, and I've been blessed to be involved in something that not only I'm passionate about but so is the man financing it.

KW: Larry Greenberg points out that you've played pilots and military men before, both real-life heroes like Carl Brashear in Men of Honor and Dorie Miller in Pearl Harbor, and also fictional characters in A Few Good Men, Judgement, Outbreak and other movies. He asks: Is this something you have a passion for?

CG: I guess so. I used to say, "No, no, I just got lucky being cast." But the older I get, the more I ask myself, "Cube, what's your deal here?" Truthfully, I think it's playing real-life people that I'm attracted to. And the majority of them have been military men. But there's also James Robert "Radio" Kennedy and some other guys I've played who are real-life people. I think there's something about the heightened responsibility to tell the truth that attracts me to these roles, especially when you can have them on the set to help you do your job. And now that I have two sons who are 15 and 17 who love watching movies, you can count me in whenever I have an opportunity to do a movie that gives a history lesson about our contributions, especially to the military. I'm in! I'm involved!

KW: Editor/legist Patricia Turnier asks: How would you describe your character, Major Emanuelle Stance?

CG: Major Emanuelle Stance is the patriarch on the base. He's like the football coach. He's the person that gives the men their encouragement before they go back out onto the field.

KW: Teresa Emerson asks: What was it like to meet the surviving Tuskegee Airmen? Did they help you prepare for your role as Major Stance?

CG: Every day, literally! They helped me to prepare to be a man. And not only were they on the set every day, but one or two have attended each of the screenings on the junket from Dallas to Miami. And they're in their 90s! It's been a magical and emotional experience for me every, single time. So, it's been great! [Chuckles]

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman says: You've played a lot of heroes. Who is your own personal hero?

CG: My mom, to do what she's done to hold the family together. She raised me, my brother, Omar, and my sister, with all of us being homeless and having to live in the back of a car for a period of time. So, yeah, my mom's my hero. If I had to pick one from the screen, it might be U.S. Navy Master Chief Carl Brashear.

KW: Film student Jamaal Green asks: Cuba, is there any material or genre out there that you have not yet covered in your career that you would like to try?

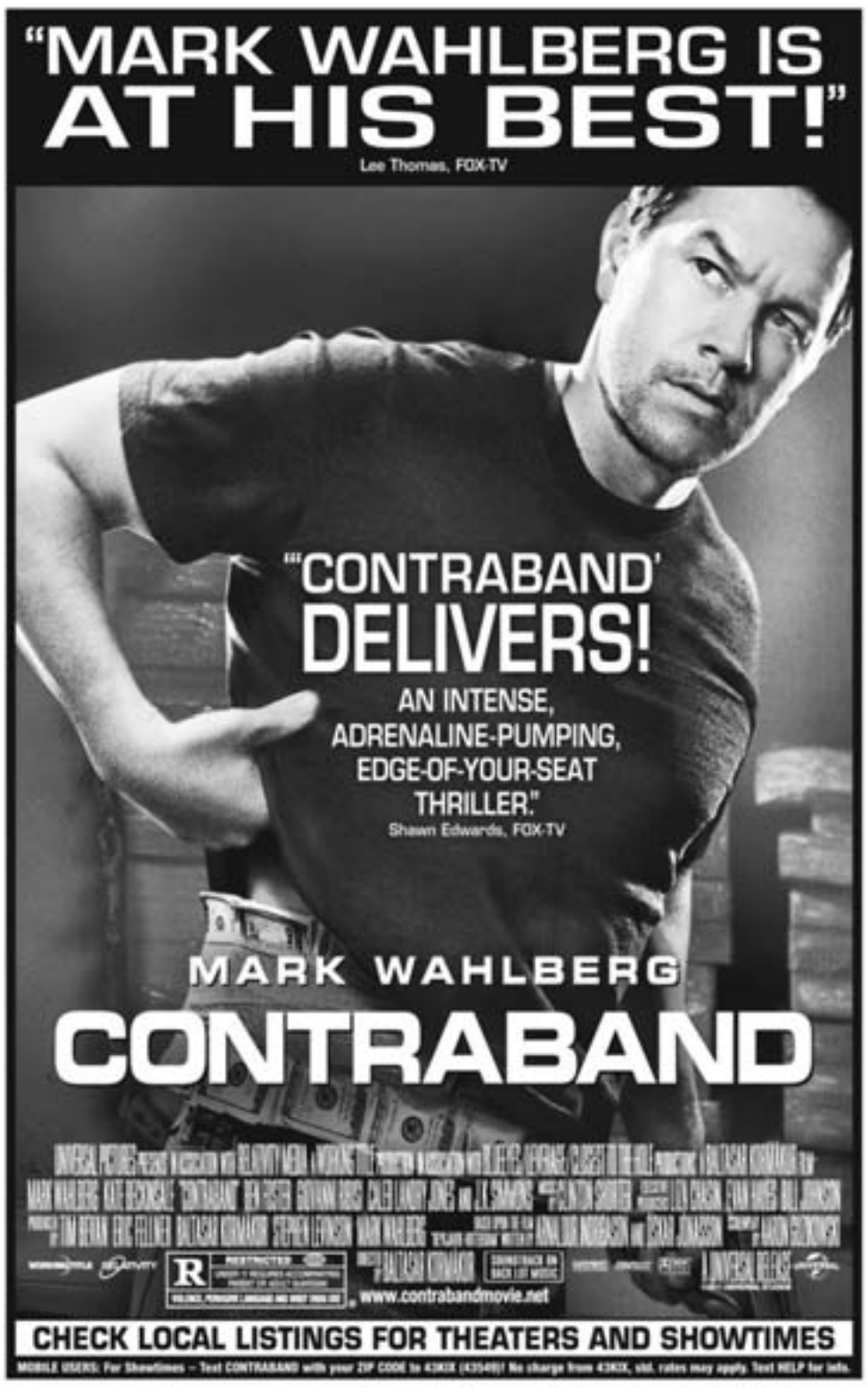
CG: Absolutely! I just heard about this magician named Black Herman who was a contemporary of Houdini back in the early 20th Century. Also, I'm an avid hockey fan and I've been playing for about 17 years, and somebody recently told me that the first organized hockey teams in Canada were all black. Telling those stories would be cool.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles asks: How do you expect the picture to contribute to the public's rethinking of the historic role of the Tuskegee airmen?

CG: I hope the picture makes an impact, and I know George Lucas is doing everything he can to make sure that happens. And then there's the documentary Double Victory I mentioned which is serving as a tangent to the movie. That will be more of a history lesson than Red Tails which is an action adventure tale on the scale of Avatar, with 16,000 special effects. It's something that I think people are going to be really impressed with, visually.

KW: Harriet also asks: What did you learn about yourself doing your role in Red Tails?

CG: I learned that not only am I a descendant of slaves, but that I am also a descendant of royalty, that there are politicians from the 1800s as well as Tuskegee Airmen in my lineage.

KW: Rudy Lewis asks: How inspirational can Red Tails be to those who who are not being educated in the skills necessary to compete nationally and globally with young men of their generation? Will

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