

Interview: Djimon Hounsou is Vocal in ‘How to Train Your Dragon 2’

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CHICAGO – Character actor Djimon Hounsou (Jee-mahn Hahn-soo) is memorable in any role he takes on – whether it’s working with Steven Spielberg in “Amistad,” or being so indelibly subtle for “In America.” Hounsou has also forged a true character in his voiceover work as Drago Bludvist in “How to Train Your Dragon 2.”

Born in Africa in the country of Bénin, Djimon Hounsou emigrated in the 1970s to Lyon, France, at the tender age of 13. His hardscrabble existence there included some homelessness, but a chance meeting with a photographer began a hugely successful modeling career. He moved to the U.S. in 1990, at which time he landed roles in music videos, TV and film – his 1990 debut film was in Sandra Bernhard’s “Without You I’m Nothing.” Bigger roles came in 1997 (“Amistad”), 2000 (“Gladiator”) and his Oscar nominated supporting role in 2004 (“In America”). Since then he has worked steadily, and also will be in Marvel Studio’s “Guardians of the Galaxy,” scheduled to release on August 1st, 2014.



Djimon Hounsou is the voice of Drago Bludvist (left) in “How to Train Your Dragon 2”.

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Hounsou joins an all-star voice cast in “How to Train Your Dragon 2,” including Jay Baruchel, Cate Blanchett, Gerard Butler and Craig Ferguson. He sat down with HollywoodChicago.com to talk about finding his villainous voice in the film as Drago, and his marvelous and fulfilling life journey.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the process for finding the right voice for Drago. Did the director Dean DeBlois help you toward it, or did you find it on your own?

Djimon Hounson: I began the process. It was after I first heard his name – Drago Bludvist – it took me places, if nothing else. I worked with that for awhile and comprehended the name and backstory. I later saw a sketch of the character, and after having my first conversation with Dean, I tried out a few things with him, and found the voice.

HollywoodChicago.com: So it was a collaboration between you and the director?

Hounson: I guess diplomatically it worked itself out like that, without necessarily being a struggle or having a defining moment. Most of it came from me ‘vibe-ing’ with the character a certain way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Drago is a villainous character in 'Dragon.' What do you think is more interesting as an actor - to play a villain or a hero, and why?

Hounson: I think it's so much more interesting to play a villain because you can play all of the emotions – the goods, the bads and all the flavors – plus you can also be gentle, charming and outrageous.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you find different about developing a character in a voiceover role, as opposed to doing one live action?

Hounson: It was liberating in the sense that it was only me, in the world that I transposed myself into using my imagination. It was so much more theatrical in that essence. In live action, people are picking at you for make-up, wardrobe and there is the added drama of the crew watching you from behind the camera.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you find amazing about the film, and what is happening to animation and cartoons in general?



Djimon Hounsou in 'Blood Diamond' (2008)

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

Hounson: Animation is fast becoming the most creative work, and generally you don't know most of the people behind it. Once in a blue moon, I've come across these people, just because they wanted to meet me. It's so humbling to me, because they are the ones doing all the hard work.

HollywoodChicago.com: You never planned the life that you have now when you were younger. How do you think that gives you an advantage as a model, actor and even a person?

Hounson: Whether growing up in the movie business or not, I really think it's the state of your mind in going through something like that. There is that world in Hollywood, but at the same time I have to create a venue for myself, where things are the way that I want them to be. In that respect, things would eventually happen, because reality only exists when the mind creates a focus. So when you conceptualize it the way you see fit, it can become that, rather than letting yourself be dictated by all the outside distractions in life.

HollywoodChicago.com: In which role in your career do you think you were given the most room to be closest to who you actually are, and was that because of how the character was written or how you approached the interpretation of that character?

Hounson: [Laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Why did you laugh after I asked that?

Hounson: Well, you know, I've tried to answer different variations of that question before, but it's really difficult to answer. The best I can say is that in all of roles I end up portraying, because you are the instrument of interpretation, a little bit of yourself will be left in all of the roles, because you are the interpreter.

We all have a little bad in ourselves, we have greatness, we have generosity. And understanding all of that everything else is creating the world for yourself, you can't let yourself be dictated or push a certain way. Some of the most successful people are ones who tell you they dreamt about it, worked hard on it and made it happen.

HollywoodChicago.com: Both you and the President of the United States both share African heritage. In your observation of Barack Obama, what do you think is most African in nature about him?

Hounson: [Pause] He's pretty darn suave. [laughs] He's likable, he smiles and he has a kind outlook on things. His story is an un-f**king-believable, excuse my language. It seems unfathomable that he is the President, in Africa he is considered the President of the World. You dream of a man like him for America, which has seen its ups and downs. It's beautiful to experience.

HollywoodChicago.com: Africa has so many areas of instability, often due to the wealth of its natural resources. How do you think the outside colonialists and industrialists – especially oil and diamonds – have ruined the continent and the African people?



Djimon Hounsou in Chicago, June 12th, 2014

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Hounson: Apart from the fact that they DID f**king ruin it, and they do it on a daily basis? The tragedy of that is the African continent as a whole has served as a babysitter for European countries. They have given their soul to those countries for so long, and I feel extremely offended when I see countries like France – who resists integrating their colonies in Africa – be so dismissive of the natives. It's very sad.

The businesses that go there are quite pathetic, in the way they exploit the continent and their one billion people, taking trillions of dollars away and never thinking about the legacy of the people – most of whom have never seen a diamond and could care less about its value. And yet, they are driven to destroy a landscape just to find that one stone. Corruption is defined through the colonizers. We are at the mercy of all that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you left your country at the age of 13, at what point – when you have the means necessary to travel back there – did you feel when it was time to reconnect?

Hounson: I must have been about 25 years old, but I never lost the connection to the country, it was just at that age I finally had the means to go back. Thank God I had the opportunity. If anybody loses the foundation from where they came from, and never have the opportunity to go back again, it's a tragedy.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have had experience as a citizen in many continents. What advantages do you think that has given you, and what do you think of Americans who live their whole lives without ever experiencing the life of another part of the world?

Hounson: It's a disservice to one's self not to have the ability or luxury to go elsewhere to live or to travel. I do acknowledge it's a luxury. Merging yourself into another culture for a period of time is a gift. It elevates the self, you have a more worldly vision of truth.

HollywoodChicago.com: You will soon be entering the fantasy science fiction realm with 'Guardians of the Galaxy.' What can the audience expect from this space opera that we haven't seen before?

Hounson: [Laughs] Besides the fact that it was truly a world apart? Filming that movie was like being in a different stratosphere, I would come to the set and think – what the hell? – I am actually in outer space. It was such a catered environment that was beautifully designed. For a brief moment, in costume, I just would get lost in that world. It was an escape for me and it will be beautiful for the audience.

"How to Train Your Dragon 2" opened everywhere on June 13th in 3D, IMAX and regular screenings. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring the voices of Djimon Hounsou, Jay Baruchel, Cate Blanchett, Gerard Butler, Craig Ferguson, America Ferrera, Jonah Hill, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, T.J. Miller, Kit Harrington and Kristen Wiig. Screenplay adapted and directed by Dean DeBlois. Rated "PG"



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