

The forest is on fire!

Written by Kam Williams



"The Butler"

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.

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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 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 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 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, tried 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 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,

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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!

KW: You can check out my review at Rotten Tomatoes. Bernadette also says: You are a true Renaissance Man. Besides acting, you write, direct, narrate and produce. You're like a latter-day Oscar Micheaux.

FW: Oscar Micheaux reshaped the Black Film Movement. Those are some great shoes to fill. I can only take that as a compliment. Thanks, Bernadette. That gives me something to live towards, because it's a lot.

KW: Director Rel Dowdell, who has made two low-budget films, including Changing the Game last year, would like to know how he can pitch you about a project.

FW: I have my company, Significant Productions, in Los Angeles. And I also have a company called JuntoBox Films Select, a crowd-sourcing film site which we produce

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movies out of. We just finished one with a first-time filmmaker, called Sacrifice. And we're about to do another one in a month or so. Rel can reach out to either one of those companies.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

FW: [Chuckles] **I can't think of one.**

KW: The Sanaa Lathan question: What excites you?

FW: **Two things: The success of my children, and the work for social justice that I do with my foundation.**

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

FW: **I see someone who is continuing to try to build his connection with the rest of the world.**

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

FW: **That everyone could recognize themselves in the face of the other people that they see.**

KW: The Kerry Washington question: If you were an animal, what animal would you be?

FW: **Either a leopard or an eagle.**

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

FW: **My dad teaching me to ride a bike at about 5 or 6.**

KW: The Anthony Mackie question: Is there something that you promised to do if you became famous, that you still haven't done yet?

FW: **No, and my goals have expanded.**

KW: The Viola Davis question: What's the difference between you are at home as opposed to the person we see on the red carpet?

FW: **I'm the same person, just with different clothes on. I'm the same.**

KW: The Anthony Anderson question: If you could have a superpower, which one would you choose?

FW: **I'd be a spreader of love.**

KW: The Gabby Douglas question: If you had to choose another profession, what would that be?

FW: **I'd either be a natural healer or a teacher.**

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

FW: **Solutions Focus. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1904838065/ref=nosi/thslfofire-20>**

KW: The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

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FW: Passion!

KW: Harriet also asks: With so many classic films being redone, is there a remake you'd like to star in?

FW: The Audrey Hepburn-Albert Finney film, **Two for the Road**.

KW: What advice do you have for anyone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

FW: Always tell yourself that you want to continue to grow, and you'll be more connected to growth.

KW: The Jamie Foxx question: If you only had 24 hours to live, how would you spend that time?

FW: With my family.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Forest, and best of luck with The Butler, and I hope to talk to you about your upcoming independent project.

FW: Sure, Kam, and thanks again for supporting Rising from Ashes.

To see a trailer for Lee Daniels' The Butler, visit:

http://www.twcpublicity.com/video_popup.php?id=10

Or: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omJedbKwzL>