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AFI FEST Interview: JUST MERCY Director/Co-Writer Destin Daniel Cretton

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

JUST MERCY plays as a Special Screening at AFI FEST sponsored by Audi on Saturday, November 16 at the TCL Chinese Theatres in Hollywood.

Writer/director Destin Daniel Cretton is an indie darling with credits, including the award-winning drama SHORT TERM 12 and THE GLASS CASTLE â?? an adaptation of Jeannette Wallsâ?? 2005 bestselling memoir. This spring Marvel came calling, enlisting Cretton to helm SHANG-CHI, the first Asian-led superhero film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise.

And this fall, heâ??ll release his third film, JUST MERCY, a powerful, true story about acclaimed civil rights defense attorney, Bryan Stevenson, as he recounts his experiences and details the case of Walter McMillian, a condemned death row prisoner whom he fought to free. The film stars Jamie Foxx and Michael B. Jordan and follows the release of the documentary, TRUE JUSTICE: BRYAN STEVENSONâ??S FIGHT FOR EQUALITY, which had its world premiere at AFI DOCS in June.

We spoke with Cretton about collaborating with Bryan Stevenson, assembling an A-list cast for the film and the storyâ??s relevance in light of todayâ??s political climate.

AFI: What initially drew you to make JUST MERCY and to tell Bryan Stevenson and Walter McMillianâ??s story?

DDC: I read Bryanâ??s book, â??Just Mercy,â?• and it honestly floored me. I felt like my heart was torn to shreds and put back together. One would think reading a book about the unfairness of our criminal justice system would leave you feeling defeated and cynical about the state of our world. But Bryan believes that hopelessness is the enemy of justice and that hope allows you to work toward the things that you cannot see. As soon as I finished his book, I had no idea how, but I knew I wanted to find any way to help him tell this story.

AFI: How closely did you work with Bryan before and during filming?

DDC: Andrew Lanham and I worked very closely with Bryan throughout the entire screenwriting process. Before we put any words to the page, we visited Bryan in Montgomery to see the work he does first-hand, alongside his staff at the Equal Justice Initiative. Bryan was an extraordinary collaborator on this project, guiding us throughout to make sure we got it right, while allowing the space for the writing process to organically come together. He was also an invaluable source for all of our department heads during production to make sure the sets, costumes and props all reflected the work they were doing at the time.

AFI: How did Bryan react to seeing the final version of the film?

DDC: I didnâ??t realize how nervous I was until I left Bryan in a theater at the Warner Brothers lot to watch the film. It was the most stressful two hours of my life. When he came into our editing suite after seeing the movie, he smiled, gave me a hug and said thank you for taking care of his story and the people he cares so much about. I almost fainted out of pure relief.

AFI: What do you think makes this story so topical right now?

DDC: It was interesting to hear some of the hateful rhetoric coming from politicians or the media while we were shooting this movie. It was very clear that in many ways, we havenâ??t come very far since 1989. For every nine people executed in this country, one person has been found innocent and released from death row. Thatâ??s a pretty staggering rate of error that exists right now.



Director/Co-writer Destin Daniel Cretton

AFI: You have Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, Brie Larson and many other amazing actors and actresses in this film. What was it like collaborating with all of these talented people?

DDC: Honestly, it often feels like I have a front row seat to the best live performance in town. Itâ??s a dream to work with actors of this caliber, who are all telling this story because they believe in it with everything in them. It was a really special thing to witness.

AFI: You screened your short film SHORT TERM 12 at AFI FEST in 2009. How does it feel to be back at the festival with JUST MERCY as a Special Screening?

DDC: True storyâ?¦my short film, SHORT TERM 12, played at AFI FEST, where it was seen by a producer, Asher Goldstein, who wrote me an email saying how much he liked the short and asked about any feature ideas. Asher ended up producing the feature of SHORT TERM 12, and also produced JUST MERCY. So, if it wasnâ??t for AFI FEST, I might never have met Asher or done another movie for the rest of my life.

AFI: What would you like audience members at AFI FEST to take away from JUST MERCY?

DDC: In Bryanâ??s book, his grandmother tells him that you canâ??t understand the most important things from a distance. You have to get close. I hope this movie allows an audience to get a little closer to the people who are affected by a very real problem in this country. I also hope the audience feels closer to the very real hope and solution to that problem through the life and work of Bryan Stevenson.

AFI: You were a thesis mentor at the AFI Conservatory. What was that experience like for you?

DDC: I always find it so inspiring to be around film students, to be reminded of the pure joy of this medium. There really is no other experience quite like it.

Tickets to all films in the AFI FEST program lineup are available here.

JUST MERCY opens in a limited release on December 25. Watch the trailer below:

(Sourced from AFI.com)

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