

# Dancing



Steve McQueen's follow-up to *Hunger* and *Shame* is just as challenging and emotional – and likely to garner awards buzz. The makers of *12 Years A Slave* tell Total Film about the responsibility they felt in honouring a very real past...

# With Ghosts

WORDS MATT MUELLER



**M**aking a film about slavery was never going to be anything but difficult. Michael Fassbender fainted. Chiwetel Ejiofor was strung up for an entire day, feet barely scraping the earth below. Director Steve McQueen had to steal away to compose himself in the midst of shooting one harrowing sequence. But the fact that *12 Years A Slave* is based on the true memoirs of Solomon Northup – a free black man with a wife and children lured to Washington DC with the promise of a violin-playing gig, only to be drugged, shackled, stripped of his identity and sold down the river to a slave's life in Louisiana – gave it a haunting resonance that the film's cast and crew drank in on a daily basis. “That feeling

of dancing with ghosts... It was palpable,” says Ejiofor, who plays Northup. Months after filming, he's sitting – alert and engaged – in a suite in the swishy Conrad Hotel in NYC. In his crisp white shirt and navy blazer, Ejiofor is now a world away from playing Solomon, but like the rest of the cast and the director, this real life story still hangs heavy on his shoulders.

So why this project? Coming off a pair of acclaimed features – *Hunger* and *Shame*, about an IRA hunger striker and sex addict respectively, both played by Fassbender – McQueen was keen to apply his artistically honed eye (he's the 1999 Turner Prize winner) to this grim historical reality. Post-*Hunger*, Brad Pitt sought out McQueen and told him he wanted to collaborate. Having struggled to find the right narrative until his wife uncovered Northup's memoirs (first

published in 1853), McQueen approached Pitt and his Plan B production team while they were mired in the difficult making of *World War Z*.

Zombies to slavery: that's no small leap... Pitt's role in *12 Years A Slave* is brief, but his behind-the-scenes patronage was fundamental; without him, says McQueen, the film wouldn't exist. Northup's book was a saviour, too: a ready-made template for the story McQueen wanted to tell. “There it was in my hand, formulated already,” he marvels. “It read like *Pimocchio* or a Brothers Grimm tale, with a man pulled from life with his family into a dark, twisted tunnel, yet one that had a light at the end of it.”

Working with screenwriter John Ridley, the two men crafted a reverential adaptation that changes almost nothing from the source material, allowing the drama to come from >>



Harrowing times: (main) Steve McQueen shares his vision; (left) Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), Epps (Michael Fassbender) and Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) up the intensity; (top right) Epps' rage spills over; (bottom right) McQueen and Ejiofor feel the heat on the Louisiana set.

Northrup's crushing first-hand account rather than creating new scenarios or screenwriting shorthand. With a \$20m budget, McQueen began shooting *12 Years a Slave* at the end of June 2012, filming in Louisiana for an authentic sensory vibe (Spanish moss hanging off sycamore trees, insect clouds, fetid bayous swarming with snakes and alligators...). The swampy but lush landscape allowed McQueen and DoP Sean Bobbitt to scatter painterly images throughout the narrative. Summer in Louisiana is oppressively humid, but the heat ended up helping the cast. Picking cotton in 108°F heat gave Ejiofor a direct conduit to slavery's torment. And newcomer Lupita Nyong'o, who astonishes as persecuted slave and fastest cotton-picker on the plantation, Patsey, refused to seek refuge in air-conditioned trailers, preferring to endure the extreme conditions as her real-life character would have.

The dedication paid off - Solomon (renamed Platt by his brutal captors) is the role of Ejiofor's life. He knew it as soon as McQueen first called him in LA, asking him to play this educated man who becomes, essentially, merchandise. But he still took two days before deciding to accept the role. Due to Solomon remaining intensely private, the narrative relies on the unspoken, in the finished film concentrating much of the time on Ejiofor's eloquent, expressive eyes to tell the story. In contemplating how to play the role, McQueen and Ejiofor discussed silent movie stars in great depth, Valentino and Buster Keaton in particular. And for Ejiofor there would be pain, too. For a scene in which Paul Dano's vicious overseer strings Solomon up and leaves him dangling in the sun for hours, on the brink of death as children frolic nearby, Ejiofor insists he can't recall what was going through his mind during those long, aching hours. "By that point, we were so far down the rabbit hole," he sighs in the thankfully air-conditioned hotel suite. "We didn't even have a conversation about it. Sean [*Bobbitt*] hunched down and started shooting it. I stood there and time passed and then we packed up and we left. We all knew where we were at that point and what our hopes were for Solomon." On screen, Solomon's torture lasts seven minutes; incredibly, McQueen only uses five shots.

*'Sometimes when you push, the person goes far beyond your expectations'* Steve McQueen

"I couldn't pull punches about what slavery was," he remarks. "Either you make a film about slavery or you don't. I had to show certain scenes to understand why people felt so terrorised."

Ejiofor admits he needed time to adjust to McQueen's methods, particularly working alongside Fassbender who'd already established an extraordinary rapport with the director after two intense films together. "The fear was that Steve wouldn't be able to find that with me," he admits. "My fear was that he would try to get me to be Michael Fassbender and I had to put my hands up and say, 'I'm a completely different guy.'" Instead he had to "learn the dance. And then the training wheels came off..."

"I had to push to get what I wanted," is McQueen's take. You can well believe it: McQueen has a no-nonsense gaze and the sleeves of his black shirt are rolled up for business. "I pushed him and he responded. Sometimes when you push, the person goes far beyond your expectations. It got to that bit at the end of the movie where he looks at the audience. All I had

to do was roll the camera and that shit happened. At that point, whatever he did was correct."

As for Fassbender, despite a big grin and incredibly firm handshake on greeting, he bristles when *Total Film* wonders how he coped portraying someone as sadistic and reprehensible as Epps, the brutal proprietor who owns Solomon for most of his captivity and a figure so loathsome that, to this day, "don't be an Epps" is still a saying in Louisiana. "Well, the fact that he is a human being decided that I had to find that in him," Fassbender all but snarls. "He's got very real, human flaws - there's a lot of fear in Epps. It's my job to find the seeds of his violent, psychotic behaviour. The main launching pad for the character was the fact that he's in love with Patsey and he doesn't have the equipment within himself to process that or deal with it."

Fassbender also latched on to Epps' lack of intelligence and endeavoured to lend him a buffoonish air, describing one scene in which he chases Solomon around a pig pen as "a bit Laurel and Hardy". "It's the unpredictability of



Epps that makes him terrifying," he muses. Fassbender so threw himself into the role that at the end of one take of a horrifying scene in which Epps rapes Patsey, McQueen became aware that Fassbender wasn't moving – he had passed out. "That's never happened to me before," the actor says ruefully. "I don't know what happened – maybe I hyperventilated – but I blacked out and I came to and I was on top of Lupita thinking, 'What the fuck?' Then I saw the camera and the lights and I was like, 'Oh yeah, we're filming!'"

At another point, Patsey is cruelly punished for a minor transgression, asking Solomon to wield the whip while Epps twists himself into a frenzy and his maliciously jealous wife (Sarah Paulson) eggs him on. Even if the blood and flesh tearing off her back were added in post-production, it's a sequence of devastating horror that won't soon be forgotten. After filming such terrible moments, the actors would embrace – no harm done, we're all professionals. And hard as it is to fathom, everyone insists that fun was had during the making of *12 Years A Slave*. "That's always the way," smiles Fassbender. "I think it's a defense mechanism to not allow the atmosphere to get too steeped. At lunchtime, we all sat down together and tried to switch off because the moments when we were on were so intense."

Intense is a word to describe McQueen. While he could be as brusque on set as he is in person (ask a question he doesn't think is worth answering and he'll let you know), when he did offer praise, the actors knew it was genuine. But

he didn't allow himself to become mired in melancholy. When he felt overwhelmed during Patsey's whipping, he swiftly pulled himself together. "You've got to get the job done, otherwise I'm letting everyone down," he says. "Knowing that people went through this gives you the spirit to go on. So many people died and we don't know who they were. It's our duty to give them a voice, to let them be heard."

Since its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, *12 Years A Slave* has been lavished with critical praise that's pointing to a one-way ticket to Oscar and other awards glory (not least for Ejiófor and Nyong'o's phenomenal turns). The 44-year-old British director insists it's the furthest thing from his mind. "I'm just happy we made the movie," says McQueen, whose own ancestors were taken as slaves to the West Indies. "That's the truth, Ruth."

McQueen's movie isn't exactly a rebuke to *Django Unchained*, but whereas Tarantino's film housed its cruelty in the giddy framework of a revenge thriller, *12 Years A Slave* delivers the real deal, a raw, realistic account of the slave experience. That's something that's going to shock, possibly change, audiences. It's certainly been a life-changing film for Ejiófor.

"This has been the most extraordinary experience in my life," he says. "At a certain point, I'm going to have to consign it to the past and move on. But it has transformed me. I'm not the same person I was when Steve called me in Los Angeles all that time ago..." **TF**

## Meet Lupita Nyong'o

Remember her face – this Mexico-born, Kenyan-raised Yale graduate is the breakout star of *12 Years A Slave*.

### Watching the whipping scene is beyond harrowing. How was it to shoot?

It was special! [Laughs] I'd been mentally preparing for it ever since I got the role, but I could not have imagined how it would go down. I was literally stripped naked in public, which was humiliating and heartbreaking. My preparation was for everything until that moment and then the whipping took care of itself. It was just a matter of reacting.

### Was it hard to shake off the role?

No. I loved Patsey; I thoroughly enjoyed inhabiting her and giving her life again. I was an insomniac throughout the shoot and I called out to her spirit to guide me. But in trying to let go of it, I succeeded. I owe it to her to enjoy my freedom.

### How was it working with Steve McQueen?

He is incredible. I was definitely nervous that he would call me up and say, "Lupita, I'm sorry – I've made a mistake. It wasn't actually you who got the role." You hear the names of the other actresses up for the role: everybody else was a somebody and then there was me! But then I got on set and I realised that this man who I admire so much has seen it fit to trust me with this role. And so I must trust myself.

### Can he be blunt sometimes?

Oh yes. He does not mince his words. You always know where you stand. So when you get a compliment, you bag it!

*12 Years A Slave* opens on 10 January.