

Forest Whitaker shines in biopic about butler who served eight presidents

Written by Kam Williams

Lee Daniels' *The Butler*

DVD Review

Eugene Allen (1919-2010) served eight presidents over the course of an enduring career in the White House during which he rose from the position of Pantry Man to Head Butler by the time he retired in 1986. In that capacity, the African-American son of a sharecropper felt privileged to be an eyewitness to history, since his tenure coincided with the implementation of most of the landmark pieces of legislation dismantling the Jim Crow system of racial segregation.

Directed by two-time Oscar-nominee Lee Daniels, "The Butler" is a father-son biopic relating events in Allen's life as they unfolded against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement. This fictionalized account features Academy Award-winner Forest Whitaker in the title role as Cecil Gaines, and his A-list supporting cast includes fellow Oscar-winners Cuba Gooding, Jr., Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave, Robin Williams and Melissa Leo, as well as nominees Terrence Howard and Oprah Winfrey.

The point of departure is a plantation in the Deep South, where Cecil witnesses his father's (David Banner) murder on the cotton field for protesting his mother's (Mariah Carey) rape at the hand of an overseer. Because the perpetrator was never brought to justice, the youngster gets the message at an early age that "Any white man could kill us at any time and not be punished for it."

Eager to avoid the same fate as his dad, he skips town as a teenager, settling in Washington, DC where he lands steady work as a bartender in a hotel catering to an upscale clientele. There he also meets Gloria (Winfrey), the maid he would one day marry and start a family with.

Cecil's sterling reputation as a polite and deferential black man eventually reaches the White House, where he takes a position on the express understanding that "You hear nothing. You see nothing. You only serve." Although he manages to maintain an inscrutably apolitical façade on the job, the same can't be said for the home front, where current events are freely debated.

There, Cecil finds himself increasingly at odds with his elder son, Louis (David Oyelowo), a civil rights activist inclined to participate in voter registration marches, sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and freedom bus rides. The simmering tension between the two builds over the years to the boiling point when Louis derisively refers to his as father an Uncle Tom.

At that juncture, Cecil's protective spouse intervenes to slap her son before uttering the memorable line: "Everything you have, and everything you are, is because of that butler." Kudos to Forest Whitaker for another nonpareil performance as a humble provider understandably reluctant to rock the boat. Ditto Lee Daniels for crafting a gut-wrenching tour de force chronicling critical moments in the African-American fight for equality.

Forest Whitaker shines in biopic about butler who served eight presidents

Written by Kam Williams



<http://www.amp.com/entertainment/ASIN/B00EY405G0/Chris-Burgess-The-Original-Size-ab>