

# SIGNATURE

## JOHN SINGLETON: IDENTITY IN THE FACE OF PREJUDICE



“THERE’S A SPECIFIC WAY IN WHICH I DO MY PICTURES AND IT’S DIFFERENT FROM THE NORM”

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER AND ACTOR JOHN SINGLETON IS AS REAL AS THEY GET—AND SO ARE HIS CHARACTERS.

BY KATE TREMILLS

JOHN SINGLETON CREATES HONEST PORTRAITS OF INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING TO FIND THEMSELVES IN A WORLD FILLED WITH RACISM, VIOLENCE AND HARSH JUDGMENTS. DESPITE THE CARS, THE GUNS AND THE SMOOTH TALK, SINGLETON’S FILMS ARE ALWAYS ABOUT THAT SEARCH FOR CHARACTER. AND WHETHER IT’S STRENGTH OF CHARACTER OR WEAKNESS OF CHARACTER, JUST OR UNJUST PREDICAMENTS, SINGLETON’S PLOTS AND PORTRAYALS ALL SPRING FROM THE SITUATIONS THAT FORGE THAT CHARACTER.

“I really just think that in every picture I do, the characters are the most important thing,” Singleton emphasizes. “You can have different plots but there are only so many plots in the world. The guy goes on an adventure; the guy gets the girl. You know what I mean? But there are so many different types of characters in the world. It’s always good to have the character’s journey dictate the story.”

When Singleton first exploded into the film world, he changed the face of movies forever. His first film, 1991’s *Boyz n the Hood*, established a new genre that took viewers into the real world of the inner city. At the time, when most movies were still set in the fairy-tale-like backdrops of the pie-in-the-sky Eighties, Singleton’s film was an intense portrayal of life and death in South Central L.A., inspired by the director’s own tumultuous experience.

“Most of the pictures that were made at the time of *Boyz n the Hood* were really fantasy,” he says. “Action; blow ‘em up, shoot ‘em up adventures. We brought a realistic core to what was going on with a certain segment of people within America. And I think people appreciated it. Also, I think that at the time, hip-hop and the whole L.A. gangster-rapper thing was going on.”

In *Boyz*, Tre, Ricky and Doughboy struggle to find their own way through the violent reality of South Central L.A. None of the answers come easily as their characters battle their own demons and the demons that surround them. The hardest choice remains whether to stay with the people you love despite the pain or, hoping to find a better life, to leave behind the place where you have always believed you belonged.

All of Singleton’s early work which he



Singleton recreated a ghastly 1923 racist lynching for *Rosewood* (1997)

wrote and directed, such as *Boyz n the Hood*, *Poetic Justice*, *Higher Learning* and *Baby Boy*, all dealt with such very personal stories told from a myriad of perspectives. His purely directorial efforts tend to have a broader scope—from the historical *Rosewood* to *Shaft* and *2 Fast 2 Furious*—while still maintaining the steady beat of characters taking a stand and claiming identity in the face of racism.

*Higher Learning* explores many of the same themes of racism, prejudice and responsibility as *Boyz*. But this time, the struggles take place in the small community of fictional Columbus University. The characters run the gamut of age, race, sexual orientation and gender, with all of the tensions and misunderstandings that come from people desperate to make a stand but not always willing to take responsibility for their actions.

Singleton’s directorial debut blew open the door for filmmakers of color. Studios immediately recognized the power he had tapped. Suddenly, African Americans were

not only a viable audience but bankable talent. Singleton is proud of the impact he’s made. “I feel that my films have opened up a whole new era in filmmaking where the characters are multi-ethnic. People deal with each other in a different way, in a more contemporary way.”

The cultural impact of his work was reflected in the box office and in the industry. At 24, he was the youngest individual and the first African American to be nominated for the Best Director Academy Award. “I think between the time I started and now,” Singleton reflects, “there is more of a diversification of people directing pictures. I’m not just saying Black men, but a lot of different types of people that are working. It’s great.”

Singleton made *Boyz* right after graduating from the University of Southern California, where he majored in Film Writing. His stylistic influences range from comic books to Westerns to classic films, but he credits the great filmmakers of the early 20th Century as his mentors. “Most of the



This man's got a lesson plan for all you students of film, in *Higher Learning* (1995)

filmmakers that I'm really inspired by are not around," explains the writer-director. "People like John Ford, Orson Welles. I love looking at older pictures. It lets me know how to tell a story in a way that's going to endure."

## "BOYZ N THE HOOD" ESTABLISHED A NEW GENRE THAT TOOK VIEWERS INTO THE REAL WORLD OF THE INNER CITY

Singleton paid close attention to all those mentors. Then he created his own new style of picture, one which reflects a spectrum of characters and uses talent from beyond the film world. Specifically, Singleton is known for featuring hip-hop musicians as key players. He reinforces powerful stories with strong performers who have lived much of the emotion they are portraying, performers that add more credibility than mere movie stars could ever achieve.

The fresh faces reinforce the realism for which he strives. By resisting stars, he makes the stories more approachable,

more real. The audience believes his stories on a deeper level. And when the core of your stories is character, you have to stand behind those people who can bring that character to the picture even when it bucks the system.

"I had to go to bat for everybody that I've put in my pictures," Singleton explains. "Whenever you do one with a studio, they always want to use established talent. As you've noticed in most of my movies, I haven't had established talent."

Using unknown talent may be one of the biggest risks he's taken in his career. Pitching a film with unproven actors is the Hollywood equivalent to taking on Goliath. The director's name and credits don't matter. Studios just cannot imagine a film succeeding without "bankable" actors. "Everything I've done I've had to fight for," he says matter-of-factly. "Everything I want to do in the way that I want to do it. There's a specific way in which I do my pictures. And it's different from the norm. That's what makes them work."

Singleton returned to South Central L.A. in his 2001 film *Baby Boy*. While many dubbed this a *Boyz* sequel, the location and the theme of taking responsibility are the only commonalities. The central character, Jody, is less sympathetic than many of Singleton's other characters, but he still strains for some sort of identity and redemption.

With characters like Jody, Singleton resists making the answers easy for his audience. He pushes them to think, to question, to move beyond stereotypes. Why does each person make the choices that they do? What are the factors? How do we judge them?

Singleton's style is defined less by his shots and more by the stories he tells and how he puts together the film. Explains Singleton: "I set up a shot depending on what is happening thematically with the characters."

His latest directorial effort is no exception. *Four Brothers* is about four foster kids, years after they have grown up, who go to their mother's funeral and find out that her death wasn't an accident but that she was actually hunted down and murdered. "They go on a journey to find out who killed her and why," reveals Singleton. "The interesting thing about it is that these are four dysfunctional men."

Though admittedly Singleton tells genuine stories mostly about the choices men make in the face of racism and adversity, from *Shaft* to *Baby Boy* he touches audiences with the reality of being human. Singleton offers us an opportunity to learn from the tough choices placed in front of his characters. Those choices are never simple, but facing adversity is what shapes strong individuals and, for Singleton, an impressive resume of films. - MPM

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