

Forest Whitaker: ‘The Butler’ Interview

Forest Whitaker is a distinguished artist and humanist. He is the founder of PeaceEarth Foundation, co-founder and chair of the International Institute for Peace, and the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Peace and Reconciliation. A versatile talent, Forest is one of Hollywood’s most accomplished performers, receiving such prestigious honors as a Best Actor Academy Award for his performance in *The Last King of Scotland*, as well as a Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival for *Bird*.

Over the past decade, he has dedicated most of his time to extensive humanitarian work, feeling compelled by his social awareness to seek ways of using the film medium as a means of raising peoples’ consciousness. To that end, he produced the award-winning documentary *Kassim the Dream*, which tells the touching story of a Ugandan child soldier turned world champion boxer; *Rising from Ashes*, which profiles Rwandan genocide survivors’ attempt to qualify for the Olympics riding wooden bicycles; *Serving Life*, which focuses on hospice care for prisoners at Louisiana’s Angola Prison; and the Peabody Award-winning *Brick City*, which offers an unvarnished peek at inner-city life in Newark, New Jersey.

Whitaker was the 2007 recipient of the Cinema for Peace Award, and he currently sits on the board of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. In addition, he serves as a Senior Research Scholar at Rutgers University, and as a Visiting Professor at Ringling College of Art and Design, too.

Besides the aforementioned films, Forest’s impressive resume’ includes *The Great Debaters*, *The Crying Game*, *Panic Room*, *Platoon*, *Ghost Dog*, *Mr. Holland’s*



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams

Opus and *Good Morning Vietnam*. Here, he talks about his latest outing as the title character in Lee Daniels’ *The Butler*, a decades-spanning sage chronicling the life and career of an African-American who served eight presidents in the White House.

Kam Williams: Hi Forest, I’m honored to have this opportunity.
Forest Whitaker: Oh, no, it’s a pleasure just to talk to you, Kam.

KW: What interested you in *The Butler*?
FW: It’s an amazing story. And the script was beautiful in the way it followed this man who served

afford me this tremendous opportunity.

KW: Did the film’s father-son relationship resonate with you when you reflected upon your relationship with your own dad?
FW: Yes, it’s hard to always understand and appreciate your father when you’re coming up, especially since my dad had three jobs when we moved to L.A. So, he was always working. Plus, coming from the South, from Texas, he had a certain way of disciplining that made it hard for me to appreciate, at the time. You don’t fully appreciate the reasons why or the sacrifices that were being made until a later age. In some ways it did parallel the journey of ultimate appreciation that we see in the movie of me towards my son and my son towards me.

KW: How did you prepare for the role of Cecil Gaines?
FW: I trained with a butler coach for quite some time. And I studied the history and, of course,

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eight presidents and portrayed his love for his family, as well as the love between him and his son. So, I saw it as offering a great challenge and opportunity. And I thought that Lee [director Lee Daniels] would do a wonderful job with the script as a filmmaker, so that was an attraction as well. And I had wanted to work with Oprah, so all of that came together to

try to make that a part of my own emotional understanding of the time period and the presidency. In terms of the aging process, I particularly had to work on movement and mannerisms. I also tried to understand the dialect and speech patterns. And I worked on how I could communicate my thoughts more clearly without words. I wanted to fill myself up enough so that you would be able



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to feel my thoughts, even in scenes where I would say nothing.

KW: That hard work paid off. I cried about a half-dozen times during the film.
FW: It’s very moving because it deals with so many primal issues: loss, degradation, even joy. Lee painted a picture that allows you to get in touch with many different emotions.

KW: True. Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: What was it like acting opposite Oprah?
FW: Oprah just really committed completely to the movie. She was startling, at times, in how deeply she was into the authenticity of the scenes. For instance, there was a big emotional moment that wasn’t shown completely in the film where she screamed and fell to the ground, letting out a piercing wail that went through my bones. It had me trying to figure out how to comfort her, because it’s hard to find the proper emotion to respond to pain that overwhelms.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia

Turnier says: You are a great director, in addition to of course being an excellent actor. Personally, I love biopics, like where you played Charlie Parker in *Bird*. Is there a story about an icon that you would like to direct and star in?

FW: Yes, there’s a film I’ve been developing about Louie Armstrong that I’d like to direct and star in. I wrote the script and really believe in it. I think it’s something I’ll probably do next year, although I haven’t made a final decision about whether I should direct it or not. It’s a really special story.

KW: Leah Fletcher asks: How did it feel, when you were just breaking into the industry, to receive such a glowing acknowledgment from a seasoned and respected actor such as Sean Connery for your work in *The Crying Game*?

FW: Leah, I didn’t even know ‘til now that Sean Connery had commented about my work in *The Crying Game*. A lot of Brits believe that I was British for quite some time after that film. So, I can see how Sean Connery might have said something. That’s nice.

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles says: You produced the extraordinary *Fruitvale Station*. Is this a new role you see for yourself?
FW: The truth is, I produce one or two movies every year, both independent and studio films. I’ll continue to produce. In fact, I have a documentary that just came out about the Rwandan National Cycling team called *Rising from Ashes*.

KW: I loved it!
FW: Oh, you already saw it. Great!

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COMMUNITY CALENDAR

SEATTLE 2013



If you have an event you want to share with the community, email it two weeks in advance to *The Skanner* at info@theskanner.com

Friday August 16

FREE OUTDOOR MOVIE AND ACTIVITIES AT HIGHLAND PARK. Make and take arts and crafts, an obstacle course, interactive demonstrations by Bellevue Police and Fire departments and much more. 8:30 p.m. the movie *Madagascar 3* starts. Other activities start at 6:30 p.m. and runs until 11 p.m. Highland park, 14224 Bel-Red Rd.

Saturday August 17

KIDGITS BACK TO SCHOOL. Get ready to take on the new school year. Summer might be ending, but the fun is just beginning. Don’t miss fun

activities in the Ben Bridge Court. 1 – 3 p.m. 401 NE Northgate Way. Seattle

SEATTLE CENTER FESTAL INDIGENOUS CULTURES DAY HIGHLIGHTS NATIVE CULTURES FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE. Indigenous Cultures Day seeks to bring together people divided by cultural differences. The days entertainment touches native cultures from across the globe. 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. Seattle Center Armory and Mural Amphitheatre. FREE

Sunday August 18

HIGH SPIRITS AND LIVELY MOVEMENT ENERGIZE SEATTLE CENTER FESTAL BRASIL FEST. Watch a demonstration of the elegant and powerful Capoeira Martial Arts, see glittering costumes and much more. Noon – 8 p.m. Seattle Center Armory, Mural Amphitheatre and Fisher Pavilion Rooftop.

INTERNATIONAL MUSIC & ARTS FESTIVAL CAPS RAINIER VALLEY CULTURE FEST WEEKEND. Come dance with us. A world of ethnic variety will convene with music, dancers, food, art activities, and booths. Noon – 6 p.m. Othello Park located one block east of the intersection of Othello

Street and Martin Luther King, Jr. Way.

Monday August 19

BEATS & EATS: HEALTHY COOKING AND FREE DJING LESSONS. Cook fun, healthy teen friendly summer snacks, then chow down as you learn the basics of DJING and music production with 2 of Seattle’s top DJs. 2:30 – 4 p.m. Delridge Community Center, 4501 Delridge Way SW.

Friday August 23

ROOT BEER FLOAT FRIDAY. 11 a.m. – 3 p.m. \$2 per float. Come by and enjoy and old fashioned Root Beer Float. Northgate Community Center, 10510 5th Ave. NE

Saturday August 24

BIG DAY OF PLAY – MAGNUSON PARK. Be sure to mark your calendar for the 2013 Parks and Recreation Healthy Parks, Healthy You event, 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Featuring great food, music, fitness, kid zone, 3 on 3 Tournament and so much more. Warren G. Magnuson Park, 7400 Sand Point Way NE