

Interview: Director Tim Disney on Incarceration Laws in ‘American Violet’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 16, 2009 - 4:55pm

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CHICAGO – In his third film, “American Violet,” director Tim Disney tackles the subject of unfair incarceration laws involving a poor African-American housing project in a rural Texas town. The uplifting drama is based on a true story and begins during the presidential election of 2000.

Dee Roberts (Nicole Beharie) is a single mother of four children, barely getting by on a meager waitress job and help from her mother (Alfre Woodard). When her housing unit is raided by country drug law enforcement, Roberts is arrested as a drug dealer suspect, accused unfairly by a police informant.



Alfre Woodard as Alma Roberts and Nicole Beharie as Dee Roberts in ‘American Violet’
Photo credit: Scott Saltzman, Samuel Goldwyn Films

When an ACLU lawyer (Tim Blake Nelson) comes to town to take on the unjust laws that sweeps out and jails poor African Americans, it is Dee Roberts that steps up to take on a corrupt and powerful county district attorney (Micheal O’Keefe).

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with director Tim Disney, who reflected on his unique and powerful film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the strongest impression that you want the audience to gain after they view ‘American Violet’?

Tim Disney: I hope people are inspired by the Dee Roberts story as I was. There are a lot of specific issues in the movie about drug policy, abuse of informants and plea bargaining, but in a larger sense that change begins, and change is possible, when individuals make choices and stand behind them. That’s what drew me to the story in the first place.

HC: This film indicates that there are still miles to go in the civil rights struggle. What surprised you most in relating a modern story about the rights denied African Americans post the year 2000?

TD: The fact that the events take place simultaneously with the 2000 election of George Bush is just pungently ironic. Dee Roberts is in jail being pressured to plead guilty to a crime she didn’t commit, George Bush is at the Supreme Court being given an election he didn’t win. That’s wrong on many levels.

You could hear this story told and assume it happened in the 1930s. That these are contemporary people was really striking to me, and in fact the same people are still in power doing many of the same things. Progress is incremental, it’s one step forward and two steps back.

HC: There have been many examples of African American injustice films that have made changes to society’s attitude. What film would you compare American Violet to within that genre and how can the cinema art continue to shine a light in the dark aspects of racial bigotry and injustice?

TD: I don’t know where it fits in the very specific genre you mentioned. In many of the older films in that category like ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ it is still the white father figure that solves the problem. We specifically tried to tell our story from the other point of view.

Even though there is a ACLU lawyer who is white and he is instrumental in the case, it is driven by Dee Roberts – an African American single mother on welfare with four children who lives in a rural Texas town – that is about as far from power as you can get in America and yet she is the catalyst for change.

In that context, it’s more similar to ‘Norma Rae’, ‘Silkwood’ or ‘Erin Brockovich’.

HC: Describe the interaction between yourself and Nicole Beharie, given that it was her debut in a film lead role. Since it was an ensemble piece, did some of the veteran actors help her out?



Director Tim Disney of ‘American Violet’, in Chicago on April 6, 2009
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

TD: Nicole is just tremendous. I know she was frightened, intimidated and all the rest but I never saw it. But she is a brave girl and has that actor characteristic where she leaves it all out there. She has that gift, whatever that is.

Tim Blake Nelson trained at Julliard, where Nicole had just graduated from. They had some language in common. They talked about acting using terms I had never heard (laughs). I even think I broke their “rules” a few times, too. I made a suggestion or used an analogy that I could tell was not in their acting language.

HC: Both Charles Dutton and Alfre Woodard have had long and distinguished careers in both social justice-type African American roles and just plain character acting. What drew these veterans to the project and what was their reactions or feedback to the injustice portrayed?

TD: Everyone in the film responded positively to the material and saw that it was an important story. In my limited experience in movies, people want to do good work. It was a low budget independent film and the whole cast had to make sacrifices because they want to be in something of quality, something about ‘something’.

HC: It’s easy to play the heroes of the piece. What approach did you and Michael O’Keefe make toward the “villain” of the narrative?

TD: Michael O’Keefe is so good in that role. It was a difficult role to cast, because no one wants to play a piggish racist. What we talked about is that his character is not a clown, he knows what he is doing and he is good at what he does, however repugnant.

We kept the words in his character to a minimum. His presence is scarier than his words can ever be.

HC: Your screenwriter and partner Bill Haney gave an interesting answer when asked about whose emotionalism is most insidious, the

maligned underclass or the powerful crass bigot. He said that in the research for the film, it was the religious and stick-too-ive-ness of the “underclass” who at least seemed more connected to what was important in life. Would you care to add your perspective on that notion?

The real-life person that Dee Roberts is based on, Regina King, definitely used her religion as a touchstone throughout the whole experience. We tried to portray it in the film without being too heavy. We also wanted to show how the churches, in this town and many towns like it, occupy an important community function beyond just personal faith.

HC: If you were the prime mover in spreading a “word of mouth” summary of American Violet, what would it be?

Change begins with individuals. It is a serious drama but it’s not heavy. It is an inspiring movie, and I hope it’s successful on that level. And go to AmericanViolet.com if you care about the issues and you want to learn more about the film.

Tim Disney is also part of the Walt Disney family, with father Roy E. Disney guiding the second golden age of animation there (beginning with “Beauty and the Beast” in 1991) and grandfather Roy O. Disney founding the company with grand uncle Walt.

Tim Disney worked for the company in the 1980s, co-writing the screenplay for “Oliver & Company” (1988). We asked him to reflect upon his famous name and the Disney legacy.

TD: I had the great fortune of working for Disney for three years after college. There were some older guys who worked with Walt himself, and that was a gift and honor to hang around those guys. Besides Oliver & Company, I did write an early treatment for the Lion King along with 500 other people (laughs) and I don’t claim that any of my ideas got into the final film. But I was around when that was happening. It was a culture of quality. Good wasn’t good enough.

I give my father a lot of credit for advocating on behalf of the animation department in the down days before ‘Beauty and the Beast’ came along. He is the Godfather of Animation.

HC: What do you think of the image backlash against the Disney Company?

TD: It hasn’t been a family company in a long time. But it went from being a large corporation to a mega-corporation. And that is what it is now.

Sharing the same last name entitles me to a cranky opinion and little else. It has been nothing but good for me, and it afforded me the opportunity to meet interesting people and do interesting things. But it owes me nothing and in turn I don’t owe it anything.

TOMORROW: Screenwriter Bill Haney and the real-life inspiration for ‘American Violet’, Regina Kelly, talk about the film.

‘American Violet’, with Nicole Beharie, Alfre Woodard, Charles Dutton, Tim Blake Nelson and Michael O’Keefe, directed by Tim Disney, opens Friday, April 17th, 2009. Check local theaters for film and showtimes



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 16 2024 - 6:29pm):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/7540/interview-director-tim-disney-on-the-important-issues-in-his-new-film-american-violet>

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