

Family Emotions Uplift 'Lee Daniels' The Butler'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 16, 2013 - 8:11am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In one of the more intriguing ways to frame the 1960s civil rights movement, “Lee Daniels’ The Butler” places the context of that African American struggle through the filter of family dynamics, focusing on the father as a butler in the White House, through six presidents.

The great actor Forest Whitaker plays that butler, from his roots on southern cotton fields to the election of Barack Obama. Based on a real White House butler, the story of the family is a fiction written by Danny Strong. It boasts an all-star cast, with Robin Williams, James Marsden, John Cusack and Alan Rickman all portraying presidents, among others. The civil rights movement is active through the butler’s son, and all the main events come alive on screen including lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Riders that get out the vote and the later, more radical Panther Party. The conflict between father and son, plus the butler’s position right next to the power, add layers and depth to a time period that covers a bit too much territory. The strong performances of Whitaker and the main cast – which includes a stellar Oprah Winfrey – propel the film beyond the density of the timeline, by evoking some passionate emotions.

Cecil (Forest Whitaker) begins the film in old age, waiting to meet the new president, Barack Obama. He has been retired as a White House butler for several years, and begins to tell his astounding journey through flashbacks. After witnessing the death of his father on the cotton fields of the South, he makes his way through the ranks as a house servant, in a hotel wait staff and finally, as butler in the White House.



In the Shadow of History: Cecil (Forest Whitaker) Serves Six Presidents in 'Lee Daniels' The Butler'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

His journey encompasses six presidents, from Eisenhower (Robin Williams) to Reagan (Alan Rickman). He is married to Gloria (Oprah Winfrey), and has two boys, one of which (Louis, portrayed by David Oyelowo) is active in the civil rights movement after going to college. As the years and the barriers fall in the African American struggle of the 1960s, Cecil's family must endure the fallout from the son's activities. All the while, Cecil serves the presidents.

The story lives and breathes through Forest Whitaker, who commands an essential presence as Cecil, both in his role as butler and father. He never breaks down from his professional demeanor – except for one very powerful scene – and is forced through the prism of the rights movement because of his son. As a professional wait staff practitioner, he has forged his personality to an exceptionally calm manner, which is challenged by the son. Whitaker communicates it all precisely and empathetically.

Oprah Winfrey, in her first major role in 15 years, brings a conflicted strength to Gloria, the wife who loves her breadwinner husband but is somewhat bored by him. She takes to drinking and carousing a bit, and there is a tell in the famous and familiar Oprah that loves the freedom to be a little “bad” in the role. She matches Whitaker's performance notes in nice harmony, and captures her character at all the right moments.

Celebrities portraying the presidents are hit-and-miss, but there wasn't much screen time for any of them. Robin Williams captures the flat Kansas accent of Dwight Eisenhower, but James Marsden is far too young to portray the middle aged John F. Kennedy – he looks about 25 years old. John Cusack creates an amazing Richard M. Nixon in two vivid scenes, discarding any lookalike make-up and simply capturing the essence.



Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) is Cecil's Wife in 'Lee Daniels' The Butler'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The timeline of the story is too extensive. What begins in the late 1920s ends in 2008, and there is too much territory to cover to make the narrative cohesive. It works because the butler's family makes it work. It is the emotions of that tumultuous era that are played through them, and it was refreshing to see how a divided African American family might have weathered the sharp breakdown of their social culture in the 1960s.

What writer Danny Strong and director Lee Daniels was trying to get at was an authenticity and truth in those emotions. Deep in their heart, a person can believe they can overcome, but that doesn't necessarily mean the society at large is going to let them just be.

"The Butler" opens everywhere on August 16th. Featuring Forest Whitaker, Oprah Winfrey, Robin Williams, James Marsden, Liev Schreiber, Jane Fonda, Alan Rickman, Terence Howard, Cuba Gooding Jr., Vanessa Redgrave, Mariah Carey, John Cusack and Lenny Kravitz. Screenplay by Danny Strong. Directed by Lee Daniels. Rated "PG-13"



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