Anti-Star

No wonder he's not a celebrity like his old A.C.T. buddy Denzel Washington: the superlative actor DELROY LINDO lives far from Hollywood, rebels against stock characters, and isn't afraid to say that race still underlies everything.

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF KATZ

When you think about it, all the Hollywood actors living in the Bay Area have Academy Award–worthy talents. Sean Penn and Robin Williams have already won Oscars, and if Robin Wright Penn took on larger roles in less quirky films, she would certainly be a contender. So would, given a worthy part, the underappreciated Danny Glover. Delroy Lindo is the least known of this group, although—in his ability to vanish into a role—arguably the best actor.

But having worked onstage until he was almost 40 and then moving with his wife, Nashormeh, to the East Bay 11 years ago, just as he was getting lots of calls for film and television work, he never ingratiated himself with Hollywood in the way an aspiring movie star should. When they don't see him around town, casting directors can't seem to remember that he's played more than brutal criminals and unsmiling cops. Far from being the coarse thug a lazy director might recall, Lindo is intelligent and intense. With his craggy, lived-in face, he's not Hollywood handsome, and he has a quiet forcefulness that you might not find appealing if you like your actors pliable. Passionate when critiquing the state of the world or of acting, he's not the most easygoing guy in the world. And, of course, he's not white.

Still, the biggest obstacle between Lindo, now 54, and the stardom of, say, fellow A.C.T. acting student Denzel Washington may be the nature of his ambition. He is an actor in an era of celebrity, when the top box-office stars usually play versions of a well-protected, popular image. Lindo considers it a part of his craft to individualize each role, even when a producer or director doesn't particularly want him to. He worked hard to ensure that his FBI agent in *Kidnapped*—a well-reviewed serialized drama made for NBC last season that, unfortunately, was cancelled—was different from the FBI agent who tried to find Mel Gibson's child in *Ransom*. West Indian Archie, the crime lord he portrayed in *Malcolm X*, is nothing like Rodney Little, the drug pusher he played in *Clockers*, who bears no resemblance whatsoever to Bo, the thug who wants to make movies in *Get Shorty*. Certainly his incestuous migrant worker in *The Cider House Rules* is utterly different from his Caribbean immigrant, cricket-loving family man in the British import *Wondrous Oblivion*, which just came out on DVD.

By stubbornly making the choice to submerge into the role rather than subsume the role into a persona, Lindo has avoided the fate—not to mention the multimillion dollar fees and international fame—of someone like Wesley Snipes. Then again, we'll probably see him in one film or another for the rest of his life, because he's been so good in so many different ways for so long. Perhaps, you can't help feeling, he's just one more attention-getting role away from the leading parts his talent warrants.

Lindo says his goal was always to be an actor first, and surely that urge to delve into a character's humanity was enhanced by his work onstage in the 1980s, when he took on some of the richest, most nuanced roles ever written for a black actor. Lindo made his Broadway debut in 1982 in Athol Fugard's still penetrating *"Master Harold"…and the Boys*, as one of the two waiters unexpectedly subjected to the racist invective of the white teenager they've known all his life. Six years later, he came close to winning a Tony as the wild-eyed, haunted Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the third of August Wilson's 10-play cycle about African American life in each decade of the 20th century. (Writing in the *New York Times*, critic Frank Rich called Lindo's Loomis "imposing and intense" and his performance "riveting.") Around that time, Lindo also played the Chicago chauffeur Walter Lee Younger, the role originated by Sidney Poitier, in the 25th-anniversary restaging of Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking *A Raisin in the Sun*. The years during which he performed in these three enduring roles, Lindo says, "were just brilliant years for me creatively."

Since then, with his work in more than 40 film and television productions, he's created a comfortable life for his wife and young son while gaining a reputation for artistic integrity. "I only know him through his work," says San Francisco–based director Philip Kaufman, "and he always seems to find the truth in his character, to create a valid human being onscreen." Now he's working in the theater again—as a director. His first attempt, last

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year's *Medal of Honor Rag,* won him a Los Angeles Weekly Theater Award for direction of a one-act. And this month, after years of conversation with Berkeley Repertory Theatre artistic director Tony Taccone, he is directing Tanya Barfield's *Blue Door*, at Berkeley Rep April 6 to May 20.

This is "a tricky play," says Taccone, "about an African American professor who is alienated not only from the world around him but from his own past." Over the course of a long, sleepless night, he is visited by four generations of his ancestors, each played by the same man, which means the two actors are onstage the entire evening. The play could be difficult for a director with far more experience, but Taccone knows the real Delroy Lindo. "Delroy cares a tremendous amount about things," Taccone says, "and he's spent a lot of time reflecting on the values of the culture and what he wants to express. He is handling all the preparation with rigor, passion, and care. At the very least, it'll be OK. But the marriage of his insight with this text could be very, very insightful and deep."

After a few hours in conversation with Lindo, on a quiet morning in the Berkeley Rep offices and later by phone, I understand Taccone's point. Interviewing some actors, you have the feeling you're getting a performance of sorts; they've chosen to be professionally charming, and that's about as deep as it goes, or maybe as deep as they go. Not this time.

Do you think not living in L.A. has hurt your career?
Yes, absolutely. Because I'm not there, the only impression a lot of people have of me is what they see me do onscreen. For instance, when I met with the producer of the film I'm doing now, he said, and I'm paraphrasing, My God, you always play such heavies; you're so different in person. I named films in which I hadn't played heavies, and he hadn't seen those. People have nothing to go on if they don't see me around town, and so their impressions can be very narrow. I know it's hurt me.

Has it hurt you in being typecast or in not getting roles at all?
I like to think that I'm not typecast. But people are only human. I was working on a film a few years ago, and a producer came to me, and—you know what a breakdown is?

No.
It's the description of the various characters in a play or film that goes out to casting directors and agents. In the breakdown this producer had, the description for one character was [enunciating carefully] "a brutish, Delroy Lindo type."

Oh!
Right. I had a kind of a chuckle, but I think that's a really good example of how one can be regarded very one-dimensionally and noncreatively.

But you can live a more well-rounded, less moviecentric life up here. Tony Taccone told me how you sought him out a while back and said you wanted a relationship with Berkeley Rep. He mentioned your reverence for the theater and how the two of you tossed around a lot of ideas before going with this play. What can you tell me about *Blue Door*?
One of the things I responded to when I read this play was its healthy portion of black male rage. The protagonist, Lewis, has had to position himself, his emotional life, in a certain way to suppress his own anger and rage. I was very interested in that.

He's reached a pretty high level, though–he's a university professor, a scholar, a published author...
But there are big problems with each of the things he has achieved. His marriage has just fallen apart. He's been put on what I believe is an enforced sabbatical because he's been having issues around his job. And yes, he's a published author, but there's a section of the play in which his family discusses his success or failure as an author. The fact is, at this point in his life, the wheels seem to be coming off.

The play is also about forgiveness. That was a revelation I came to after reading the play two or three times leading up to the auditions in New York. That also really interests me.

You weren't born in this country–
I was not.

Your parents came from the Caribbean–
Jamaica.

–and you were raised in London, so African American history isn't your history.
Per se, no. That's correct. So?

So how does that affect your reading of the play and your directing?
That's a good question. Perhaps in the final analysis, these ideas are universal. If we look at the play outside of the [pauses to think] ethnic context, here we have a human being who has had to be about the business of incorporating himself into environment A. That process becomes pathological for him because of the things he has to do to adapt. Now in broad terms, one could say, well, that's a human condition, but one identifies that process very specifically when it's a black man having to adapt to a white world. When you talk about that [laughs], any black man on the planet who's had to do that can relate.

That brings me to *Wondrous Oblivion*, in which a Caribbean family comes to south London in the early '50s and interacts with its neighbors, especially a Jewish family. Were you raised in south London; did you go through anything like this family did?
The reason I wanted you to watch *Wondrous Oblivion* wasn't for any cultural reason per se—I didn't want *Kidnapped* to be the last thing you've seen me do as an actor. Actually, it's interesting to compare it to something like *Kidnapped*, which is a whole other kind of work.

I thought it was great to see you smile for a change. Plus, you got to kiss the girl. ▶

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Far from thuggish in *Wondrous Oblivion*, Lindo plays a warm, loving Caribbean immigrant to south London, who, with his daughter (Leonie Elliott), teaches their Jewish neighbor (Sam Smith) about more than cricket.

PALM PICTURES/UMVD

I did get to kiss the girl, and that was one of the things that intrigued me about the film: the concept of getting to kiss the girl.

You got to play a romantic lead.
Sort of. I didn't think of it like that because I didn't get the girl. But there was that element, and it had to do with being seen as a sexual being.

Yeah–it was a hot kiss.
Well, that's what one doesn't get to do. Most black men don't get to do that in films. Frequently, our sexuality is not where the emphasis of the stories is.

Why is that, would you say?
People are afraid of us, our power, but it's not a three-dimensional power. Go into any store in downtown San Francisco and look at who the security guards are. That's not an accident. Most security guards are black males, and I think that indirectly preys on the fear that society has of black males. You're not gonna come into this store and steal, because we got a black man standing at the door, and he'll *get you*.

You still feel that fear, that generalized fear of black men, even here?
[Gives an incredulous laugh] Of course. That's part of what *Blue Door* is about. There's a scene where he notices this woman looking at his hands [at how the skin on his palms is lighter]. And then he has to protect her from her fear of him, whether it's founded or unfounded, just because she's having this response to his physical being.

The play seems as if it is not quite set in the present to me. Maybe that's my lack of knowledge of what a black male's life is like, that somebody in this day and age, in a university setting–
[Kind of sputters and laughs again.]

OK, guess so.
Ha! I'm sorry. Go ahead, finish the sentence.

Was he the only black professor on the campus? Wouldn't she already know that about the hands, wouldn't she have interacted to some extent with other black men? Or maybe my sense is that the play doesn't take place on the East or West Coast. I just feel that people around here would be a little more sophisticated than that.
One might think. But you should speak with native San Franciscans, African Americans who've been born and raised here, and let them tell you about San Francisco.

Was this kind of thing a reason you wanted to be in *Wondrous Oblivion*?
I wanted to tell a story that spoke to my mom's generation of people from the Caribbean who went to England in the '40s and '50s; it peaked in the '60s. I lost my mother in 1996, but maybe a year or so before my moms passed, I was going through her things, and I found some passports, one stamped in 1948. She's from a generation called the "Windrush" generation, for the boat that took the first wave of people from Jamaica to England in 1948. When I was researching the film, I started thinking, huh, maybe my mother was on that boat.

My mother was a nurse, and another thing I found were letters in which various hospitals she worked in reprimanded her, and my mother's letters responding to those reprimands. And in that moment I realized just how much hell my mother had caught. That wave of immigrants was victimized in extremely harsh ways. The British would have you feel that they're not racist—not like, you know, the Yanks. But it wasn't subtle. The various manifestations of the prejudice against her were stunning. And so I wanted to do this film as an homage to my moms.

In your childhood in London, did you experience anything like this family in terms of the extremely overt racism? Or like your characters in *Blue Door*?
Did I experience prejudice? Yes, of course I did. And it was harsh.

So you left England when you were–
When I was a teenager, we, my moms and myself, traveled to New York, Toronto, back to London; there was some back and forth for a while. My moms ended up in Toronto, and I ended up in New York.

And then in 1977 you came to San Francisco to study at A.C.T., when you were 24. And wasn't Denzel Washington in your class?
[Singing, like a kid teasing] You've been on the Internet.

I do my research.
Yeah—the problem with the Internet is that a lot of that stuff is wrong. Denzel left after the first year, but yes, that's when I met Denzel.

You met up again when you made *Malcolm X* in 1992, and I'm wondering: there must have been a part of you that felt you could play Malcolm X.
I remember when we did the first read-through at Spike Lee's office in Brooklyn, there were some wonderful actors in the room, and the script was really interesting. I wasn't thinking, "I want to play Malcolm X." I was really, really excited to be playing West Indian Archie; it was a great part. I mean, I had no idea that it would have the impact that it had on my career, God bless it, thank you, Jesus. I was just happy to be in the film.

How did that impact play out? Did you begin getting offered more roles?
Indirectly. Spike called me the following summer and said, "I'm doing this film *Crooklyn*, I want you to do it." As a result of doing *Crooklyn*, he called me the following year and said, "I'm doing this movie *Clockers*, and I want you to come do that." That brought me, cumulatively, I would say, to the attention of Hollywood, and I got a really wonderful agent, and then I was hired to do *Get Shorty*, with John Travolta and Gene Hackman and Rene Russo and Danny DeVito. That was the first bona fide Hollywood studio film I had done. You know,

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After Lindo's impressive turn in *Malcolm X*, director Spike Lee called on him again for *Crooklyn* and then the following year for *Clockers*, in which Lindo (here with Mekhi Phifer) made a powerful drug lord.

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

Opening night for *Joe Turner* on Broadway was a completely Zen-like experience. One was so relaxed and so in the moment and so in that role, it was just brilliant"

Spike's kinda outside of that. But being hired to do *Get Shorty*, that was all part of a continuum that started with *Malcolm X*.

Before that, you worked in theater.

For pretty much the first 10 years of my career, from 1979 to 1988. The first thing I did when I went back to New York after A.C.T. was to understudy in a play called *Spell Number 7*, by Ntozake Shange. I actually got to perform, so I made my off-Broadway debut in the fall of 1979. I did *"Master Harold"…and the Boys* a couple of years later, in 1982.

And in that play, from what I've read–

On the Internet, yeah—

–you were directed by the playwright.

Athol Fugard. That's correct.

What can you remember about being directed by the man who wrote the play?

[Considers his words] What I remember about Athol Fugard was that a fundamental question that was never successfully answered was, is Willie—the part that I was playing at the time—illiterate? Is he mentally slow or not? I felt not. And Athol would never come out and say, "Yes, Willie's slow." It would come up in the ways that I wanted to play certain moments. We would dance around it. He never would come out and say [taps the table for emphasis], "This is who this person is."

Why?

I'm really going out on a limb here. But in the late '70s and the early '80s, Athol Fugard had a very interesting position. His plays gave American audiences the chance to unburden themselves of their feelings about race without taking responsibility. Because, after all, these plays happened in South Africa, not here. I think that had a direct effect on his success in this country as a writer. His work post-apartheid is far less successful. Anyway, I think he didn't feel it was his place to come out and say to an African American actor, "This is a slow black man." Athol had a certain knowledge of these men he had written, but it was a curious process as he attempted to communicate to his actors who these men were. I mean, the actor who had originated the part of Sam was Zakes Mokae, and he won a Tony Award. So I wondered if even though Athol had created, quote unquote, this character, a lot of it was Zakes.

Has that experience influenced your directing?

There are ways that I know I don't want to communicate with actors.

You want to be more straightforward?

Yes. But my experience with the play was like a tapestry, a creative tapestry. I was hired as an understudy when Zakes Mokae and Danny Glover were doing the play on Broadway. Zakes left the production, and James Earl Jones was hired to replace him, and Lloyd Richards came in to direct. The last month of the Broadway run, Danny Glover left to do a film, and I was hired to replace him. Did you follow that?

Yeah.

But prior to that, while I was still the understudy for both parts, James Earl Jones had to come out to California to do some additional dialogue recording for *Star Wars*. So I made my Broadway debut in *"Master Harold"…and the Boys* playing Sam to Danny Glover's Willie. Danny Glover is from San Francisco, as you know, and we had become friends when I was at A.C.T. So it was really wonderful to be making my Broadway debut in this part with Danny Glover.

On opening night, they made the announcement: "Attention, ladies and gentlemen, at this evening's performance, the part of Sam will be played by Delroy Lindo." And there was this groan. They all wanted to see James Earl! But I really felt strong about doing that play, and I went on, and it was great.

And then a few years later you were in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, also directed by Lloyd Richards; in fact, you were a finalist for a Tony in 1988 when the play was on Broadway.

Joe Turner remains one of the most fulfilling experiences as an actor that I've ever had on the planet, bar none, period. As I said, I had met Lloyd Richards, who is an icon, a profoundly important person in the American theater. Lloyd had directed *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, which was the start of a whole new generation of black actors playing in black theater. Lloyd invited me to Yale in 1983 to perform in the 25th-anniversary production; it was a huge deal, and I was very intimidated and not very good. But in 1986, I got the opportunity to play Walter Lee again, at the Kennedy Center, and I was much better. If at Yale I was maybe 65 to 70 percent successful, at the Kennedy Center I was probably 85 to 93 percent successful.

But before that, in the spring of 1986, I saw *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The actor Charles Dutton, Roc Dutton, originated the part of Herald Loomis up at Yale, and I went there to see the play. The next day, I said to some actors I was working with, "You've got to go see this play." One guy said, "What's it about?" And I said, "I don't know, man, but you've gotta go see it." It was completely visceral with me.

When they took the play to Boston, there was a possibility that Roc wouldn't do it because of a film. I remember reading the play in my living room in New York, closing the last page, and saying, "I've got to do this." Roc didn't do it, and Lloyd called me to audition.

But here's my point in telling you all this: In the fall of 1986, I did my first *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Then in the winter of 1986, I got called for *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the spring of 1987, I went to Seattle to do another *Joe Turner*. In late spring of 1987, I did the Los Angeles production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. ▶

As the migrant apple picker who abuses his daughter in *The Cider House Rules*, Lindo (here with Tobey Maguire) creates a man who somehow is not a monster.

MIRAMAX

> The more known you are, the more challenging it is to disappear inside a character. Look at Jack Nicholson—in *The Departed*, you know you're seeing Jack. That's the level of familiarity. It's *Jack*, for God's sake."

Lindo's solid authority is ever present in films like *Ransom*, in which he plays an FBI agent who neglects his own family to help another find their son.

Wow.

Wow is right. So I was alternating between Herald Loomis and Walter Lee Younger, and creatively it just doesn't get any better than that. These are two great, classical parts, as good and as complicated, with as much magnitude, as Othello or the Scottish king. I was thrust into this maelstrom. I'd like to believe that I advanced as an actor by leaps and bounds as a result. By the time we opened *Joe Turner* on Broadway in 1988, that opening night was a completely Zen-like experience. One was so relaxed and so in the moment and so in the play and so in that role, it was just brilliant.

When I did *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Kennedy Center, I think it was the most successful piece of theater they'd ever had. As a result of that production and the one in L.A., they did the television remake, starring Danny Glover [laughs] as Walter Lee. But that was OK. At that point I was off to do a film.

Yes, and since Hollywood is all about youth and looking young, and you were in your late 30s by then...

That's American culture, not just Hollywood. American culture is youth oriented. Youth obsessed, actually.

But do you think in hindsight there was a tradeoff for working in the theater when you were young?

No. Who's to say what would have happened had I gone to Los Angeles to try to get a film career? To me it was more important to learn my craft. Also, when I started doing Hollywood films, I had a certain track record as an actor. That's what was getting me hired, I think.

Still, you are such a fine actor, you should have gotten more leading roles. That's what I think.

Talk to the producers [laughs]. And when you're making your film, remember that.

But why do you think that is?

[Still laughing] Why do you think it is?

Did you not seek them out? Or could it be because you're not a conventional-looking, Hollywood-handsome guy?

You would have to speculate on that. I tend not to spend my time thinking about that kind of stuff. It's really a waste of time.

Alright, but getting back to the notion of typecasting, I noticed a comment you made a few years ago–and this is from a news article, so I know it's not necessarily accurate, but it struck me: "As my career has grown, I've had to battle typecasting more intensely."

You know, what happens during a press junket for a film, all the journalists mix and match the various comments that you've made.

But it is an interesting notion, that as your career has grown, as we've seen more and more of you–

This is what I think I was referring to in that quote: that the more one works as a film actor, and the more one's audience becomes familiar with one, it becomes much more challenging to get the audience to accept that one is these various, different characters. When you look at someone like Jack Nicholson—I just saw *The Departed*. Did you see the film? He's playing a character, but you know you're seeing Jack. It's *Jack*, for God's sake. I don't even know Jack Nicholson, but he's *Jack*. There's that level of familiarity, right? That's the phenomenon I was referring to—that the more known an entity one becomes, the more challenging it is to disappear inside a character.

To get cast in different roles.

Well, that's a whole other [laughs]—getting the job in the first place.

In terms of disappearing inside the character, one does feel that an actor like Jack Nicholson or, say, Dustin Hoffman or others did their best work when they were younger.

Right. But part of that is because they were less known.

But you still see longtime actors like Helen Mirren–maybe it's mostly British actors?–completely vanish into their roles. You'd think that's what an actor would want, to stretch himself and show what he can do.

The entertainment industry is a lot more celebrity driven, and a certain kind of producer thinks in terms of giving audiences known quantities. The point of any film is to get people to pay money to see it, which is why you have this phenomenon of people who are successful in other spheres becoming "actors"—rappers, singers. That has nothing to do with acting and everything to do with the fact that these are commodities that young people especially will pay money to see. So the idea of an *ac-tor* doing really good work interpreting a part, and lending that to a film, has become less valuable; that's a huge generalization, but look at the films that get made. So for somebody like me—you know, I'm an actor—it becomes more challenging to find parts.

More challenging for a couple of reasons.

Yes, it's more challenging to get parts, and then when you do, how do you distinguish between what you're doing and what you've done in three other films?

Is it a fight to make that happen?

One time—and I'm not gonna mention the project—I was playing what could easily have been interpreted as a stock part, "the cop," "the doctor." In a part that has elements of the stock about it, you want to three-dimensionalize it, make it a real human being. So I made some choices with regard to wardrobe that they'd all signed off on. Then the first day of shooting, I show up on the set, and they say, Oh no, don't wear that; wear this. And I said, Wait a second, this was all agreed to. It became a little ugly; they got very upset with me. I was called in to speak with the producer the following day, and he said, "I'm paying you a lot of money for this look. That's what I want in my film." And that was the level of creativity he wanted.

And the producer could overrule the director?

In this case, yeah, because he was a very, very powerful producer.

So you had to acquiesce. ▶

Blue Door

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SONY PICTURES

Yes, I did. But you try to work in other ways to become a human being, and be different from what you did two or three films ago.

Another reason to be in *Wondrous Oblivion*.

Sure, *Wondrous Oblivion*, *The Cider House Rules*, West Indian Archie in *Malcolm X*, *Clockers*, *Get Shorty*, *Ransom*—I think all were distinctive. Something else I'm really proud of is playing Satchel Paige in an HBO film called *Soul of the Game*.

Thinking of *Kidnapped*, your recent TV series, you've played the FBI guy a couple of times...

There you go. That's how you as an audience member respond to it. So knowing that, my job becomes: how do I distinguish this FBI guy from the other FBI guy? How do I distinguish this drug dealer from another drug dealer? When I was doing *Clockers*, the fact that the guy was a drug dealer was completely not of interest to me. What interested me was his relationship to those children. Why does this man have such power over these children? Finding that which is humanly compelling, that's what's interesting. If you can solve that, hopefully you can make it compelling for an audience.

Do you feel you're getting enough calls for roles that you can find something in?

Look, I've made a living as an actor, and hopefully I'll continue to make a living as an actor, and as a director, both in theater and in film. That's my desire, that's my wish, that's my objective for myself.

Especially now that you're working on a bigger play, with more experienced actors, in a place that loves theater–do you feel that ultimately you want to move in that direction? I mean, directing plays and films?

All of it. Why can't I do all of it? Yeah, I want to do all of it. ■

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