

Film

A Comeback on His Own Terms

After an African detour, Isaiah Washington is back on screen.

By ROBERT ITO

LOS ANGELES — Isaiah Washington was talking about goats. At Hal's Bar & Grill here on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, he was recounting how he had recently bought 15 of them for a village in Sierra Leone, where he has been a chief, known as Gondobay Manga II, since 2006.

"Their meat is low in cholesterol, they're a sturdy animal, they've been around since the beginning of time," said Mr. Washington, who rode his black 21-speed bicycle from his home just down the street. "And they're delicious."

If you didn't know that Mr. Washington was a chief in Sierra Leone, let alone that he's buying goats for a village there, well, that's understandable. Since being fired from the ABC series "Grey's Anatomy" in 2007, after he reportedly used a homophobic slur during an on-set argument, and later repeated the slur backstage at the Golden Globes, this 50-year-old actor and married father of three has kept a low profile, at least in Hollywood circles.

But this year Mr. Washington is making something of a comeback. After spending a good chunk of the past six years off camera, he's excited to talk about his coming projects, even as his conversation skitters from topics as varied as his recent trip to Rwanda, the globalization of hip-hop and why love and hate are really just two sides of the same coin. He recently starred in the Old West shoot-'em-up "They Die by Dawn," alongside Michael K. Williams and Rosario Dawson, and plays Chancellor Jaha, leader of the few surviving humans, in the coming CW sci-fi series "The 100."

And then there's "Blue Caprice," a feature film based loosely on the Beltway sniper killings. In October 2002, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo killed at least 10 people in the Washington area, firing at random victims out of a small hole cut into the trunk of their 1990 Chevrolet Caprice. In the film, Mr. Washington plays the elder assassin, Mr. Muhammad; the role of his deadly protégé went to Tequan Richmond ("Everybody Hates Chris").

Although the film has garnered kudos for Mr. Washington since its premiere at Sundance in January — in *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis called him "ferociously magnetic" — he very nearly didn't



MICHAEL LEWIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



ROBERT BLAKE/SUNDANCE SELECTS

Isaiah Washington kept a low profile after leaving "Grey's Anatomy," shifting to a role aiding Sierra Leone. He is back in "Blue Caprice," with Tequan Richmond, below.

get the role. A first-time director, Alexandre Moors, had been trying to contact him for months, but by July 2011, Mr. Washington had ditched many of the usual accouterments of a working actor. "I didn't have an agent, a manager, didn't want it," he said.

So Mr. Moors reached out to him through that most dependable of talent agency stand-ins: Facebook. "I love Facebook," Mr. Washington said. "I could brush my teeth with Facebook."

Even after making contact, however, the role was a hard sell. Indie film salaries aside — "No studio put a dime into this film to get it made," Mr. Washington said — he wasn't interested in reharsing a story about two of the most notorious black serial killers in recent history. "I was thoroughly embarrassed," he said, recalling the time he learned that the two men were black. "Because in my community, whenever you hear some really foul" — and here he used a word that is unpublishable in this paper — "we're holding our breath to see whether the person is black or white. He's always either a crazy white man or a brother."

But the director pressed him — largely because he had no other actor in mind for the part. "I was a big fan of his work, especially his work with Clint Eastwood in 'True Crime' and with Spike Lee in 'Clockers,'" Mr. Moors said. "I thought he brought an amazing versatility and ambiguity to the characters." And his turn as Dr. Preston Burke on "Grey's," for which Mr. Washington received two N.A.A.C.P. Image Awards and a Screen Actors Guild Award? "I never knew he was in a TV show," he admitted.

Mr. Washington was ultimately sold on the director's vision of the film, which focuses on the twisted mentor-student relationship rather than on the horrific killings themselves. (The murders exist as quick blips late in the movie.) "I was more interested in how you become a killer, not what you do once you become one," Mr. Moors said by telephone from ile de Ré in

his native France. "In the first draft of the script, we had the movie ending once they departed for Washington, once they got in the car."

Playing serial killers took a physical and mental toll on both lead actors. "I had to go to the couch for about six weeks," Mr. Washington said.

Mr. Richmond, who has been receiving strong notices for his sullen, nearly mute depiction of Mr. Malvo, took up smoking. "I was stressed," he said. "I was 18, living alone in New York, and Isaiah is wrestling me to the ground at 5 a.m. in Central Park," where they trained.

As for Mr. Washington, he's happy with his current lot in life, despite its financial and professional ups and downs. In 2005, he learned he was genetically linked to the Mende and Temne peoples of Sierra Leone and has since become one of that country's most vocal and visible supporters. Through his foundation, he has helped build a school, worked to create wells and bring in medical supplies, and helped woo foreign investors. In 2008, he became an official citizen of the country. Lately he's been working on a plan to manufacture "rainwater catchers," but finding financing has been hard. "I tweeted my idea to Bill Gates, but he didn't respond," he said. "I can get money for an independent film quicker than I can get money for something like this."

"I've been rich and poor three times," he said. "I'm on my way back to becoming rich again, whatever that means. Money comes and goes. It's just a tool."

He's moved on from the "Grey's" debacle, too, he said, though it made him something of a magnet for homophobes. "For the last six years of my life, I've been fighting off bigots," he said. "It's, like, bigots want to embrace me, and I politely take their arms from around my neck. I don't share their views, never have."

Mr. Washington is now working to create a consulting firm to spur economic development in Sierra Leone — like buying goats, but on a much grander scale — and is looking forward to his coming movie "Blackbird," which he describes as an "African-American gay coming-of-age story."

"I've been so incredibly blessed," he said. "I've worked with some of the greatest professionals in town. I stood at the Golden Globes."

"I worked with Sandra Oh, bro!" he continued. "My life has been great."

Where a Bicycle Is Sweetly Subversive

A female director breaks new ground in Saudi Arabia.

By JULIE BLOOM

Early this year, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia issued a decree allowing women to be appointed to the Shura, an assembly that advises the king on laws and other issues and has been traditionally all male. For the first time, too, women may vote in the next municipal elections, in 2015. Both decisions represent steps for a conservative country where women still cannot drive and lack other basic rights.

There have been smaller milestones, too. On Friday, the movie "Wadjda" opened in New York and Los Angeles. It is the first feature film to be shot entirely in Saudi Arabia — and it also happens to be written and directed by a woman.

"Wadjda" tells the story of a determined, misfit 10-year-old girl and her quest for a green bicycle. Set in the Riyadh suburbs, where women's mobility is limited, and bike riding is considered a threat to a girl's virtue, Wadjda hopes to buy one herself by winning a Koran-recitation competition at school that has a cash prize.

Through the eyes of this charming troublemaker — with her black Converse sneakers and purple laces, her love of mix-tapes and turquoise nail polish, and a veil that never seems to stay put — the audience is exposed to a side of Saudi life rarely seen by outsiders.

Directed and written by Haifaa al-Mansour and starring Waad Mohammed in the title role, "Wadjda" was financed partly by Rotana, the production company of the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and the German producers Gerhard Meixner and Roman Paul. Despite a small budget, the film took more than five years to pull together because of trouble convincing investors that making a movie in Saudi Arabia was even possible. But that didn't deter Ms. Mansour.

Dressed in black skinny jeans, with lustrous dark hair and nail polish in Wadjda's turquoise shade, Ms. Mansour discussed making the film over lunch in Gramercy Park this spring. She based the lead character on her niece. "She's very feisty, she has a great sense of humor, but my brother is more conservative, and he wanted her to conform," she explained. "To me, that's a great loss. It reminds me of a lot of girls in my hometown who had great potential. They could change the world if they were given the chance."



FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ms. Mansour, who now lives in Bahrain with her American husband, grew up in a middle-class family on the east coast of Saudi Arabia; her father was a legal consultant. She studied literature at the American University in Cairo and received a master's degree in film and directing at the University of Sydney in Australia. At one point, she worked for an oil company, but she has always maintained her love of movies, with Jackie Chan and "Snow White" as favorites. "Those films are not maybe art house," she said. "But they had so much power on me growing up. They opened up the world."

Her first documentary, "Women Without Shadows," came out in 2005. She wrote "Wadjda" while her son was a baby. It was selected for the Sundance Institute's Screenwriters Lab in the Middle East in 2010. But it was still hard to find producers. "I made a list of all the production companies that made films in the Middle East, and I sent e-mails," she said. "Nobody responded." Finally, Ms. Mansour connected

Above left, the Saudi director Haifaa al-Mansour, whose movie "Wadjda" is about a 10-year-old girl and her bicycle. Above right, Waad Mohammed in the title role.

'I tried to be respectful of the culture and not be offensive.'



TOBIAS KOWNATZKI/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

with Mr. Meixner and Mr. Paul.

While the producers were warned that they would probably have to shoot elsewhere in the Arab world, Ms. Mansour persuaded them to take a stab at making the movie where the story is set. "Haifaa's answer was super," Mr. Paul said via Skype. She said, essentially: It is not allowed to shoot here. There is no rule, because it has never been done.

One challenge in making the film was that Saudi Arabia has no real film industry or infrastructure. There is, however, television production, and most of the actors had television experience.

In developing a script, "I tried to be respectful of the culture and not be offensive," so it would be approved by the government, Ms. Mansour said. Men and women are not seen together except in scenes at home or in a hospital — or in the constant, comic dance between matrons and their drivers. "The way people move changes completely when they go from outside to inside, especially for women," Ms. Mansour said. "Because outside, they are invisible, but when they go home, they inhabit the space, they sing, and they dance. That in-between is so interesting."

This is true of sounds, too. For instance, at one point in the movie Wadjda's teacher says, "A woman's voice is her nakedness," while admonishing students for being too noisy. And women's voices are noticeable throughout the movie — girls laughing, Wadjda's mother singing.

Strict social codes proved difficult for

filming, which took six weeks. When Ms. Mansour wanted to shoot outside, she had to stay in a van and talk to her actors over a walkie-talkie. When the crew could not have access to a girls' school, it remade a boys' school.

There were also fears that the religious police would disrupt filming. "We had to pay attention," Mr. Meixner said. "And we were always fast when we knew they were around, and would wrap and switch location."

Encouraging Saudi Arabians to see the film is the next challenge, as there are essentially no public movie theaters in the country. "Wadjda" is available on DVD, and on TV, timed to coincide with the United States release, and Ms. Mansour said that many Saudis go to Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates on weekends to see movies.

But the film has gained plenty of attention already. In April, a glittery screening at the Tribeca Film Festival was attended by Queen Noor of Jordan and followed by a discussion led by Gloria Steinem.

There, Ms. Mansour emphasized that her expectations were modest. "I don't want to offend people or fight," she said. "It's more like: Tell them a story and have them feel it."

"I know Saudi won't change overnight," she added later. "It will gradually, but not because of this film. I feel it's very important to celebrate the right steps, the right changes, even if they are small. Like women riding bicycles."

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