

Interview: Actor Trai Byers of Film ‘Selma,’ TV’s ‘Empire’

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CHICAGO – The excellent film “Selma” focuses on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But just as important as King were the marchers from supporting civil rights societies, such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and their leaders like James Forman, portrayed in the film by Trai Byers.

Byers is an up-and-coming actor, with “Selma” being his first major film after stints on the daytime drama “All My Children” and the revival of “90210.” But besides “Selma,” Byers has a high profile part as Andre Lyon, the son of lead character Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard) on the huge new FOX Network hit, “Empire.” The freshman drama has already been picked up for a second season, and its maneuverings within the Shakespeare-in-the-music-industry vibe has connected with viewers.



Trai Byers as James Forman (left) Kneels with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (David Oyelowo, right) in ‘Selma’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Trai Byers was in Chicago last week promoting “Selma” and “Empire,” and talked about the life lessons of being involved with telling the history of Dr. King, and his actor philosophy.

HollywoodChicago.com: In research, I found out that you auditioned for John Lewis, not his fellow Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member James Forman, the role you eventually landed. In your research regarding the events of “Selma” and SNCC, what surprised you about Forman or the situation there?

Trai Byers: Right after the pilot was shot for ‘Empire,’ I auditioned for John Lewis. I did some research on him, especially as he was back then, and found out I looked nothing like him, which was important for the role. My audition was good, and that led to being cast as James Forman.

Regarding Forman, I wanted to specifically know what his involvement in the Selma march was, and in that sense get his flavor. There wasn’t as much material on him, but I saw a clip on YouTube where he said, ‘if we’re not going to sit at the table of fellowship, we should knock the f**king legs off.’ That was the energy that he had, that clip really served me.

HollywoodChicago.com: You grew up around the modern south, but what elements of the Selma story did you recognize from your own development?

Byers: To clarify my biography, I was born in Kansas City Missouri, but my father was in the military, so we moved around quite a bit. I graduated from school in Tucker, Georgia, but we only lived there two years. My greatest parallel to Selma in my life occurred when we were living in Ankeny, Iowa. I was in the fourth grade, my sister was in the third grade, and in this small town we were the only black family. Now this was the 1990s, but the school district wanted to split my sister and I up so there would be one black student in each school.

I remember an incident, among others, where my sister and I were on a school bus with a white bus driver. She went past what she knew was our stop, and just kept dropping the other kids off, until me and my sister were the only two left, miles from our stop. This was during the times of the floods in Iowa, so she took us to the overflowing banks of a river. The bus driver stopped the bus, looked at us curiously – while my sister was crying – and then started up the bus and took us back to our stop. Anything really could have happened on that bus. I was only nine years old, my sister was eight, and we were only trying to fit in. That is what hit me, when I did ‘Selma.’



Trai Byers as Andre Lyon in FOX TV's 'Empire'

Photo credit: FOX Network

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think was different about African American men like James Forman, born in the early 20th century and coming of age and participation in the civil rights movement, versus African American men of the same age that grew up in your era?

Byers: There was more invested in what Forman and his generation were doing. He grew up in a time in which black men of his generation generally – and in a lot of cases, had to – accept their fate. And the civil rights leaders were exceptional people, just as there are exceptional people now. It was about expressing what wasn’t right in society, just as myself and others were doing last month when it was about ‘I Can’t Breathe.’

The same vision and attitude of James Forman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the civil rights movement can live within people of today. It takes something to rouse an individual versus collectively what the society wants a person to be.

HollywoodChicago.com: What historically did you admire about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and what did you learn about him as a man within David Oyelowo’s performance?

Byers: Nobody involved in the production wanted to make a ‘textbook’ movie, especially when dealing with the icon that Dr. King has become, especially to find the life behind the idea. There are two sides to every story, so it’s always going to be an idea.

Dr. King was not necessarily the man who wanted to do what he did, but he was called, and answered the calling. There is a beautiful part near the conclusion, when King is discussing the possibility of being killed, and what he thought it would mean to the movement. What David did there, really brought it home. His silence as the character of King also was remarkable. The speeches we know from history, but the scenes that David portrayed with King’s wife and friends – just as a man in those relationships – that is where the performance breathed.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve said that your character of Andre Lyon in ‘Empire’ is most fascinating because he has a bipolar condition.

What it is about that character note fascinates you?



Trai Byers in Chicago, January 15th, 2015
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Byers: The research is amazing, but once that research is ‘on its feet’ it has to become you within the character. It has to be more to be authentic. Creating an ‘abandon’ for that type of condition and letting it be was it is, was about the spirit of life. There are so many people that suffer from being bipolar, and they are right with me as I interpret that condition. If I can bring it to life, imprint the research and character work onto my heart, then it’s about letting go everything I think I know about it, and letting it manifest itself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What can you tell me about your ‘Empire’ co-star Terence Howard, that the rest of the world doesn’t know?

Byers: He’s a sweetheart, I don’t know why people think of him differently. [laughs] We would all have controversy if we had a camera in our eyes at his level. He is a sweet, giving artist, and I couldn’t have done half the stuff I’m doing with the character if it wasn’t for his guidance.

HollywoodChicago.com: Can you pinpoint the specific performance that you did, even as a child actor or in high school, that told you the acting profession would be your calling?

Byers: It was a cumulative thing, I knew it was something I wanted to do even as a child, before I could define was an actor was. When I saw others do it, I knew I could do it as well, even though he was older than I was. When I was twelve years old I saw Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, and I knew that’s what I wanted to do.

I also knew eventually, as a profession, that acting was a foot race with myself. It wasn’t about being better or worse than others, I can do what I want to do. My breakthrough came in the Yale Drama School, in one of the last plays I did there, called ‘Good Words.’ It was a cabaret, where I portrayed a pastor who had Alzheimer’s Disease, and he was eulogizing his own son. My great grandmother had the disease, and my performance put that fruition into movement.

HollywoodChicago.com: What distinguished that role from others to that point?

Byers: As I was eulogizing the character’s son, I was mixing up the other people in his life, as well as himself, and it became like a wormhole into his brain. It was a one man show, with 47 pages of dialogue, and it was all me. It still bring tears to my eyes, because it was so important as a breakthrough, and it was greeted with a standing ovation every night. Because I played everything in that role – for my great grandmother, and for what it gave me in the realization that it was as much about who and what had come before me, as it was me.

“Selma” is in theaters now, and features David Oyelowo, Trai Byers, Giovanni Ribisi, Tim Roth, Cuba Gooding Jr., Oprah Winfrey, Tom Wilkinson, Carmen Ejogo, Common, Martin Sheen and Wendell Pierce. Written by Paul Webb. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Rated “PG-13.” FOX Network’s “Empire” is on Wednesdays, 9pm ET/8pm CT. Check local listings for channel location.

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