

Forest Whitaker Says ‘The Butler’ Served Him Well

BY STEVEN ZEITCHIK
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NEW YORK — Forest Whitaker tends to talk about his work with a mystical flourish. Movie roles, he says, have helped him achieve transcendence, learn the value of quiet and appreciate fear.

Yet the star of Lee Daniels’ “The Butler” is surprisingly direct about how he squandered an opportunity after his 2007 Oscar win for playing Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in “The Last King of Scotland.”

“I thought I found a new way to work after that movie. I could be this intense person, someone who vibrated differently, and it would make me a better actor,” he said. “Then I tried it on a few movies, and it didn’t work.”

But last year he began shooting “The Butler,” and “something changed,” he said. “The energy changed.”

As the period drama arrives in theaters this week, Whitaker’s prolific, praised and puzzled-over Hollywood career indeed seems to be in the midst of a resurgence.

After toiling in recent years on nondescript films such as the Keanu Reeves crime picture “Street Kings” and the fact-based basketball movie “Hurricane Season,” Whitaker stars as Cecil Gaines, a White House staffer who attended to seven presidents and served as a silent witness to history. The actor also produced this summer’s art-house sensation, “Fruitvale Station.” And still to come this fall and beyond are turns in the holiday musical “Black Nativity,” the Leonardo DiCaprio-produced revenge drama “Out of the Furnace” and the French director Rachid Bouchareb’s auteur piece, “Enemy Way.”

Finally, Whitaker produced and lent his voice to “Rising From Ashes,” a documentary about a Rwandan cycling team’s bid to compete at the London Olympics.

Inspired by the story of White House staffer Eugene Allen, “The Butler” examines tensions within Gaines’ family and in the country at large during the Civil Rights era. As his Zelig-like work evolves (the movie shows Cecil present as Robin Williams’ Eisenhower contemplates integration and James Marsden’s JFK pushes a Civil Rights agenda), Whitaker’s character is also facing complexity at home. He is married to the supportive but alcoholic Gloria (Oprah Winfrey, in her first live-action film role in 15 years) and raising a son, Louis, who undertakes a brand of campus activism that veers from the

preachings of Martin Luther King Jr. to the teachings of the Black Panthers.

Though Cecil has overcome a sharecropping childhood to become a fixture in the halls of power, Louis believes that his father has been too submissive. It’s this tension that provides the movie’s ideological and emotional spine.

Whitaker, famous for his level of preparation, calls this “the most specific work I’ve ever done on a character.”

He trained with a butler consultant and met, quietly, with one of the famously discreet White House butlers. He studied proper hand move-

ments and tray-lifting, and he spent hours with confidantes of Allen, who died in 2010. Because the movie spans many decades, Whitaker created an elaborate system of flash cards that would remind him of his character’s age and experience in a given scene. “It’s not easy to be 90 in the morning and 35 in the afternoon,” he said.

It was all in the interest “of feeling it deep inside me, to know the places I was coming from so I could know who I needed to be,” he said over a late lunch at an uptown restaurant. “I wanted to feel the collective experience of Cecil’s life, so when I walked at 90 you

could feel that weight. I wanted my parents and grandparents and all the people of their generation to feel like this accurately represented them.”

Whitaker has a sweet-tempered quality and even at 52, a wide-eyed enthusiasm for small things; his eyes light up at the sight of the vegan soup he’s ordered. His soft-spokenness is all the more striking when one thinks about his intense performance in “The Last King of Scotland,” which had him inhabit Amin’s megalomaniacal tendencies for weeks at a time.

He said the part changed him, and not necessarily for the better. During the shoot, he

said, he felt a hard-edged side to his personality developing. He conducted an interview with a London newspaper where he found himself practically yelling at the reporter. After that, he told his publicist no more on-set interviews. Still, the live-wire act carried over into his other choices and roles, and it left him feeling a professional chill until just before “The Butler.” “I had touched on some frustration. I didn’t feel like I was challenging myself,” he said.

As Gaines, in part because he’s a more soulful character, Whitaker sought to inhabit a quieter place. To put himself in

the right frame of mind, he and Winfrey would act as a couple even when they weren’t shooting, rubbing each other’s shoulders and calling each other by their characters’ names.

Before shooting had begun for the day, Winfrey would take Whitaker’s hand and say “Let’s go for a walk, Cecil,” and the two would stroll arm-in-arm around the New Orleans set. Danny Strong, who wrote “The Butler,” said he embraced the choice of Whitaker because this part “needed someone whose soul you could hear even when he was being quiet.”

Band

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to the talented musicians that participate.

That is also the case with the group’s ability to jump from one genre of music to another, he said.

“One thing we pride ourselves on is that we all have an encyclopedic knowledge of every genre of music — some of us better than others,” Summy said. “For example, I’m not very well versed with country, but some of the other guys are. It’s one of those things where we’re able to pull in an eclectic group of musicians that are all skilled at what they do and what they bring to the table.”

With the band’s ability to cover a wide range of genres, Riverboat Days Secretary Katie Greene said the group fits perfectly with the goal of the festival’s board of directors to find a family-friendly band that will appeal to the majority of people attending the celebration.

“We want the energy to stay positive and entertain, but are also looking for a variety of music so that sometime during the weekend everyone gets an opportunity to be entertained and enjoy the festivities,” she said.

The Troubadour Retrievers will play three sets, Summy said, with breaks at approximately 8:45 p.m. and during the fireworks show at 10 p.m. Earlier sets will focus on more family-oriented music, he said.

“As we move into the latter part of the evening, we’ll ramp up the selection to cater more to the beer drinkers,” he said with a laugh.

Summy added that the band is excited to play in Yankton and is hoping for a great turnout.

“We’re totally stoked,” he said. “One of the things we love is walking in cold. There’s an excitement factor that goes along with meeting new people, getting to perform in front of new faces and really bringing it to a whole different crowd that we haven’t experienced before. We’re looking forward to a high-energy night.”

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