

Interview: Director Justin Simien Reflects on ‘Dear White People’

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CHICAGO – Some say, to use a FOX News term, that America is “post-racial.” The election of Barack Obama is supposed to have ended the debate on race, and any marginalization because of race. Of course, that is not possible in society and culture, and it’s articulated in writer/director Justin Simien’s new film, “Dear White People.”

The film is set at a fictional elite college, where the African-American population is small and highly educated. The stereotypes still dog them, especially from the clueless – and also supposedly well-educated – white students on campus. With a talented cast, the breakdown of how farcical “post-racial” is becomes apparent within the film, and Justin Simien creates a statement of principle that echoes beyond the production.



Tyler James Williams (center) and the Cast of ‘Dear White People’

Photo credit: Lionsgate

HollywoodChicago.com met with writer/director Simien during the Chicago International Film Festival earlier this month, and talked at length about his expression regarding the film, especially as a representative of a younger and more personal voice.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this is your feature film debut, how long has this story been percolating within your soul, and what was the major step in the path that led to the production?

Justin Simien: It’s been percolating since college. I was having conversations that were similar to the ones the characters are having in the film, not only about being black in a white college space, but also about the awkwardness and hilarity that ensues when navigating identity.

This was also in a space where people have hard-wired assumptions about us as black people, and the identity we have about ourselves – which includes the things that we hide and the things that we show. I just thought it would be a great subject for a film, in the tradition of the black films I loved that played the art houses. I wanted to contribute to that genre.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the most famous lines from ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ is ‘You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’ How do you think you’re creating that type of empathy in ‘Dear White People’?

Simien: I think that by creating characters that are human. In many films about race you get the ‘tragic black character,’ which is more about sympathy than empathy, because they are so downtrodden, and you feel good about yourself because you cry over them. Or you get other types like the inner city interpretation, or the flawless and holy black character. We don’t get anywhere with those idealistic images. There are certain film tragedies, like ‘12 Years a Slave’ and ‘Fruitvale Station,’ that do create empathy because it crafts real human beings, but those are exceptions.

For my film, it was about creating human beings that are part of the human condition. They are black, and I complicated their experience, and the narrative is through the lens of myself as a black person. But what the film is actually about is something that everybody faces. Everybody at some time in their lives has to confront the way people see them, the way they see themselves, and who they really are. It’s part of the human condition, and it’s part of our birthright in being born on this planet.

HollywoodChicago.com: In casting the vital roles for ‘Dear White People,’ what kind of actor were you looking for, beyond just interpreting the emotions of your characters, and what did you talk about as an ensemble to create the themes in the production that were your goal?

Simien: I wanted actors who could deliver dialogue, because it is a written piece. Like the film ‘Network,’ there is no doubt that [screenwriter] Paddy Chayefsky wrote every single line, but the actors deliver those lines with such a slice-of-life ease. I wanted to find actors who could do that, and also to give something more – who could breathe some complexity in the characters. With a multi-protagonist script, we didn’t have time to get into everyone’s back story, or to develop the characters. I wanted actors where you didn’t have to do that, because their presence gives context to the role.

When Tyler James Williams came in to read for Lionel, we gave him the scene with the Dean of Students [Dennis Haysbert]. He was the only actor who came in and made me laugh out loud during that scene. I suddenly realized I had written a comedic scene, but it took Tyler’s interpretation to make me realize it.



Justin Simien at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: As a nation, we continue to suffer from the karma sins of slavery. What elements of those sins do we find in ‘Dear White People’?

Simien: The most reductive way to say it, if I go back a few grandfathers, they were all slaves. Your great-great grandfathers maybe weren’t so well off, but they weren’t slaves. So, in a sense, you were set up to do better than me. Your family line over the years has more wealth and more access to education, healthcare, opportunities, etc. Also history and the past is a factor, because African Americans have no touchstone to the distant past.

There are so many circumstances having to do with all of that, and it’s generational. For example, my parent’s ‘black experience’ is starkly different from mine, but the battles of their experiences is something I can’t escape from – there is no way I can tell my mother a story of what happened at school, without it reflecting back upon me from her version of the world.

HollywoodChicago.com: How does that fit in with the ‘post-racial’ argument?

Simien: Well, of course now there is a black president, obviously you’re not racist, and I’m wearing a nice blazer and not running from a lynch mob. [laughs] There are some things solved, but still there are covert issues currently, due to what has happened in black history, and that was not too long ago.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since there are both outspoken African-Americans in the film of both genders, what differences are faced vis a vis racism for black women versus black men, in your opinion?

Simien: Well, first off being a woman is harder in society, period. They are placed in a box, and they’re conditioned in many subtle ways to expect and not expect certain things out of life. You place race on top of that, and then there is another set of things you can and cannot have access to. Black men in certain circumstances – like white men – do have a more powerful voice. Black women are also much more ‘exotic-sized’ when they’re successful – it becomes a vixen thing in society’s viewpoint, and it’s more multi-layered, and complex.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is a song in the old musical ‘South Pacific’ regarding prejudice entitled ‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.’ What kind of fear is being manifested when white parents teach their children to separate themselves from their African-American brethren?

Simien: First it teaches them that there is something different or wrong, in looking at a group of people. But black kids are taught the same thing, not to trust the other. Black kids grow up knowing that they are black, but at the same time a white person will grow up accepting their version of color blindness that comes off as glib, especially in viewing the experience of the other. In that view, there is a denial that a person of color is having a different experience.

It comes back to empathy, which is important to teach our kids. To see themselves in the other, instead of assuming anything about another person’s experience – whether the assumption is positive or negative.

HollywoodChicago.com: Describe your feelings regarding the night that Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, and what have you felt since about both his legacy and his representation of African-Americans as a governmental and historical figure?

Simien: Like most Californians, I had the split reaction. It was, ‘yay Barack,’ but now we also had Proposition Eight [banning gay marriage in California]. Recently I was asked if black persons were responsible for voting that Proposition through, because of their numbers at the polls that year. That was another piece of covert racism, because it put too much of a responsibility on a so-called ‘conservative and homophobic’ black population, and polling proved it to be untrue. Like what was expressed back in 1915 with the film ‘The Birth of a Nation,’ it was a subtle declaration that if black people get a hold of the country, it will be messed up.

I believe Barack Obama has been treated unfairly. He has done great things and not so great things, like all other presidents. And considering what he had facing him when elected, to where we are now, it doesn’t make sense that his approval rating is so low. His successes tend to be glossed over, and his faults are ripped apart. I don’t think that would be the case for an equivalent white president.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is a rite of passage for all African-American males in our current culture, in which they are marginalized as the ‘other’ or as a person who is treated differently or negatively. Can you recall your rite of passage as a child or adolescent, that stuck with you and eventually came to the surface in the creation of ‘Dear White People’?

Simien: Yes, it was in elementary school. My best friend had a birthday party, and I wasn’t invited. When I asked him why, he told me because I’d be the only black kid there. It wasn’t the first time I realized I was black, but it was the first time I realized that being black restricted access to certain things.

Also, since I went to a mostly white elementary school, my teachers would marvel on how ‘articulate’ I was, and of course in my black neighborhood I was shunned because I spoke like a white man. That was all around the same time. I realized, well, I might have some trouble in this life. [laughs] Not enough for this, too much for that, and what would I have to do about it? That is what found its way into the film.

“Dear White People” is now playing in Chicago and other select cities. Featuring Tyler James Williams, Tessa Thompson, Brandon P Bell, Teyonah Paris, Kyle Gallner, Justin Dobies, and Teyonah Parris. Written and directed by Justin Simien. Rated “R.” Read the review of “Dear White People” by Nick Allen of HollywoodChicago.com by [clicking here](#). [17]



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