

Hollywood Fairy Tales

Denzel Washington's directorial debut is a Tinseltown dream come true for its first time screenwriter, Antwone Fisher, and big screen newcomers Derek Luke and Joy Bryant

by Laurel DiGangi

Long before *Antwone Fisher* the film, long before Antwone Fisher the screenwriter, there was Antwone Fisher the security guard at Sony Pictures with a story he needed to tell. Lacking formal training, he enrolled in a free screenwriting class at the Bethel A.M.E. church in South Central Los Angeles, where he met instructor and professional scribe Chris Smith. After reading Fisher's work, Smith introduced him to producer Todd Black (*A Knight's Tale*), setting in motion a Hollywood-style rags-to-riches saga.

"An hour into the meeting, I was laughing and crying, I was so moved by [Fisher]," says Black, who is promoting the film at a Four Seasons press junket along with director Denzel Washington and actors Derek Luke and Joy Bryant. Fisher had told Black that he wanted to write a movie based on his life. But 20th Century Fox, who loved the story, didn't want a novice tackling the script.

So Black used his own cash and set Fisher up with office space, enabling him to quit his job at Sony. "He knows character and dialogue the way no writer does," says Black. But Fisher didn't know structure or format, and Black had to lead him through the long, hard process of screenwriting. The effort paid off a year later, when Fisher got together his first draft and presented it to Fox. Says Black, "The president of Fox called and said, 'You were right; he can write.'"

Ironically, *Antwone Fisher* is also a story of a mentoring relationship between two men. Fisher (Derek Luke) is a young naval recruit in constant trouble for his explosive temper. He is ordered to see a naval psychiatrist (Denzel Washington), who eventually becomes his mentor, helping him explore and come to terms with the traumatic childhood abuse he suffered at the hands of his foster family.

Although a generation younger, Derek Luke's success story in many ways parallels Fisher's. Like Fisher, Luke was working a low-level job at Sony when he was "discovered." His prior acting experience had been limited to appearances on the television series *Moesha* and *The King of Queens*. Luke auditioned after he convinced a friend of a friend to allow him to read for the part.

Recalls Black, "We had the auditions in my office, and he came in the very first day and after he left Denzel and I both said, 'He's our

Antwone.' Then I showed Antwone the tape, and Antwone was like 'Oh my God.' He was completely taken back by how he embodied him like no other actor."

In addition, both Fisher and Luke grew up feeling like outsiders. Fisher's background caused him to seek refuge in the Navy. And although Luke had a supportive mother, his dream of acting didn't quite jive with the mindset of his tough, Jersey City neighborhood, where drug



Washington, right, on set with his charges Luke and Bryant

sales were rampant.

When asked how he made the break from Jersey City, Luke says, "I ran." He left old friends behind and didn't tell them where he was going, for fear they'd try to talk him out of it. "The dream was calling me," says Luke, "and my heart responded."

For actor and fashion model Joy Bryant, her role as Fisher's girlfriend Cheryl is her biggest feature role to date. "My family is tripping," says Bryant. And her female friends were vicariously thrilled that she got to work with Washington. Says Bryant, "There was plenty of 'Kiss him on the cheek for me, girlfriend.'"

But the biggest plus of working with Washington was his directorial finesse. "Denzel, as a director, was incredible," says Bryant. "I finally understand now what people mean when they say [someone's] 'an actor's director.' I felt like I was in one big acting class."

In a film about mentoring, Denzel was like a guru to the young actors. "Denzel showed us how to bring our characters to life," says Bryant. "He gave us examples from his career and what it was like for him, and it made it so much easier."

Says Washington, "I had [Bryant and Luke] write extensive journals about their characters...

where they grew up, how they ate, where they went to school and all of that. They came in with a lot of confidence and I just tried to be gentle and supportive and share with them all the tricks I learned as an actor."

When working with actors, Washington takes a cue from admittedly one of his favorite directors, Jonathan Demme, whom he worked with in 1993 on *Philadelphia*. "Jonathan created an environment where you felt like you could fly or fail, and I told [Luke] that it was all right [if a performance wasn't perfect]. We've got more film. It doesn't have to be precise, but make it honest."

Overall Luke felt very relaxed working with Washington. "I thought I should be intimidated. I didn't know why I felt so comfortable," says Luke. But one scene threatened to destroy his comfort level — when Luke, as Antwone, explodes in rage at Washington, as his psychiatrist. Luke had a hard time expressing anger at someone of Washington's stature, someone he genuinely liked. "I had to find a way to get Derek to be angry," says Washington. "I used to call it 'going back to the bricks'

because he's from Newark. I kept telling him, 'You're not rough enough.'"

Luke finally broke through his inhibitions when Washington told him to go for it. "I saw *Training Day* before, so I saw the level he was trying to direct me to," says Luke. Washington says he undertook the task of directing "to collaborate with other talent, to experience the whole picture, the whole pie." Yet as the film's first day of shooting loomed nearer, he began to panic. "Directing was the most frightening thing I've ever done in my life. I was so scared. But once I got going, it was fine."

Fisher's script originally came to Washington's attention in 1996. In addition to his enthusiasm for the script and its subject, he felt that *Antwone Fisher* was aptly suited to his directorial weaknesses and strengths. "I've done a few movies about real people," says Washington. "I think I know something about how to make a film like that." He also thought, since most scenes involved only two characters, that covering them would not be too technically challenging. Washington adds, "And it was a performance piece. I



The real Antwone movie doppelgänger

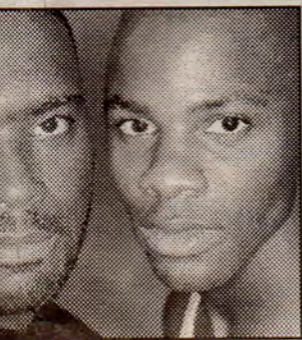
figure that's my strength. I think I know a little about acting."

In addition to sharing his expertise, Washington made sure that Luke and Bryant understood firsthand what their characters lived through in the Navy. "We had a whole boot camp set up for them," says Washington. "They got to go out on the ships, eat the ship food. They also had to learn to march, fold their uniforms... and I know as an actor those things add up to character."

Quite unexpectedly, they also learned of the tragic events of Sept. 11 while aboard a naval vessel preparing for their roles. Says Black, "Denzel called me at 6:40 in the morning [from aboard the naval vessel] and said, 'Turn on your TV.' And I said, 'What the hell are you waking me up for at 6:40?' And he said, 'Turn on your TV and come and get us. We got to get out of here.'" Later Black feared that 9-11 might cause the Navy to withdraw their support from the project. But that didn't happen. "We had to tighten everything security-wise and really be very firm about what we were shooting and

where," says Black. "But [the Navy] was as cooperative as anybody I've ever worked with, ever. Other than some cuss words, they didn't make me change anything."

Although the majority of *Antwone Fisher's* cast, its director and its screenwriter are African-American,



Antwone Fisher, left, and his biographer, Derek Luke

the film's subject matter—child abuse and the search for acceptance, identity and closure—transcend racial issues.

In one scene early on, Dr. Davenport, the psychiatrist who treats Fisher, hands him a book that purports to explain child abuse in the African-American community as a legacy handed down from white slave masters. Its thesis is that because the slaves were beaten, some beat their children and carry on a tradition of abuse into future generations. Later, the Fisher character becomes enraged at Davenport, suggesting that the book is a quick fix, a means by which Davenport can guiltlessly turn his back on Fisher and end his treatment.

Washington intends the film to be embraced by a mainstream audience, and notes that the torment the young Fisher endures has little to do with his race. "Abuse is color blind," says Washington. "This isn't happening because [Fisher] is black."

Luke agrees, and hopes that the film inspires others to take risks and pursue their dreams in much the same way that Fisher unburdens his battered psyche, finally seeking out the biological family he's never met. Luke envisions this film helping people, like himself, to get out of a metaphorical "hood." He further explains, "That 'hood' could be suburbia or the ghetto. It's about bringing people out of fear. A slave mentality exists in the white community, too. It represents the shackles in everybody's mind who's living in fear." E