

News

'Free State of Jones' Star Mahershala Ali Talks to Kam Williams

By **Kam Williams**
For *The Skanner News*

co-starring Matthew McConaughey, Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Keri Russell.

Born in Oakland and raised in neighboring Hayward, Calif., Mahershala Ali received his bachelor of arts degree in mass communications at St. Mary's College. He made his professional debut performing with the California Shakespeare Festival in Orinda, California. Soon thereafter, he earned his Master's degree in Acting from New York University's prestigious graduate program.

Mahershala is fast becoming one of the freshest and most in-demand faces in Hollywood with his extraordinarily diverse skill set and wide-ranging background in film, television, and theater. Last fall, he wrapped Brad Pitt and Adele Romanski's independent-produced feature film, "Moonlight,"

Kam Williams: Hi Mahershala, thanks for the interview.

Mahershala Ali: Thank you, Kam.

KW: What interested you in "Free State of Jones"?

MA: The story, first off. I had never heard of Newton Knight. So, the narrative as a whole was really attractive to me because it was a refreshing departure from the homogeneous depictions of the Civil War where the North wanted to abolish slavery while the South wanted to keep it intact. Here, you had an example of a Southerner who spoke out against slavery during the war and who later became an activist for Civil Rights and this new idea of equality for all people regardless of one's skin color,



Mahershala Ali (right) during the filming of 'Free State of Jones,' a Civil War saga co-starring Matthew McConaughey (left), Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Keri Russell.

“His were big shoes to fill, but they were ones that I was very excited to step into.”

and reprised his role in "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2," alongside Jennifer Lawrence, Donald Sutherland and Julianne Moore.

On television, Mahershala was recently cast in Netflix's "Luke Cage" in the role of Cornell "Cottonmouth" Stokes. He can also be seen on the award-winning Netflix original series House of Cards, where he's reprising his fan-favorite role as lobbyist and former press secretary Remy Danton. Here, Mahershala talks about acting in "Free State of Jones," a Civil War saga

race or creed.

KW: What interested you in playing Moses?

MA: I had never seen a character in this time period who had such agency and mobility for someone living in the South. He had run away with a group of former slaves and was really living life on his own terms in the swamps. And he was determined to be proactive in his people's emancipation. Also, seeing his evolution over the course of the narrative really inspired me. He's

a disenfranchised, runaway slave with no education who learns to read and write and really becomes a leader and an active participant in the democratic process who mobilizes others. His were big shoes to fill, but they were ones that I was very excited to step into.

KW: How was it working with such an accomplished cast that included Matthew McConaughey, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Keri Russell and Brendan Gleeson?

MA: It was very inspiring and also humbling. It was a difficult shoot, being in the swamps in both the heat and the cold for four months, but everybody arrived ready to go, all-in and totally

committed. It all started with Matthew and Gary [director Gary Ross] who had a wonderful energy and approach to the work every day that trickled down to the rest of the cast and crew. Everyone was aware of and inspired by the importance of the story we were telling, and that was another added layer that contributed to the focus that everyone had.

KW: And how was it being directed by a four-time Oscar-nominee in Gary Ross?

MA: Pretty phenomenal, starting with the audition process. He was very curious about my ideas in terms of

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