

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH SIDNEY POITIER

Actor, director, and producer Sidney Poitier single-handedly changed the image of the black actor in Hollywood. Raised in poverty in the West Indies, Poitier became a theater actor after moving to New York City. Starting with his very first film, *No Way Out* (1950), he developed an elegant, intense screen presence and became Hollywood's first African American actor to play leading roles. A few days before he was honored at the Museum's gala Salute, Poitier spoke in this interview about his early days as an actor, his brush with the Hollywood blacklist, and the path of his remarkable, pioneering career—described with undue modesty.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Sidney Poitier, presented in conjunction with the Museum of the Moving Image's retrospective, 'The Films of Sidney Poitier,' curated by historian Donald Bogle. Moderated by Donald Bogle and senior curator of film Richard Koszarski.

KOSZARSKI: I want to ask a question that's been on my mind for the last three or four months while I've been working on this show. It has to do with 1949, when you were a young actor—a young stage actor—and you came here to the Astoria Studios when it was the Army Pictorial Center. You made a film for the Army chaplain's office called *From Whence Cometh Help*, which we've been able to get a print of from the US Army and which we'll be showing on Friday evening. I wonder if you could say something about how a young Broadway actor would get involved in a production like that at the time? Also, did this first film experience have any real effect on your later motion picture career?

POITIER: You're asking me to go back a great number of years... I think that it was called The Signal Corps—Army Signal Corps Films—and they had a procedure not unlike that which you found in the commercial theaters. There was an office that did the casting for that function, and actors who would go to that office taking resumes and pictures. And there was, in those days, a pipeline, meaning there was some information that got out to the acting community. It was usually printed in something akin to what today is called *Backstage*, or a kind of almost underground [publication]: three or four sheets that gave information about various

activities that could possibly eventuate in a job for some young actor. We would all snatch these things up once a week and would see suggestions of who was casting somewhere; this was where I found the Army Signal Corps. I must say the pay wasn't sterling (Laughs), but it saved lives I'm sure...

(Laughs) Mine, certainly. (Laughs)

KOSZARSKI: Was that film of any use later as a potential screen test or something to show film producers?

POITIER: I remember clearly asking them for permission to come and look at it because I needed to see what I looked like on the screen. This was my first crack and I did go and I saw it. It was quite an experience. It almost sent me back to the Caribbean. (Laughter)

BOGLE: I think that the thing about you that's been so fascinating, which makes you really this larger than life figure, is that you became not simply an actor, you became this social symbol as well and a very potent one. I can remember when I saw *In the Heat of the Night* and when you say, "They call me Mr. Tibbs!" I can remember the wild cheers of sheer pleasure that went through the audience, particularly the black audience. Here was a figure on screen, a black man, who was not letting people treat him as anything less. When you then went to Hollywood, when you made *No Way Out*, what gave you that drive to say you were going to be a film actor when there was really no predecessor for the

kind of figure you became? What motivated you, can you tell us?

POITIER: When I was a kid in the Caribbean, in the Bahamas, I used to go to movies a lot. Movies cost a sixpence in those days and a sixpence was hard to come by. I remember I used to do all kinds of illegal things to come about those six penny pieces. One of the things I used to do was to sell peanuts. I would parch them myself in the shell, we would fill tiny little bags with them, and we would go and stand around in front of the theater, which was not permitted by law. We were panhandling and selling and with my little profits I would go and see these movies myself.

Because the kinds of films that they showed in those days were mostly Westerns, I fell in love with Westerns. And because it was actually a semi-primitive kind of cultural area that I grew up in, I didn't know the geography of the United States and I had no idea what Hollywood was like. I had no idea where Hollywood was. But from the screen I read that the cowboys that I admired were almost always in this place called, "Hollywood." (Laughs)

So when I got to be about twelve or thirteen I began dreaming of one day going to Hollywood to be a cowboy, but not in movies because I thought that is where cowboys actually did the work that cowboys do (Laughs). So my sister who, a very dear sister, a friend, asked me one day, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" and I said, "I'm going to go to Hollywood and become a cowboy." And I fully meant with the knowledge I now have that I wanted to go to Texas and work the cows. When I discovered the difference, it was too late. (Laughter) But I came to America and I got involved with theater.

BOGLE: The American Negro Theater?

POITIER: Yeah. And it was not until then that I began really making a commitment to become an actor—and that was an accident.

BOGLE: There's that story that you stumbled across an ad in *The Amsterdam News*?

POITIER: Yeah. There was—and I suspect still is—a newspaper called *The Amsterdam News*, a black newspaper. When I was very young, I came to New

York. And I had no friends or relatives here so what I did to earn a living was I washed dishes a lot. I could get those jobs fairly easily. I would be washing dishes mostly on a pay-as-you-go basis, meaning that it was during the war and if you got a job as a dishwasher you could get paid the same evening. I was what they called a "relief dishwasher." And to get those jobs, *The Amsterdam News* had a want ad section.

Opposite the want ad section was a page—the theatrical page. Now I was not accustomed to reading newspapers so I didn't know what a theatrical page was. I glanced over—true story—I glanced over at the theatrical page and I saw a familiar phrase, it said, "Actors Wanted," very much like on the—on the other page it said, "Dishwashers Wanted" or "Foreigners Wanted" (Laughter) and "Elevator Operators Wanted." So I thought, "Well I've been trying this dishwashing thing, (Laughter) I might as well see what this other thing is about."

I was at 125th Street. The address in this article said, "The American Negro Theater, 135th Street on Lennox Avenue," and it gave the number on 135th Street that was the basement of the 135th Street library, that's where the American Negro Theater was housed at that time. And I decided to go. Actually I was on my way to another dishwashing job, and I thought, "Well, before you go downtown and do that, why don't you check this out." So I did.

I walked in and there was—much smaller than this but the same kind of feeling—a small theater. And there was a stage—not quite as high as this—and it was empty, there was one man there. And I said, "Hello," and he said, "Yes?" I said, "Is this the place where the actors are wanted?" (Laughter) And he said, "Yes, come in." He said, "Are you an actor?" I said, "Of course," (Laughter) and he said, "Okay." He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Florida," which in part is quite true. And he asked some questions about what kind of acting I had done down there and I mumbled something. And he said, "Okay here's a script," which of course was the first problem I had because I had never heard the word "script." I didn't know what a script was. But he handed me a soft book. I took it. He said, "Why don't you go up on the stage and read the part of John?" I said, "Okay." And he said, "It's page..." and he gave me a page number.

I went up on the stage and I opened the book to this page and there were a lot of names, "John..." and underneath "John" were words. Then there was another name and underneath that name were words. Well I got it very quickly, I said, "I better read what's under John." (Laughter) So he said, "When you're ready," and I proceeded.

Now I have to forewarn you that I was fresh from the Caribbean—but I mean fresh—and I had the worst Caribbean accent—depending on how you look at it—or the best Caribbean accent (Laughter) that I ever heard. Now on top of that problem, the fact that I went to school for a year-and-a-half and I had to get out and go to work at the age of twelve, so I could not really read very well. I was terrific on one syllable words like "is" and "and" and "I," but I really was not able to read very well. And hence I had no real reading comprehension, and fairly simple words would trip me up. I was aware of this as I was going through this first speech, so I started to read this first speech, and I was going to be careful therefore. I was not going to rush and stumble over any words. So I said, "And, so, John, is, my, name. Oh, yes," etc., etc.

Well I didn't get through the first speech. I heard "slam!" That was his script slamming shut. He came up on the stage furious and started verbally abusing me. He was a big man and he took me by this ear and he started to lead me. Mind you, I'm just fifteen years old and he starts to lead me to the door and his running commentary was, "You shouldn't." He said, "What're you going wasting people's time?" He says, "Why don't you go, hear me good. Why don't you get out of here and go find yourself a job as a dishwasher?" (Laughter)

By the time we got to the door, he had said that he had listed for me all the problems I would have to overcome. He spoke about my accent. He said, "You can't be an actor with an accent like that, you're just wasting my time, you're wasting your time." And so on and so forth, and just, "get out of here."

When I was outside and walking towards 7th Avenue, I wondered how he knew I was a dishwasher. (Laughter) I thought there was something in my appearance, in my eyes, in my persona, an aura that he read and I didn't like that. I resented it deeply because it implied that he was, unless I did something about it, making a prophetic

remark. He was limiting my life; he was circumscribing my existence; he was pigeonholing me—not intentionally, but this is how I read it. And I said to myself, walking towards 7th Avenue, "I am going to be an actor, to prove to him that I have more stuff than just dishwashing. And when I am an actor I will go back to him, prove it to him, and then I'll walk away and give up this acting business because I don't want to be an actor anyway." (Laughter)

That day I went downtown in New York City and got a job, as usual, as a dishwasher, and with the money I earned over the proceeding days, I accumulated thirteen dollars. I bought a radio. From that day on for six months solid, I listened to that radio every day, every night, when I wasn't at work. I intended to change my accent, so I listened to Americans speaking. So I got to a point where I began to lighten the a's and I picked up rhythms. There was a man on the radio in those days by the name of Norman Brokenshire and he used to do the introduction for the *United States Steel Theater of the Air*. He had a wonderful, wonderful speaking voice. And I listened to him, [and to] all the commercials and everything I heard, because words were being said by Americans.

Anyway, six months later I went back—actually it was more than six months, it was a little more—Six months later I went back and I said, "I want to know how one gets into this acting school that they have there at the American Negro Theater." And they said, "You have to audition," and I said, "Well I'd like to apply for an audition." They said, "Fine." I said, "What do you do?" They said, "You come in with the audition material on this certain date, and you go up on a stage, and you do a little audition—you do like a five minute audition—and they will determine whether you have the qualifications for being able to enter the school." And I said, "Terrific."

I left not knowing that one had to have a scene from a play or something, so I went out and bought a *True Confessions* magazine (Laughter) and I memorized the first two paragraphs of some silly story about a detective. I got it down, I felt I was really ready, and I went there this particular night for my audition. Mind you, I was alright, I was in good shape wearing my best clothes, I had my *True Confessions* magazine and when I got there I looked around and I saw other youngsters with

these soft books. (Laughter) I wondered, "What were they doing with all of these soft books?"

Anyway, the first guy got up there with his soft book and he opened it, and he's looking at it and the guy says, "Are you ready?" He says, "Yeah." He says, "Take your time," and he puts down the soft book, he gets up there, and he does his audition. Sometimes two kids or three kids in a scene. And I figured that I was in trouble by now.

My turn came and I went up on stage; I was petrified. I went up on the stage and they said, "We would like you to do what you're going to do and then we want you to do an improvisation for us, too." (Laughter) I figured if I kept my mouth shut, I'll figure out what improvisation means (Laughter). So I got up there and I started this scene of two paragraphs from *True Confessions* magazine. Now you can imagine what it is doing an audition from such material. Instead of playing words in a speech, you're saying, "And Frank walked around the corner, and as he crossed the street there were cars going back..." (Laughter) Well, about halfway through I got the idea that this wasn't going (Laughs) so well but they let me finish and then they gave me an improvisation.

They said to me that they were the heads of the American Negro Theater—Abram Hill, Osceola Archer, and other people who's names I don't quite recall at the moment. Frederick O'Neill was not there this night. Frederick O'Neill was the chap who threw me out. (Laughter) They said, "Here's the improvisation. You're in the jungle, you're alone, your buddies have all been killed, and you're the only one left. They are faceless, you can't see them, and you know they're out there and you are the only survivor. We want to see how you handle the situation." And I said, "Okay."

Well the first thing that jumped into my mind was one of those James Cagney things. So naturally I had a Tommy gun... (Laughter) So I said, (Laughs) "Alright, you rats. Come and get me you dirty rats." (Laughter) And then I started doing my regular, "da-da-da-ra-ra-ra." Then I got hit by return fire, right, so I dropped my imaginary Tommy gun and I was holding myself, I got hit, and I was just kind of stumbling around the stage. But to really play this I had to fall down, but I was wearing my best suit. (Laughter) Reality overwhelms us sometimes, so

halfway down I put out my hand and I wound up like this so I didn't get my suit dirty. (Laughter) They said, "Thank you," and the procedure was they would let you know within three days. They let me know three days later that I was rejected.

Well, it broke my heart. So I thought of any way I could get in, and I was fairly observant there at this particular place where the auditioning was held, so I said to them, "You know, I noticed that you don't have a janitor to clean the stage and such and such." I said, "I would do those janitor works for you, because it only requires maybe a couple of hours in the evenings, if you let me come to the class." Well they were impressed. They wanted to know why this kid was so determined. Anyway, they said, "We'll let you know," and two days later they made a decision and they said, "We'll take you on a trial basis and we'll see how you do. We'll take you for the first three or four months, then afterwards, if we decide at that time you're not material, we'll let you out." And I said, "Deal."

I was washing dishes or did whatever I was doing during the day, and I would go there for the evening classes and then I would clean the stage and I do all the necessary janitor work. And after the first semester, they came to me and they said, "It's not working out." (Laughter)

But at the end of that semester, they did, as was their custom, a student production. And by now I had developed some camaraderie in the classes and some of the other kids went to bat for me, saying, "If you're going to do a student production, you should let him do it." The person who directed the student production went outside to hire an actor—it wasn't a hire because nobody got paid, but to bring in an actor who wasn't a student in our class—an actor named Harry Belafonte, (Laughter) and gave him the choice part. My compatriots in the class said that it would only be fair if they would allow me for the period of the production to understudy Mr. Belafonte and that was the compromise.

So I understudied for Harry Belafonte whose father was a janitor up on Amsterdam Avenue uptown in an area they used to call "Sugar Hill." Harry used to help his dad take out—in those days they burnt coal, and you had to shovel the coal out into big cans, and you'd take the big cans up and put them on the sidewalk because they came to get those

cans certain days. It was quite a chore for Harry, and on that particular night when Harry had to be helping his dad—it's incredible what I'm telling you (Laughter)—a Broadway director, who himself had done the student production before, at a college, was invited by the directoress to come and see what she was doing with it. He came, they waited for Harry to get there, he was late, she said, "Okay Sidney, would you get up and read the part until Harry arrives." And I got up there and I played Harry's part. Harry didn't show at all that evening. I went through the whole play, and that man said to me at the end of the evening, "Come to my office on Monday. I'm going to do a production of the Greek comedy *Lysistrata* and I'd like you to read."

And I went. Of course I didn't sleep until Monday. (Laughter) I went that Monday and I got a job, my very, very first job. And it was heaven. I rehearsed and four weeks later the play was about to open, and I was excited. I was working with Hetta Mulson and Babe Wallace and a lot of very good people and on Broadway and I was making seventy-five dollars! (Laughter)

Five minutes before the curtain went up, I saw that all of the experienced actors were over at the curtain, and they did this [makes squinting gesture], and I wondered what they were doing. There was a little teensy hole there that they could look out and see who was in the audience. I didn't know that. I went up when it was vacant. I saw 1,200 people (Laughter) sitting out there. I turned to stone. I was so scared. Then I heard, "Curtain."

The curtain went up, I was in the first scene and I was on about two, three minutes after the curtain. I was standing in the wings and I couldn't move. The stage manager gave me a shove—true story—gave me a shove, and I went out on the stage and as luck would have it or fate, I was looking across the stage. The audience was out here, there was no reason for me to look out there, but I did then. (Laughter) I forgot every word I was supposed to say. I had nine lines to speak. I looked at the actor I was supposed to address and I gave him line number six. His eyes went like that (Laughter) at which point he gave me the correct line to try to get me back on track. I gave him line number three. For some reason the audience started laughing, I was convinced they were laughing at me, so I got more scared. It was so terrible, I stumbled through just

getting the lines all mixed up and finally at the end of it I walked off there. I was so ashamed. I went up stairs, I was wearing this very nice Greek costume, I got out of it, I put on my suit, and I just knew that was the end of my brief sojourn into the theater.

I left the theater and I went up to Harlem. About 11:20, no about 12 o'clock—in those days, believe it or not, in New York City there were thirteen newspapers—anyway, ten of the thirteen newspapers trashed the show. And they said, "Who was that kid (Laughter) who came out there and just broke up the whole audience?" I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute." That was my introduction to theater. (Laughs, applause)

BOGLE: Well that's a great beginning. I'd like to ask you about something that happened a little bit later, once you got to Hollywood. You did *No Way Out*, and then you did a film I liked very much, which we're going to show in the series: *Cry the Beloved Country* with Canada Lee. Then you were about to do *The Blackboard Jungle*—and this was the '50s, it was the period of blacklisting in this country—and I don't know if most people realize that you did have certain problems with this. Is it true that at one point you were asked to sign a loyalty oath, or to repudiate people like Canada Lee and Paul Robeson? Can you tell us something about the atmosphere then?

POITIER: Well, yeah, that happened before I went to Hollywood, actually. There was a climate in town. It was the McCarthy period. It was, well let me put it in its proper perspective and context. I did a television show for NBC.

KOSZARSKI: *A Man is Ten Feet Tall*. [An episode of *The Philco Television Playhouse*.]

POITIER: Yeah. And let me take you even farther back. There was an organization called the Negro Actors Guild, remember that? There was a man who was a part of that guild who—a black man—who was—he was an informer, and he caused an awful lot of black actors to become blacklisted. I had no idea that I was being victimized in that regard because I had so many problems getting work anyhow, so there was another kind of blacklist operative for me. But anyway, because of having gotten the job in *Lysistrata* and other things, I was a member of Actors' Equity. And the only place to

raise your complaints about the lack of job opportunities is on the union floor, and I did. I did in concert with lots of other actors. He sent my name in. And I didn't learn this because I wasn't getting any work anyhow.

I didn't learn that there was a question about my loyalty until I was asked to come to see about a television show called *A Man Is Ten Feet Tall* written by someone I knew. So I went, and they liked me, and they wanted to use me. I said, "Terrific." I made a deal, money arranged, and they said that a lawyer from NBC wanted to see me. And I went to his office and I thought it was about the contract. It turned out he wanted me to explain why I had worked with Paul Robeson. "I really had not worked with Paul Robeson," I corrected him. "I appeared with Robson on several occasions to raise funds or to support a cause, but I was never paid for it." And he said, "We need an explanation as to why you did that." And I said, "I did it because I felt it, because I honestly believed that what he was fighting for was something one should lend support to." And he said, "We can't use you until you repudiate that behavior." He moved on to Canada Lee, he said, "You also know Canada Lee..."

Anyway to make a long story short, I said to NBC, "I will not sign it, and thank you very much for the job offer, but that's the way it is." They wanted me to sign something. The production was—I've forgotten who was the producer—anyway the writer Robert Alan Arthur, a friend of mine, came to my house to try to work out a compromise. I told him I could not work out a compromise. I remember being so angry because I had thought then—and I think now—that Paul Robeson was one of the most remarkable men I'd ever met, and to ask me to deny him was an offense to me. And I remember being so angry in the lawyer's office I started to cry. But anyway, I was told by Robert Alan Arthur to report for rehearsal. I did. I expected to be approached again and never was. I believe had I been approached again I would not have signed it. The upshot of it was, somehow or another, I never heard again from the lawyer.

Then it happened to me in Hollywood. In Hollywood, I was doing a picture called *The Blackboard Jungle* and the question arose again. And I said, "I can't do that." Luckily the picture was being directed by a man named Richard Brooks.

We were in rehearsal on the set one day and the word came down that they wanted to see me in the legal department. On my way to the legal department—Richard Brooks apparently had some inkling of what they wanted from me—he said to me, "I want you to do this picture. Whatever happens up there, I want you to do this picture." So by the time I got up there I was fortified, with my own convictions plus his support, or what I read as his support. And I went up there and they raised the question again. But in Hollywood, what it was there was an organization here in New York called *Red Channels*. And my name was in *Red Channels* for whatever reasons. I believe it came from that chap...

BOGLE: James Edwards was on the scene in 1949, and so was Juano Hernandez. You were the only one who was able to go on to a really significant, powerful career. Could you tell us something about the forces at work within the industry there?

POITIER: Well, I think there was a historical influence at that time. History was such that America was about to face a very painful period. That has to be counted in the mix. Simultaneously, there were a half dozen or so mavericks in Hollywood making films with some currency in the industry. Mavericks, men who by their values and by their view of the world wanted to express themselves in social terms. And it's interesting that I worked for almost all of them. The first picture I did was a picture that was produced at a studio headed by Darryl Zanuck, who had some degree of courage. It was directed by Joe Mankiewicz who—again, one of those guys, maverick-type guys who had a passion. So that was in the mix. I came along with certain qualifications, I cannot articulate them for you, I don't quite know what they were, but obviously I had them. That was in the mix.

So from my standpoint, in terms of what I brought, whatever it was, I happened to have been standing at the right place at the right time, where the atmosphere socially, politically, and philosophically were swirling around me. I happened to be at that spot. I believe that had there been another chap at that spot with a requisite set of qualifications, it would have been him. I don't think that the industry was then prepared to entertain two such happenings. So it was a combination of those things. We were in the Civil Rights movement. It

was boiling—just minimally—under the surface. And there was such a broad range of injustices, in terms of the minority communities in America at that time, that the response to that injustice had developed an energy of its own that could find no release. And there were men, see, there are always men of good will everywhere. Oft times they were in woefully small numbers, but they were present just about everywhere. And the film industry was no exception. Those half-a-dozen guys, at that time, plus the civil rights period upcoming, plus whatever I was—

BOGLE: Plus your great talent.

POITIER: Well, thank you. (Laughter) All of those things came together at a junction, and my career happened. There is an intangible set of energies involved in the success of anything. Success is missed by fractions of a second. So there is an intangible element that we sometimes characterize as luck, we sometimes give it a mystical flavor. But whatever it is, we cannot control it, we cannot request it, we cannot manipulate it. It happens. We, with hindsight, might be able to analyze it. Generally, we could say (as I'm doing now), "Civil Rights movement, the maverick guys, the winds of change, my presence... all the forces coagulating to bring about what happened." But there's no way to really know. I could have gotten up one day and left the house a second earlier or a second later and none of this would have happened.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Question about working with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn].

POITIER: It was a great experience, as you can imagine. They were remarkable: he was a remarkable actor, she still is a remarkable actor. What I remember most about them was the day I was supposed to play a scene with them where I go in and talk to them about their daughter. I had known the words backwards, I could say them in my sleep, and through the rehearsal it was fine. Then the stage got quiet, the camera rolled, I walked in, and there they were sitting there. I looked at them and in my mind I heard, "Oh my God, there's Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn!" And I forgot my lines. I forgot my lines about 25 takes. Then I asked Stanley Kramer— precisely what I say is what happened—I asked him to send them home please. And he did, and I played the

scene—the big close-up of me—to two empty chairs with the script person reading their lines. I couldn't, I just couldn't remember the words with them around. After I got that scene off my back, I was fine. I was fine.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Which roles were the furthest removed from you personally?

POITIER: I think what was farthest away from me was *Porgy and Bess*, because I didn't want to do it. And I did it, but I did not want to do it. I chose work on the basis of how it helped me to define myself. I always have done that. And I started doing it early because I always wanted my work to distinguish me from dishwashing. Unless it did that, I couldn't play it, and wouldn't play it—and would not have played *Porgy and Bess*.

But I was in the Caribbean working on a film, in the Virgin Islands, on an island where there was no telephone. We got away from the island once every two weeks to go to St. Thomas for one evening of some kind of recreation. On one such trip from the island, I spoke with my agent, and I learned that my agent was then in New York and that he had an affiliate agent in California. The affiliate agent, a lady who knew Sam Goldwyn (who was the producer of *Porgy and Bess*), had promised me to him. And I said to the agent, "You just tell her that she made a mistake." She had not contacted me, and had she done so I would have told her, "I have no interest in that." I went back to work on the picture, and when I was finished and came back, I came into a brouhaha.

It was messy. Sam Goldwyn was now exposed in terms of his ego. He had made statements that he had his cast and I was going to play Porgy. So as gently as I could, I tried to let Sam Goldwyn know that I was not interested in playing Porgy. But it was too late. I was adamant, and he was adamant, and it got to a very tight spot.

There was a woman in Hollywood at that time, her name was Hedda Hopper. Hedda Hopper liked me a lot. She used to wear funny hats and I suspect the reason she liked me a lot was that every time I saw her I said, "Where did you get that hat?" Anyway, she and Sam Goldwyn were not on speaking terms, and she called me once and asked me when I'd gone out to talk with Sam

Goldwyn about *Porgy and Bess*, to tell him—man on man—that I couldn't play the part. She called me while I was out there and she asked me to come to her office. So I went in and I laid on my usual comment about her hat. And she said to me, "Sam is a very powerful man. And you're in a spot. You're really in a spot." She said, "He is powerful enough if he chose he could stop you dead in your tracks."

There was a man named Stanley Kramer who—on that trip, while I'm wrestling with this question—sent me a script called *The Defiant Ones*. I thought that was my out. I read it and I loved it, and I said to the agent, "Tell him, that's the script that I want to do." And I knew that that would get me out of the Sam Goldwyn picture. He went to him and he said, "We're going to do your picture." And Stanley said, "I was told by Goldwyn that he has a commitment. And I don't want to get into a fight with Goldwyn. If you clarify your situation with Goldwyn, we'll go to work on the script." Goldwyn wouldn't let me out. So, in order to do one, I had to do two.

Stanley Kramer was a liberal in the best sense. There was a time when the dictionary definition of liberal was pretty wonderful. And there was a time when liberal was another word for fairness, honesty, integrity, justice. Well, to me it still is. (Applause) Kramer lived his whole life that way. His body of work was an expression of how he felt, his values, et cetera.

Now he took upon himself, at the peak of his career, to make a very controversial film. [*Guess Whos' Coming to Dinner*] He made it as commercial as he could, but make no mistake about it, that was a controversial film in 1968 in the United States. Because of his skills as a filmmaker, he fashioned it in a manner that made it interesting, provocative, entertaining, an overlay of humor. And the picture worked, it really worked. But the picture was a controversial film. And it has been criticized. A lot of people said, "Well, he was too perfect. He was a doctor, and he was so educated, and the family was a very liberal family and he was a newspaper man." The truth is, it was necessary at that time to fashion it that way. You have to remember that Lena Horne was excised out of musicals and she was alone singing a number, just thirty years ago in this country. She would appear in an MGM musical and it went to the South and they would cut her out. Same country ten years later, Stanley Kramer

makes *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. So you have to see that film in its proper respect, what the circumstances really were, and if you did you would see that Stanley Kramer was a very courageous filmmaker. One of his problems today, at the age of seventy—close to eighty—is that he is a painful reminder of the absence of courage on the part of an awful lot of guys. (Applause)

BOGLE: In talking about *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*—and you had a number of great successes around that time, commercial successes... *To Sir With Love* was another and, of course, *In the Heat of the Night*—but you've said that when you started directing films, your career really went in a different direction. How did you respond to some of the criticism that came out in the very late '60s about the perfection of the character in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*? Did you decide you really wanted to make an image change, or to make a new kind of film?

POITIER: No, it wasn't an image change so much as a search for longevity. I had spent my life in this business, in films. I learned a great deal about films, and I know, for actors (especially principal players), the usual pattern: as a principal player approaches the age of fifty, he begins to lose fashion. Character actors tend to be able to go on much farther. I am essentially not a character actor. And I didn't know I was still going to have my hair at sixty-two. (Laughter) I wanted to learn about producing and directing films so as to enhance the possibilities of staying at the game I liked. That was it. Not an image change, because I had no problem—I didn't—with whatever my image was. What I wanted to do with the films that I directed, I wanted to create films that would give black audiences a greater sense of personal expression. But it wasn't an image change. You can't change your image. The directing was intended for when I was older, and I got fatter, and the chin becomes two chins. I wanted to continue to take advantage of what I'd learned, and stay around.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Question about the social impact of *In the Heat of the Night*, and Poitier's own importance].

POITIER: No, I think it's Norman Jewison's accomplishment, he directed it. And I think it's Stirling Silliphant's accomplishment, he wrote it.

And Walter Mirisch produced it. I was, again, exemplifying that mix. I was there, and they were there and we came together and it happened. Objectively, I cannot overstate the contribution of each one of those people. And, objectively, I have to say that mine was smallest of all. I was the actor. I brought no philosophical point of view to the project. They did. Because Walter Mirisch saw some value in putting that story on screen and Norman Jewison saw some value in directing that film as well as he did...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Question about winning an Academy Award in 1964 for *Lilies of the Field*.]

I was in concert with very powerful actors. Albert Finney was up that year. I think Paul Newman was up that year. Some other guys were up that year...Rex Harrison. And I was sitting there. I had rehearsed how to behave when one of their names was mentioned. Because, the moment the guy is announced they put the camera on a guy who loses. And I had my smile all ready and my applause, I was going to applaud that winner. The moment came and as we got to it, second by second I tell you that the old heart—thank you God for making it good and sturdy—it was just a beating and a beating and a beating. And when they said, "The winner is ... Sidney Poitier!" Up came my smile and I was about... (Laughter) I said, "I won!" I leaped out of that chair in that auditorium about six feet and I want to tell you, my cool was gone. I just stood around telling people in the aisle, instead of going down to get the statue, I said, "I won, I won, I won."

Now, I like to be prepared for any eventuality, so I had written me a few words in case the amazing had happened. And I memorized it pretty good. I got up there, and as I got to the podium, I forgot. Anne Bancroft, who gave it to me—I think it was Anne Bancroft, right?—Anne Bancroft, who gave it to me, (Laughter) she gave me the statue, and I've got it, and suddenly I've realized that I had gone blank. Luckily, they were still applauding. So I said to myself as I'm smiling, I'm saying, "Think hard, your lines! What are you going to say? Come on, come on..." And as the applause died down, it came to me. And I read off what I had memorized to read off. It was a great, wonderful night, for me. I mean it really was, terrific. I took the statue to the

local pawnshop two days later... (Laughter) I'm just joking!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did you feel "blacklisted" in the 1970s because of the new types of films that were being made?

POITIER: Yeah. Well, that was—it wasn't a blacklist so much as I was out of favor, in a way. And my interpretation of that is there was some validity to their point of view, but more than the validity of their point of view was a human element, which was as follows.

I don't know how I would have reacted had James Earl Jones gotten all those jobs when there were 120 of us out there, all capable, all able to do the job. Most thinking they can do the job better, and indeed some could. And month after month, the two choice jobs that come along, James Earl gets them. Then two more come along in the same year, James Earl gets them. And then a second year, James Earl gets them. And the 120 or 119 others of us have not had even a smell. I think that does something—that would do something to me. I believe it did something to my compatriots. It was an unfortunate time for me, and for them. It would have been better—but life doesn't unfold that way—it would have been better if there was a more equitable distribution of the forty-two movies I've made. There wasn't. There were responses to them.

Also a part of that was the fact that I had no leverage. I had one option and that was to refuse to do films that I didn't want to do. I exercised that option often, but that notwithstanding, most of the parts I got were conceived by whites—mostly white men, written by whites—mostly white men, directed by whites—mostly white men, financed by whites—mostly white men. That was the fact of Hollywood. I sometimes wonder how I persevered through those times. It was difficult because my fellows were my friends. I had to vortex with them, daily, and I had to look in their eyes and say, "I'm going off to Hollywood, again. I'm going to California, again."

Now, the kinds of parts I played were parts that were designed to include the larger audience. That's the bottom line for all filmmaking. They want to get to the larger audience. The larger audience in America is white. There's no getting around that.

Subsequent to those films, we have had an introduction of others—actors like Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, and now Denzel Washington. Those young people came subsequent to me, which took the pressure off the need for the black community to find expression in a single person.

I made forty-two movies. I couldn't service the action fans in that audience who were black because most of my films were not [action films], most of my films were cerebral stuff. I wore a white shirt most of the time, and a suit, and I was a doctor, or a lawyer. The guy from the street who works in the factory and who drinks beer in the local bar and feels the pressure of a hostile community around him couldn't find much release in the films I made. There were times when he did and there were times when he didn't. So that was a part of that mix also. And I think, too, that a part of that mix was my need to make *Uptown Saturday Night* and the other pictures in conjunction with the need to broaden my base in an industry that I liked. How all that turned around, I don't know. But over a forty-year period of work, I think that was certainly one of the most painful periods for me. It ended with, or it began to end with the arrival of others in the game.

That arrival was characterized by the blaxploitation films. They were short-lived. They came and they went rather quickly because they made a very serious mistake. They created an outlet for frustration, in ways that were not very thoughtful. There was a creation of villains who were very one-dimensional, very white, and they got beat up on in all kinds of ways to give expression to this pent-up rage and disaffection of many years. Because again, believe it or not, these exploitation films were written by whites, they were produced by whites, they were directed by whites. So a mistake was made again. Rather than going for sounder values, as they should have done when they were doing the pictures that I made, they didn't. And again, the blaxploitation guys didn't go for sounder values when they were doing blaxploitation films.

But we survived. Evolution takes all kinds of courses. I've survived it. Now they say, they use such phrases as, "Well, he came through." Like I'm kind of elder statesman or something. I am not. I persevered, I survived. I did it with some effort on my part, an incalculable amount of luck; the cape of history came across my shoulder. I had nothing to do with it. I brought little to the game, but I was lucky I played it.

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TRANSCRIPT: A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH SIDNEY POITIER

PAGE 10