

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

RICHARD ROUNDTREE INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Richard Roundtree

Actor

“John Shaft”

Interviewed by John Maggio

Total Running Time: 59 minutes and 42 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Roundtree, take one.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Richard Roundtree

Actor

“John Shaft”

Early life

01:00:13:20

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

I was reading something a day or two ago about Barney's. I used to be a clothing salesman at Barney's, and I used to wait on actors and models and what have you and Tom Ford, yeah, he was with Ford Modeling Agency. And he would periodically come in and he'd say, "You ought to be a model." And

being the mercenary that I was at that point, I said, “How much does it pay?” “40 dollars an hour.” “What?” So I went out and I got a portfolio, put it together, and I think it was Black be—not Black beauty, Grace DelMarco Modeling Agency on 42nd Street. And I got with them. What Tom failed to tell me that 40 dollars an hour wasn’t a 40-hour week. I started doing Sears, Montgomery Ward Catalogue, stuff like that. That was the basic—that was the, what’s the word, the foundation if you will. Then I started getting liquor ads, but I was still working at Barney’s 17th Street. I found out that Ebony Magazine was doing a—hiring people for the Ebony fashion show. And I auditioned, and I got the job and went to Chicago. I lied. They said, you know, “Have you done runway modeling?” “Oh, of course.” Go to Chicago and for the wardrobe and what not. This was—that’s back when they were doing 79 cities in 90 days. On a bus.

01:02:54:01

That was singularly the largest most fun experience in my early career. I didn’t know what runway was about. And we had a—kind of a dress rehearsal in Gary, Indiana. And I remember watching the girls go out and did a halfway down and then turn around and went to the end of the ramp, turn around. I can do that. But I can’t do it the way they do it. And to this day I don’t know what I did but when I went out, the place went crazy. And for years after, I can remember going around the country doing promos or whatever and people would say, “I know you did *Shaft*, but I remember you from the Ebony Fashion Fair.” And I can’t tell you what I did when I went out,

but I can tell you this, (Clapping) it's very addicting. That was magical. I said, "Oh, I love that." And I remember what that's about, being on the athletic field. How can I extend that? So by the time we—at the end of the show we wound up here, in Hollywood, and Bill Cosby threw a party for the Ebony Fashion Fair models. And during the course of the evening, we got—we started talking. And he says, "So what are you gonna do now?" "I'm gonna be an actor."

01:04:58:05

And he said, "Do yourself a favor. Go back to New York and learn your craft." And he was on *I Spy* then. Come on. He must know what he's talking about. And I did. I went back to New York and I knew someone who got me into the Negro Ensemble Company. Singularly in New York the most prestigious Black company in New York at that time. And Michael Schultz was my first teacher. And watching Denise Nickels listening to Robert Hooks and all of these people who were incredible artists, I was in the right place at the right time and just seeing what it took to learn and be an actor. Unfortunately I'm very impatient. I didn't—I stayed at NEC close to two years. I got into one of the company plays. It was a three-hour play and I had one word. Her name escapes me at this moment; she was on *Good Times*. And I'm sitting on stage and I'm—(making fluttering noises) and my line came up and she went—(nudging motion)—yeah! That was my line. She teased me every time I saw her. Esther Rolle, yes, yes. Every time I saw her, she went (nudging motion).

Working with Gordon Parks

01:07:40:05

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

Gordon was old school gentleman. Gordon introduced me to Morty Sills, his tailor. And to this day, I'm very protective of—of what Gordon's tastes were for the character. And in large part, that's still with me. There is an inner elegance. Morty Sills—he says, "I'm gonna send you to my tailor. He will—he will put it all together for you." And he did. And I remember I was going to the Academy Awards when Isaac won the Academy Award. And I just said, "Morty, I want something a little different, the tuxedo. Green velvet." I'll never forget this look he had on. "Well, if that's what you want, we can do that. But it will be subtle." Back to that original thought. Gordon's elegance I always wanted to mirror. I get a little flashy at times, but never over the top. To the—to the degree when certain productions have tried to emulate the *Shaft* character, and I look at the way they—come on. That wasn't what Gordon was about.

01:10:38:06

He never told me this. And it was only years after that I looked back on it in retrospect. It was Gordon Parks. Even the way he explained to me what he wanted to see. When I was coming out—he said, "Look, you gonna be coming out of the subway. We got a camera up there and a camera up there and we're

gonna follow you, and I want you to walk across 42nd Street and I want you to own it.” “Ok.” The trust level hearing what he said, I totally got it. To the point, it wasn’t scripted to the cab. I did all of that. Much better than I could have ever imagined. It’s an incredible legacy to have been directed by this man.

Shaft: Casting

01:12:21:00

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

David and I went to rival high schools. David went to White Plains high school and I went to New Rochelle high school. And my naiveté, I thought that was gonna be my end because I knew his son. And his reply to that. And it’s interesting that—‘cause David has a totally different slant on that story than I do. The interview when I finally got to meet Gordon went through the casting director leaving my picture and resume and a callback to actually meeting the actual casting director. Then a call back to meet Mr. Parks. “Oh, I got this.” ‘Cause I knew his son. And I’m sitting in the office with him, and there’s a desk there and Gordon is sitting here and he’s telling me about the character and he says, “We’re kind of looking for someone like, like this,” and he points to a tear sheet of an ad I’d done. “That’s me.” And he looks, looks at me. “Mhmm.” The next time, I get a call back to do a screen test. Now I’ve done maybe two, three plays, and I was doing the Great White Hope in Philadelphia, communicating—communicating—commuting back and forth. And, screen test? What is that? Come in at the end of the screen test, what’s

his name? The actor who was star of *No Place to Be Somebody*, which I had just seen. Nathan George. Wow. He was brilliant. He goes in and does the screen test before me. He comes out, oh, Nathan George? Well this is gonna be a good experience, but this is not gonna happen.

01:16:01:00

I see Nathan George come out and I'm going in, I said, "It's gonna be a good experience, but this is not gonna happen." During the screen test, I interpreted the character as a smoker, too cool for school. So I'm doing the thing and I'm doing the—what I learned later was the master—cut. Script supervisor comes over and says, "Ok, you inhaled here and you had the cigarette." "Why are you telling me that?" "That's the master, you've got to do everything again on the close up, matching." "What?" Needless to say, I did not smoke very much on film after that. But it was a great learning experience. This all come up again. A couple days later I get a call on my service to call Mr. Parks. There was a hangout, 63rd and 3rd across the street from Bloomingdales. Yellowfingers! The models and actors used to hang there. There's a phone booth on the corner. Wow. I called my service and there's a message. "Call Mr. Parks." I got to call him and he's gonna say, "Kid, you did a good job, but we hired someone else." I call him. "Yes, Mr. Parks, this is Richard Roundtree calling." "Yes, yes. Well, it looks like you got the part."

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When I picked myself up off the floor, he says, "But you can't say anything about it because holiday season and it'll get lost. We're not gonna announce it

until after New Years.” I said, “Can I tell my parents?” He says, “Well, yes you can tell your parents, but please, keep it under your hat. And we’re gonna have a big announcement after New Years.” Now, I had driven a cab in Manhattan dropping people off at Sardis and a restaurant on 3rd Avenue. And I said, “One day, one day, one day.” Limo, we pull up in front of Sardis, and I go in. The press is there and they announce Richard Roundtree’s gonna be a star of this movie, *Shaft* (1971). It was the start of an incredible dream. It’s hard to explain; Gordon, his genius was in letting you think you were doing your thing. He was a genius. One day, we were on a set and we had like an eight-something call and we’re all there. And one of the actors had not shown up. And he’s sitting in his directorial chair, and everyone around is (checking watch). About 10:30, the actor finally shows up, and he’s coming in and starting to apologize and Gordon went (puts his hand up), “Let’s go to work.” And everyone went, “Damn.” But that’s who he was.

***Shaft*: Gordon Parks as a film director**

01:21:35:20

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

When he would describe what he wanted, I would watch his physicality and it was—case and point. Just prior to the guy going out the window in my office, he sat behind the desk and physically got up and started talking to Bumpy. I said, “Oh, I see where you’re going.” And there were a couple of takes, we finally got it. But there was—I visualize an animal. There was a—there was a

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physicality that he wanted, and I got it, I got it. With exception of the mic in my sweater, most people don't notice that, but there was a mic in my sweater, my turtleneck sweater, I'll never forget that. It was Gordon Parks. And I only say that looking back at it in retrospect, a renaissance man. And for the time that *Shaft* came out, he was a renaissance man. His mentality; you were either right or wrong. There was no grey, there was no grey. And that was pretty much where Gordon came from. When I listened to the lyrics of Don't Misunderstand, that is totally who that character is. And those lyrics come from Gordon Parks.

01:24:26:03

Gordon's choice of weapons, he played by his rules. As did Shaft. If there ever was a word—an obstacle, Gordon knew how to maneuver around it. He didn't see obstacles. Nor did Shaft. I'm a man who—who got a camera and started taking photographs, writing symphonies and taking relatively simple idea, *The Learning Tree*, and putting together his life experience simply and magically on-screen to—to *Lead Belly, Lead Belly*, there's so much to that man. So, I'm incredibly blessed to have that man put me on the map. As I said earlier, I—there was a period I got a little full of myself because of how successful the first film was and compared to my salary. And I had a twelve picture deal with MGM in this, so when they're revving up to do the second one, I was spouting over the mouth about what I was being paid and I should be compensated, yada yada yada yada. I got a phone call from Gordon saying, "Yeah we need to talk." So I go to his place and, "I'm gonna fix you something

to eat.” He’s a great cook. And he’s in the kitchen and, “Pour yourself a drink.” And I did. He comes out and said, “You know, listen, I’ve been hearing stories about you spouting off about what you’re being paid, and let me tell you something. Let me handle that, but you got to understand you can’t spout off like that until you get that fuck you money.” “Oh, got it.” And he renegotiated my contract, and again, grateful to Gordon Parks.

01:28:29:01

That was the beauty of that—when that actor showed up late, that was the beauty of the human being in him. Not to—‘cause I’ve been around directors who showed off in front of cast and crew. He didn’t need that. When—when Boundini started apologizing, and, he just put his hand up. “Let’s go to work.” And everyone on that set got it. That’s who Gordon was. But intuitively, I know that if need be, just in case you’re free some time and need some time with me some time, I will be around. That’s the lyric from Don’t Misunderstand. That’s Gordon Parks. His name escapes me but he comes in, I’m sitting there having cappuccino—espresso, and the hues, color wise, in the no name bar, it’s a Gauguin painting. I wasn’t aware of it at the time, but looking back on it after the fact, wow, he’s painting pictures and making movies at the same time. His eye, woof, that scene stands out in my mind’s eye. Yeah, that was his genius. My oldest children, Kelly and Nicole, played the daughters—was that the second or the first? In the second movie. And the way he treated them was so special. These are kids, first of all, they’d never been on a movie set, and I don’t know what the conversation was, but the fact

that I had the—they must have been around seven or eight around in there somewhere, and he made them feel so special, which made me feel over the moon. There again. When you were in his presence, you were around someone very special.

Shaft: Premiere

01:32:04:20

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

I got to share this with you. Opening night, *Shaft* on—biggest night of my life. My mom, my grandmother, my sister; the klieg lights and we go into the theatre and the lights dim and the lion roars and the (makes symbol noises). The first fight scene, then the guy goes out the window, my grandmother stands up, “Don’t you be hitting my grandson!” The place fell out. She—I loved her to pieces, I did. Great lady, great lady. And when I was doing *Shaft in Africa*, the third film, my mom got in touch with me saying that she’s in the hospital. So I came home and went—she was in New Rochelle Hospital. I came in and I said, “Miss Lucy, what are you doing in the hospital?” And she says, “Son, I just got tired.” Obviously I had to go back to work, and two days later I got the call. My mom said, “You know, she was just waiting for you to come.” And those—she wasn’t sick, she just—she just got tired. When I came out here to do looping, I didn’t see that scene. I didn’t see that scene. I saw a couple of other pieces. I had to do some looping on—with Gwyn. And at the no name bar there was a couple of lines that had to be looped. But that

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screening at the premier was the first time I had seen the whole film. Oh wow, that was a magical night. Magical.

The Johnny Carson Show

01:34:58:12

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

He was so engaged while the red light was on, but as soon as that light went off—it was weird. That’s—whoa. And when you go down to—not Merv Griffin, do you remember the guy that was in Philadelphia?

JOHN MAGGIO:

Mike Dougals?

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

Mike Douglas! So engaging, and so there. Oh, wow. Ah, I love show business.

Friendship

01:35:59:05

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

We played tennis at the Beverly Hills Hotel. I show up—I mean, this is mid-summer. I show up and I go out to the course, and Gordon comes out in white flannel long pants. And a white t-shirt—I mean short sleeve shirt. “Let’s play.” Whips my proverbial ass. I’m so mesmerized that this man is too cool. I’ll never forget that image. Who wears white flannel long pants on a tennis court? He was universal. I mean, he—he had a fisheye lens as opposed to something narrow. A parallel: Jim Brown, the running back. His peripheral vision—you could not putt, you had to stand so far back that he couldn’t pick you up. Gordon’s visual was the same way. His universality, if—that was how he viewed the world. He could talk to Malcolm X; he could talk to John Kennedy, Mahalia Jackson, Michael Jackson. I mean, universal. He didn’t have boundaries. When you—when you look at some of his photography, he married photography with paintings, and it’s all seamless. I like to think of myself as an amateur photographer, until I look at his stuff.

Career after *Shaft*

01:39:39:05

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

I was still amazed that—the way it touched people; the excitement of older, middle aged, younger people, were talking about this character. It was a very heady period in my life. Going from the Ebony fashion fair, first time in the Deep South, New Orleans, and seeing a sign on a door, no Negroes and no dogs, to the explosion of this man who happens to be Black who is infused

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with his own way that he wants to live. And the adulation, that's some pretty heavy stuff. When I think about the people that I've had the opportunity to know and be around and think about the history of this industry, I'm an incredibly fortunate human being. That's what I was trying to say.

Experiences with racism

01:41:57:12

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

Growing up in New Rochelle, New York, it's—you're in a tight bubble. It's—my parents are from an age when you swept things under the carpet, that didn't exist. As I said, my grandparents lived in Thomasville, Georgia, — on my dad's side — and every other summer we'd either go to Thomasville or Reedsville, North Carolina. Every other summer we'd go to Reedsville or Thomasville, and on my mother's side of the family, an uncle had a tobacco farm. And on my dad's side of the family, my grandfather, who I'm named after, it's only 20 miles from Tallahassee. So my dad was proud of the fact we're gonna take the family to Tallahassee, Florida; my cousin, my brother, my sister, my mother and dad. And we stop in this little grocery store on the way — today would be 7-11 type thing — and my dad goes in the store and we're in the car and my cousin Terry sees this kid on a bicycle, White kid on a bicycle. And Terry gets out of the car and asks him can he have a ride on his bike. And the kid looks at my cousin—we're in the car, we didn't think anything of it — the kid looks at my cousin like he's crazy. And Terry says, "I

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just wanna ride on your bike.” And Terry being Terry grabs the bike and starts to get on it, and my dad runs out of the store, grabs Terry up, puts him in the car, and we hightail it out of the car. And when my dad got excited—all his words would come together. We get back into Thomasville, and my dad says, “You—you just don’t know.” We had no idea. In New Rochelle, where we lived, when I was a pre-teen, we lived on Plane Avenue, which was a totally mixed area. We went to Barnard elementary school. We didn’t know any of that. Johnny Rule and his brother Bobby, they had the first television. On Saturday morning, we would go across the street to their house and all the kids, *The Lone Ranger*, all of that stuff. We didn’t know any of that stuff, so going to the South, and then experiencing it with the Ebony fashion fair, and then I went to SIU. And we played Missouri Minds, and driving there, the bus stopped for food and the Black kids on the team couldn’t get off the bus. And during the game, I never heard the N-word so much in my entire life. What? What was the question? So my exposure to what Sidney and Harry had dealt with was alien to me. And Martin Luther King spoke at our church. I didn’t know. Union Baptist Church he spoke. The only thing I knew about him was this—this was a dynamic individual. There was something about him that was just huge, but that was the extent of it. When I look at my career, there is an innate universality about it that—wow, wow. I—I would like to think that I have some of Gordon’s outlook on life. I wish I had his artistry, but his general perception of mankind, if you will, I’d like to think I have some of that. When I think of characters I’ve played, for the most part they have that universality about them. Narrow-mindedness is alien to me.

Shaft: Style

01:49:29:00

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

They did not—they being MGM—did not want the character to have a mustache. “Yeah, he’s gonna have a mustache.” “Who has a mustache like that?” I can remember doing a film—I won’t name the name—but I had a mustache before he ever did, and one of his underlings came to my trailer and said, “Mr.”—Burt Reynolds—“Mr. Reynolds wants you to shave your mustache.” “Really?” And I had a mustache long before he did in film. And the character I played had processed hair. *City Heat*. I did have a thin mustache. I didn’t have a full Gordon Parks type mustache, but you know, I said, “I’m not shaving.” (Inaudible) Style wise, it’s all attributable to Gordon Parks. It’s a problem because I’ve done everything—case and point: I did a role on—what was the name of the show? I was the first interracial gay marriage on television. What’s the name of that show? I wanted to do anything I could possibly do to get away from the character. Another one, *Man Friday* was the Robinson Crusoe story through Friday’s eyes with Peter O’Toole. I loved Peter O’Toole. I tried to distance myself from that pigeonhole. Not that I didn’t love it to pieces, and I was an actor. That and two dollars. My dad visited me in ‘70—late 70’s, and I’m—we’re sitting out on my porch and I went, “Dad, you know, 20—” I didn’t use that term back then but, “24/7, Shaft, Shaft, Shaft, Shaft.” He says, “Son, let me tell you something. A lot of people leave this earth

not being known for everything. Shut up.” “Got it, dad.” There are days when someone will come up and say, “Shaft!” “No, Richard.” “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” “I appreciate where you’re coming from.” They’re not coming from a mean place or an angry place or whatever. It’s an acknowledgment, but there are moments, and I think back on my dad. Oh man, oof. “Hey, thank you. Thank you.”

Blaxploitation films

01:54:24:21

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

You know what, oh I wish I had thought of that, but Gordon again had a blurb about that. I’ve always been offended by it because of who he is, and he had the most perfect paragraph about how he felt about that—that term. I wish I could have brought that here today. There is nothing exploitive about what I’ve done in my life, including Shaft. I’m paraphrasing, but the gist of it was, and what I’ve always said, that is a very bad word to use in any sentence about Gordon Parks. I get very, very angry when those terms are put together. You look up class in the dictionary: Gordon Parks. Exploitation? Please.

Hollywood

01:56:18:17

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

I got—I have a sense—I don't know. My sense of who—Gordon would do what he needed to do and move on. His constant motion, he didn't let any grass grow. I wanted to do *Lead Belly*. "No." You know, he always knew what he was about. And I—I don't think that the town soured on him, I think he just moved on.

Gordon Parks' relationship with women

01:57:17:00

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

I've already said the innate elegance of the man, sophistication. David, his youngest son, would not bring his girlfriends around his dad. I would watch how he would talk to women. I can remember, I know it was London and Amsterdam and being at different functions, and they would find out who I was and, "Oh, oh, please, please tell Gordon I said hello." He was truly international.

Gordon Parks' influence

01:58:59:12

RICHARD ROUNDTREE:

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The—the only person that I know of that has that persona is Sidney P. He has that ability to make you feel very special. That's the only person I can think of that could come close to Gordon.

END TC: 01:59:42:07