

Interview: Kevin Costner, Anthony Mackie & Director Mike Binder Ponder 'Black or White'

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- [Anthony Mackie](#) [2]
- [Black or White](#) [3]
- [Bull Durham](#) [4]
- [Dances With Wolves](#) [5]
- [Ferguson](#) [6]
- [Field of Dreams](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Interview](#) [9]
- [JFK](#) [10]
- [Joe Arce](#) [11]
- [Kevin Costner](#) [12]
- [Mike Binder](#) [13]
- [Octavia Spencer](#) [14]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [15]
- [Race](#) [16]
- [Relativity Media](#) [17]
- [Silverado](#) [18]

CHICAGO – Kevin Costner has come to represent a particular brand of Americana, for his roles in films like “Field of Dreams,” “Dances with Wolves” “JFK” and recently as Pa Kent in “Man of Steel.” His latest film is “Black or White.”

“Black or White” is written and directed by Mike Binder, who Costner has previously collaborated with in “The Upside of Anger.” It focuses on Eliot Anderson (Costner), who loses his wife in a car accident as the film begins. He is left to raise their granddaughter Eloise (Jillian Estell), after he and his wife had adopted her when their daughter died in childbirth. Eliot’s daughter had hid the pregnancy, and the father was an African American man. The other side of Eloise’s family, led by matriarch Rowena (Octavia Spencer), challenges Eliot for custody of Eloise, and retains Rowena’s high powered lawyer brother Jeremiah (Anthony Mackie) to process the trial. Old wounds and relationship issues come to light in this high octane family drama.



Kevin Costner in Chicago, January 9th, 2015, for 'Black or White'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

The iconic actor Kevin Costner talked with HollywoodChicago.com, along with his co-star Anthony Mackie and writer/director Mike Binder. Their commentary was neither "Black or White," but contained the other shades of authenticity where such a situation would reside.

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, what fascinated you most about the themes of this film – socio/economic differences between black and white, attitudes about being black in America, similarities of human experience or something else?

Mike Binder: I'd go with the similarities. How both grandparents had the love of the girl in common, and had to work all the bad out of that. As human beings, I think the races have more in common than they want to admit sometimes.

HollywoodChicago.com: Kevin, I was most impressed on how you infiltrated the tragic circumstances of your character with his vulnerability towards alcohol. Did you have to understand what your own relationship with alcohol was about, when understanding Elliott's situation?

Kevin Costner: I had my introduction to alcohol in college, and didn't like it that much. I'm not a tattle-teller, but I just don't care for it, and it never was an issue in my family. I've been around people who have had an addiction, and observed things. As an emotional detective, I've seen the physicality, the vulgarity, the sloppiness and the 'lack of ballet,' if you will. I thought if I could slip in what I've observed, and not get caught doing it, that's how I'd performed that part of the role. Using the script to inform me, I didn't want to shy away from anything in it. That was part of the character, and helped to inform me about him.

Binder: Kevin portrayed the alcoholic part of the character in a very clever way, which I thought it was much more natural. Instead of slurring or the usual traits, Kevin played it from the 'motor nerves.' In one particular scene, you see him get into a car, and he wanted his arm to go a

certain way, but it didn't follow his lead, because he was impaired. That's what really happens when you imbibe, you lose those functions, and he came at it in that very specific way as an actor.

When I directed him in 'The Upside of Anger,' there was a scene in which he shows up at the door of Joan Allen's character, and it's obvious that he's high. When she asked him whether he was high or not, when he paused right before he said, 'Yeah,' it was perfectly played.

HollywoodChicago.com: Anthony, your character is a driven, successful lawyer who is also proud of his African American heritage, and somewhat mistrustful about the white power structure in society. Do you know people like that in your life, and were they inspirations on how you formulated your character?

Anthony Mackie: I don't think my character had self-conscious problems with the white power structure, but he was a firm believer in that 'you work hard, you succeed hard.' The idea of pushing Kevin's character into saying that he might have a problem with black people had nothing to do with my character not liking white people, it was about him winning his sister's case.

A lawyer, to me, does not deal with true or false. Whatever truth he needs to come up with to win the case, that's his truth. There is no social expectancy to a lawyer, it's all about winning the case. If I go there to win, I will win. My character's biggest problem was with the little girl's biological father in the movie, his nephew, because that character was a father and he wouldn't take care of his responsibility.

Costner: You said it precisely in the movie, 'I can't win this case if he's on the f**king stand.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, you created distinct lines in the sand between the white family and the African American family in your scenario, with the black family having more of 'it takes a village' in their structure. Philosophically, do you think the upper middle class white family depicted in the film are getting farther away from those types of villages in raising their kids?

Binder: No, my philosophy in the film was 'a family is a family.' Kevin's character was a man who had been mortar shelled – two deaths of the persons closest to him. He lost his wife and his daughter. His home becomes kind of a torture chamber for him. It does become empty for him, but I wasn't creating any distinction between the two families.

HollywoodChicago.com: Kevin, your courtroom speech regarding the character's view of race is a titanic moment of truth. Again, how did you filter your truth into that speech? Do you recall an instance in which you were confronted with an assessment of your own attitudes toward race relations?

Costner: That speech was all Mike Binder, it was a lucky piece of dialogue for me. Sometimes I come into parts knowing I have to 'help' the dialogue a bit, or even a lot. When I came into this script, it was like painting by numbers. When you follow the paint schemes and colors on a paint-by-numbers kit, it looks pretty good at the end. So when I came across that part of the script that Mike wrote, I had to throw myself into it and believe what I was saying, but like paint by numbers there wasn't a false moment as long as I followed it.

There were three or four lines I had to add, that had to do a bit with my own past. It was about a word I used, it's ugly I know, and I'm ashamed that I had used it. But I never had to fix any of that 'big moment,' and nobody else said anything about it, during the process of bringing that scene alive. There was no, 'I need more' or 'I need something else.' It's just everyone understood that this was a moment that we all had to play well.

HollywoodChicago.com: Anthony, there is an intense debate today regarding the treatment of African American males, both in law enforcement and in general society. What have you experienced in your life regarding that debate, and how does your experience frame your opinion on it?

Mackie: It is my experience, 100%, that frames my opinion regarding it. I think there is a huge inferiority complex that comes specifically with both white and black men. It started with slavery and it has worked its way through the generations. Much of it has to do with the stereotypes of sexuality, strength-plus-aggression and fear. My experiences with the police hasn't been very different than the ones we're hearing on the news.

But the one thing that I know about those experiences was that those people involved were a*sholes, and I don't associate myself with a*sholes. It becomes a bigger problem when me, as an individual, allow the actions of a few to determine my attitude toward anybody that looks like that person. Do I think all policeman are bad? No. Do I think the good policemen should help to get rid of the bad policemen? Yes.



Kevin Costner, Writer/Director Mike Binder and Anthony Mackie for 'Black or White'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com



Writer/Director Mike Binder of 'Black or White'

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

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, how does being a actor help you to be a better director?

Binder: I think you know a lot more about how an actor spends his day, regarding the process of a performance. I sometimes think that directors don't understand that, especially when you call somebody in at 5pm, for example, and don't get to him until midnight. That messes with his head. Another example is when an actor completes a scene and the director says nothing. I think that also messes with the actor's head. I just think it's a good experience for a director to do some acting.

I grew up with [director] Sam Raimi, and had him act in my second film. He told me afterward that his experience on my set affected the way he interacted with actors on his sets from then on. So I think that every director should show up at least once and act in a film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Kevin, your remarkable Best Picture/Best Director achievement for "Dance with Wolves" still is a legend in Oscar history. Does that achievement mean more to you now or do you just see it as part of your journey as an actor and filmmaker?

Costner: The planets have to really line up for the Oscar thing to happen. They did, and I know I have a greater appreciation now that they did line up. I feel like I've done some great work since then, and was it recognized or not? Who knows?

HollywoodChicago.com: Then what are your bucket list goals as an actor, after everything you've done to this point?

Costner: I enjoy keeping the Western genre alive. They don't do a lot of that genre in the movies, but if they're going to be done – whether remakes or new films – I'd like to be a part of them. I love the Western, that's pretty basic, and I'd like to do a few more.

HollywoodChicago.com: Anthony, you were recently in one of the best comic book movies of the genre, "Captain America: The Winter Soldier." What do you think the adoration of this genre of film say about our cultural direction as a society?

Mackie: I think that genre is great, I think it's great that we take that form of literature and have introduced it to a new generation. Both kids and adults are going back to the comic books, and learning the origins of those great American creations. My fear is, though, that because movies like that are being made, movies like 'Black or White' aren't being made.

In the business model, I believe in base hits. If you get to the plate and hit seven base hits in a row, you likely score three runs. But in the movie business, everybody wants to hit a home run. It's very frustrating, because it seems everything is backward. Before, you would do smaller films that became successful, and that would get you an opportunity to do a big film, like a superhero movie. Now, you have to do a successful superhero movie to get the power to do a smaller, more personal film. It's a 'Catch-22.'



Anthony Mackie in 'Black or White'

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

Costner: I was only the father of a superhero, I couldn't stop anything, and they killed me. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, of your director influences, do you ever include a hidden or not-so-hidden tribute to them in your films?

Binder: Not really, but I do have influences. I love Woody Allen, Sidney Lumet and Cameron Crowe. My whole thing when I see a film I love is always, 'I wish I had directed that film.' For example, I wish I had directed 'Dances with Wolves.' That's my thing.

Costner: I feel that way when I see great acting as well. But usually it's about how I would have never done it that way. I'd be the stupid ass in the corner. [laughs] When I see something that good, I usually think I can't do that. Otherwise, you're a narcissistic as*hole.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you all believe in the karma of the entertainment culture, since your film and 'Selma' is releasing just as controversial tensions and race issues are in the news again?

Binder: No, I think it's more of a zeitgeist. It's like when somebody has an idea for a movie, and suddenly there are three other films at the same time with similar themes. It percolates in the air. We were working on this long before these tensions, and so was 'Selma,' but the issues are always percolating.

Costner: I guess in terms of karma, we could use all the good kind we can get.

"Black or White" opens everywhere on January 30th. Featuring Kevin Costner, Anthony Mackie, Octavia Spencer, Jillian Estell, Bill Burr and André Holland. Written and directed by Mike Binder. Rated "PG-13."



[19]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/black-or-white>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bull-durham>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dances-with-wolves>
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