

One on One With The Star of The Butler: The Oscar Winning Actor Forest Whitaker

Written by Kam Williams
Friday, 23 August 2013 17:30



Forest Whitaker was born in Texas. His father, Forest Whitaker, Jr., worked as an insurance salesman and was the son of novelist Forest Whitaker, Sr. His mother, Laura Francis (née Smith), was a special education teacher who went to college and earned two Masters degrees while raising her children. Forest Whitaker enrolled in the Music Conservatory at the University of Southern California to study opera as a tenor. He was accepted into the University's Drama Conservatory and graduated from USC in 1982. In addition, he earned a scholarship to the Berkeley, California branch of the Drama Studio London. Whitaker is also getting a degree in The Core of Conflict: Studies in Peace and Reconciliation at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

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

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Bird

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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 *Kasim 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. Again, in 2007, Whitaker got his star on the *Hollywood Walk of Fame*

. In 2009, he earned

an Honorary Degree from Xavier University of Louisiana and he was given a chieftaincy title in Nigeria.

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 [Whitaker], I'm honored to have this opportunity.

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Forest Whitaker: Oh, no, it's a pleasure just to talk to you, Kam [Williams].

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](#) [Winfrey], 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.

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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 [Winfrey] ?

FW: Oprah [Winfrey] 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.

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Forest Whitaker, who played Idi Amin in the 2008 film "The Last King of Scotland," is one of the few actors to have won the Oscar for Best Actor. He is also a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In this photo, he is standing next to his wife, Sherry Noveck, who is also a member of the Academy. They are both smiling and looking at the camera. Forest is holding the Oscar statuette, which he won for his role in "The Last King of Scotland."

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