

Carmen Ejogo: The 'Sparkle' Interview

By Kam Williams
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News

Carmen Ejogo was born in London on New Year's Day 1974 to Elizabeth Douglas and Charles Ejogo, a couple of Scottish and Nigerian extraction, respectively. She made her U.S. film debut opposite Eddie Murphy playing Veronica 'Ronnie' Tate in the 1997 comedy "Metro."

Carmen then went on to star in films such as Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare's "Love's Labour's Lost," "What's the Worst that Could Happen?" opposite Martin Lawrence, Neil Jordan's "The Brave One" opposite Terrence Howard and Jodie Foster, Gavin O'Connor's "Pride and Glory" opposite Ed Norton, and in Sam Mendes' 2009 indie hit "Away We Go" opposite Tyler Perry in the feature "I, Alex Cross," a psychological thriller based on the James Patterson novels about Washington DC

detective Alex Cross.

Additionally, Ejogo garnered the attention of television critics and audiences alike for her portrayal of Sally Hemmings, the title character in the 2000 CBS miniseries "Sally Hemmings: An American Scandal." Later, Ejogo starred as Coretta Scott King in HBO's critically acclaimed film "Boycott" opposite Jeffrey Wright and Terrence Howard. Her role earned her a 2001 NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Actress in a TV film or miniseries. In 2005, Ejogo starred in HBO's Emmy nominated "Lackawanna Blues." Her role as Aalen earned her a second Image Award nomination. Ejogo will next star as FBI agent Baca Sunjata in the highly-anticipated ABC television series "Zero Hour" opposite Anthony Edwards.

Carmen and her husband, actor Jeffrey Wright, live in Brooklyn, which is where they are raising their two children. Here's she talks about her latest role as Sister in "Sparkle" opposite Jordin Sparks and the late Whitney Houston.



Carmen Ejogo, Tika Sumpter and Jordin Sparks in 'Sparkle'

Kam Williams: Hi Carmen, thanks so much for the time. I really appreciate it.

Carmen Ejogo: Thank you.

KW: My brother Larry is the librarian at a Friends school that I think you're very familiar with.

CE: Oh, wow! That's so cool! That's where one of my kids got their start.

Small world!

KW: What interested you in "Sparkle?"

CE: You wouldn't ask that question, if you'd seen the movie, Kam. This role is to die for. It's such a great role. The highs and lows of the character's sister [Sparkle, played by Jordin Sparks] are so dramatic and nuanced and layered that you'd be a fool to turn this role down.

KW: Did you go back and watch Lonette McKee's performance in the original version of "Sparkle" in preparing to do this role?

CE: No. No, I don't know how you make a role your own if you do that. So, watching another actress play the same character in preparation for my own performance is the last thing I would ever do, particularly with Sister, since Lonette made it so iconic that it would be a crazy idea to watch her. I think our movie pays homage to the original, but it's definitely different in numerous ways.

KW: What message do you think people will take away from the movie?

CE: It's essentially about not letting your light be dimmed by anybody who doesn't appreciate the dream that you're trying to pursue. It's about knowing who you are, and following your path even if you're not given support by those around you. And it's also about family.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier says: I loooooooved your performance in "Metro." She asks: Do you enjoy being a member of Mensa and what is your IQ?

CE: [LOL] That is hilarious! Oh my God! I had no idea until recently that my being in Mensa was even on Wikipedia or somewhere else. It is true, but it's funny that it should come up as that interview question.

KW: So, how high is your I.Q.?

CE: 156, for anyone

that's interested. But I probably wouldn't be able to get as high a score after raising two kids and losing a lot of brain cells in the process.

KW: Patricia also says: Musicals are an amazing art form. We used to see a lot of them with people like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and the Nicholas Brothers. They were an integral part of Hollywood and it was common to see actors sing, dance and act. But by the 1950s, the decline began and we rarely

of a sense of nostalgia.

KW: Marcia Evans says: I'm a huge fan of yours. I loved your role in my favorite film, Lackawanna Blues. I was so proud that HBO showcased such an amazing story about a piece of the patchwork to our cultural history quilt. You PLAYED that role! What was it like for you to portray Alean, and to be paired opposite the gorgeous and talented Jimmie Smits?

CE: What's interesting is that that role was actually Halle Berry's. She had to pull out at the very last minute, which meant I literally had only a couple of days to prepare for that role. Honestly, it was like baptism by fire, because I was so underprepared that I had to work on instinct. I was feeding off the energy of those excellent actors while trying to find my place which made it a really exciting experience for me.

KW: April Hughes asks: What was it like working with Whitney Houston?

CE: Amazing! She is an icon, and she brought a passion from the heart for telling Sparkle's story that made her an inspiration to watch every day and it also made it a pleasure to per-

'Go back and watch the great performances in your business so that you can understand the heights that should be aspired to'

see big musicals anymore besides "Chicago." How do you explain this phenomenon and what do you think it will take to reverse the trend?

CE: I'm not a film historian, so I couldn't say for sure. But my guess is that the costs involved in making musicals was pretty high, and that the taste of what was pleasing to movie audiences changed by the time you got into the Sixties and Seventies. I was a big fan of John Cassavetes, his wife, Gena Rowlands, and that era of filmmaking which was about realism and which represented the antithesis of the dreamy escapism you found in musicals. I'm guessing that musicals didn't make sense anymore because of the changes in the political environment that began in the late Sixties, an era of self-awareness and social revolutions. Musicals are finally kind of coming back to a degree now, perhaps out

form opposite her.

KW: April would also like to know if you have any advice for aspiring actresses/singers?

CE: Yes, go back and watch the great performances in your business so that you can understand the heights that should be aspired to. There are many mediocre entertainers who don't aspire to much more than fame and glory. It's very easy to have them as your role models because there aren't as many greats. Go back, discover the greats, and take it from there.

KW: Larry Greenberg says: I read that your director, Salim Akil, worked with schizophrenics before he started working with actors. He asks: Did that make him a more patient director than others you have worked with?

CE: Oh my God! I had no idea. But that makes sense. He is literally the calmest director I've ever worked

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