

Show me the butler!

Written by Kam Williams



Cuba Gooding, Jr.
The "Lee Daniels' The Butler" Interview

Cuba Gooding, Jr. was born in the Bronx on January 2, 1968, but raised in Los Angeles from the age of 4 on. Best known for his Oscar-winning portrayal of the charmingly-arrogant Rod "Show Me the Money!" Tidwell in Cameron Crowe's Jerry Maguire, he first found fame in 1991 when he received critical acclaim for his performance in John Singleton's coming-of-age classic "Boyz n the Hood."

Cuba followed-up that success with roles in "As Good as It Gets," "What Dreams May Come," and the Oscar-nominated "A Few Good Men." The versatile thespian's repertoire also includes roles in pictures ranging from "Red Tails" to "Radio" to "Men of Honor" to "Pearl Harbor" to "American Gangster" to "Shadowboxer" to "Boat Trip" to "Snow Dogs" to "Norbit."

Among his upcoming big screen projects are "Don Jon" and the sequel "Machete Kills." On television, he played the title character in the award-winning "Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story," as well as in "Firelight," the highest rated Hallmark Hall of Fame movie ever.

A decade ago, Cuba's extraordinary achievements were recognized when he was awarded with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Here, he talks about his work opposite Forest Whitaker and Oprah Winfrey in "Lee Daniels' The Butler."

Kam Williams: Hi Cuba, appreciate the time.

Cuba Gooding, Jr: Anytime, Kam. How are ya, buddy?

KW: Great, and you?

CG: Very well, thank you.

KW: What interested you in The Butler?

CG: Well, to give you a little history, Lee Daniels and I had been friends even before he was a producer, manager or casting director. When he offered me the role of the shadowboxer in Shadowboxer, I was invited into the editing room. We've done this thing throughout his career from Precious on, where he sends me screenplays that he's

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considering. So, I feel like this is an invested relationship I have with him. He sent me this screenplay about five years ago, suggesting that I might be the butler.

KW: Were you upset when you didn't land the title role?

CG: No, one thing led to another in casting choices, and now I couldn't imagine this movie without Forest Whitaker playing the lead and Oprah playing his wife. I think they're both deserving of Oscar nominations. Their relationship in the movie's so powerful, and so is Forest's with David Oyelowo's character.

KW: You did a great job, too.

CG: Thanks. It just feels so good to be involved again with a movie that's socially relevant. I recently met a 27 year-old white male who admitted that he didn't know about the sit-ins until seeing this movie's scene with the kids being refused service in a segregated diner. And it hit me how we can so easily forget, because I'm in my forties. There's such a disconnect from the next generation in terms of all the brutality. That's why it feels good to be a part of this film which revisits that time period and talks about what transpired.

KW: Especially because it tackles the material from a fresh perspective.

CG: It's interesting, too, because when *Django Unchained* came out, so many people were alienated by it, while others who thought it was just a really cool ride from Quentin Tarantino said, "Get over it!" If you look at the latter group, a lot of them were really young kids who had a disconnect from slavery. To them, all they saw was their hero being freed, shooting back, saving the day and getting his girl. It's funny, I started dating my wife, who's Caucasian with blonde hair and blue eyes, in 1987. I got hate mail when I did *Boyz n the Hood* saying stuff like, "I can't believe your girlfriend is white." But I hadn't grown up in the South back in the days when blacks were lynched for even looking at a white woman. And when you look at what I did today, it's elementary compared to the attention being paid to the issue of same-sex marriage. So, we've moved away for the better, but we just can't afford to forget all the sacrifices and trials and tribulations.

KW: How much research did you have to do to prepare for the role?

CG: Well, I'd been researching and gathering information on the subject for several years for both this script and for a Martin Luther King story about Selma. So, it's a time period I'd already become pretty well-versed in.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: How similar are you to your character in *The Butler*, Carter Wilson?

CG: I AM that guy! [LOL] Sometimes, I can be pretty goofy, and a bit of an exhibitionist. I don't think I'm quite as free with the lips as he is, but I can tell a joke or two. Some of those lines I ad-libbed.

KW: How emotionally affected were you seeing the film for the first time?

CG: I was a wreck. I sat and hugged Pam [producer Pam Williams] like someone had died in the family. And, to be honest with you, Kam, it wasn't so much the history lesson, but

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simply that my eldest son who's 18 was going off to college, and I couldn't get back to L.A. to see him off when he left because I was stuck in New York. The father-son relationship just hit me, man, especially the scene where Cecil Gaines says goodbye to his son departing for college. What I experienced wasn't a feeling of sadness, but rather a realization of this higher calling in life, and how we're all a part of this chain.

KW: Speaking of your being in New York, Harriet Pakula-Teweles asks: How did you enjoy being on Broadway? What play were you doing, A Trip to Bountiful?

CG: Yes, sir, since February. I loved it. I actually started in theater, that's where an agent found me in '86, I was doing a Shakespeare festival. On the stage, if you don't understand every word of what you're saying, it is apparent in your countenance. So, I was always about living the character. Then I got stolen away by TV where I got my start as MacGyver's sidekick for awhile which was easy to phone in. You know the guy, you know the peril, and you know how to save the day. So, I leapt at this opportunity to go back, and it reignited my creativity. Just to be across from Cicely Tyson on that stage every day, was great. My creative passion is back!

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

CG: That's an interesting question I've never been asked. Just last night, literally, I was sitting around talking with some friends about those old movies with a Broadway theme. Maybe one of those.

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

CG: Well, I smile a lot more on the red carpet.

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

CG: I would fly. I've been dreaming about flying since I was 5 years-old.

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

CG: Social work. Or maybe coaching kids sports. I've always been a people person. It would have to be something where I could help people.

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: What is your favorite charity?

CG: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America is one of them. I have a few.

KW: Can you give me a Cuba Gooding, Jr. question to ask other celebrities?

CG: Yeah, what still scares you?

KW: Thanks, and thanks again for the time, Cuba.

CG: My pleasure, Kam.

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

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http://www.twcpublicity.com/video_popup.php?id=108

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