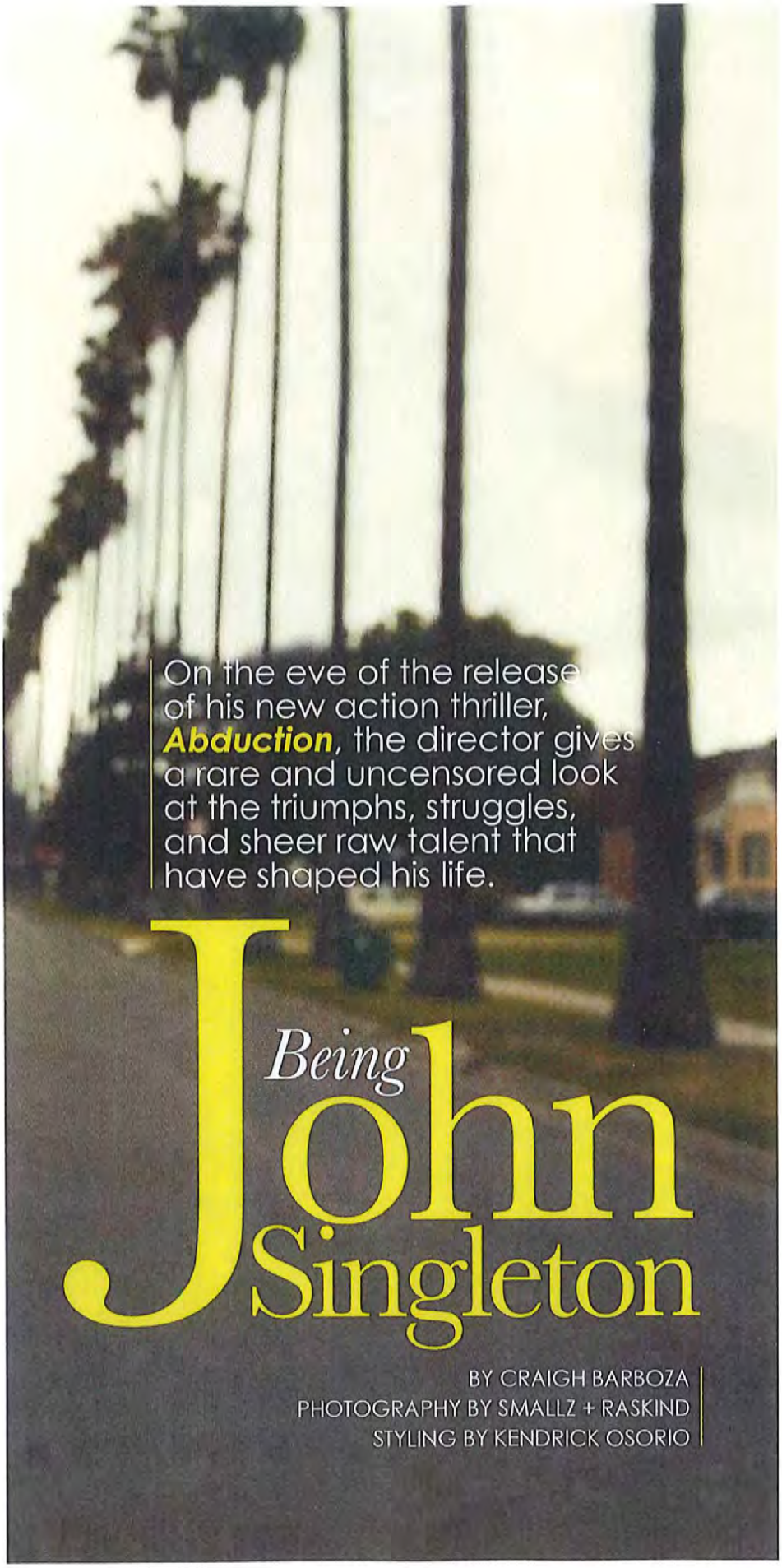


On the eve of the release of his new action thriller, **Abduction**, the director gives a rare and uncensored look at the triumphs, struggles, and sheer raw talent that have shaped his life.

Being John Singleton

BY CRAIGH BARBOZA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SMALLZ + RASKIND
STYLING BY KENDRICK OSORIO

"I'M GOING TO TELL YOU

something I haven't told anybody," says John Singleton a few minutes into our conversation. We're discussing the director's 1991 groundbreaking debut, *Boyz N the Hood*. "When all the hype happened with my first film, I locked myself in my house and just watched movies and read literature about filmmaking. I didn't go to every f---ing party and kiss everybody's ass to get accepted. I was nervous of being a flash in the pan."

Fast-forward 20 years and Singleton has gone from a cocky amateur making music videos for drug dealers to an influential director and producer with staying power. His 13 films, all burning with energy, attitude and cultural resonance, helped introduce national audiences to Ice Cube, Taraji P. Henson, Tyrese Gibson, and Sofía Vergara—and epitomized what was hot for a generation of moviegoers raised on hip-hop. He made the crowd-pleasing reboot *Shaft* and the personal drama *Baby Boy* as well as commercial hits like *Four Brothers* (which grossed $92 million) and *2 Fast 2 Furious* (which raked in $236 million). His latest film, set to hit theaters this September, could be his biggest release yet.

Abduction, a thriller starring *Twilight*'s Taylor Lautner as a teen who finds his baby picture on a missing persons website and is forced to go on the run, has franchise written all over it. Hot leads? Check. Roller-coaster action? Check. Steamy romance? Check. "This movie's going to make a lot of money," Singleton says with a nonchalant shrug. "We're already working on concepts for the sequel."

The stars of *Abduction*—Lautner and Lily Collins (of the upcoming *The Brothers Grimm: Snow White*)—were barely born when the now 43-year-old director attended his first Academy Awards. Singleton was nominated in 1992 for *Boyz* in the director and screenplay categories. "I started making movies in my early 20s, and the cast was the same age or younger. Now, I'm the elder statesman, still chugging along and doing interesting work."

Today, Singleton sits on the boards of both the Directors Guild and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He's able to walk into pretty much any movie industry–related event uninvited. But in some ways, he still sees himself as an outsider who, by force of talent and personality, managed to crash the establishment without giving up his ghetto pass—and outlast many of his peers.

"I can spend the night in a Baltimore jail to research a project," he says at one point. "None of those Hollywood cats would ever do that. And I still got my balls too," he says with a boastful chuckle. "I'm in Hollywood for 20 years, and they didn't turn me into a bitch."

IT IS A MONDAY evening and Singleton, dressed in his uniform of jeans and a polo shirt, is sitting in a window booth at a seafood shack off the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. During the next week, I will spend several days with him trying to learn just how easily he bridges the chasm between showbiz and the 'hood. In a few days he would meet up with an actress to discuss a new project before dashing over to a power lunch with a Lionsgate film executive. Then he would fly to Pittsburgh to shoot additional scenes for *Abduction*. But right now what he wants to talk about is sailing. Singleton recently spent two and a half days cruising the Channel Islands and can't wait to push off again. "John's attraction to water has been very extreme as of late," says actor/singer Tyrese Gibson, a longtime friend. "I mean, he's out there sailing when it's cold, when it's hot. He's on the water, like, every day. I call him and I can hear the wind in the background. He's on his boat."

For months, Singleton has been taking lessons in long-haul sailing and will proudly show off his book stamped with certifications from the American Sailing Association. He looks forward to boating to different countries one day, maybe even crossing the Pacific. "Sometimes you just want to escape," he explains while digging into a plate of fried fish. "On a boat, there's no rush to get anywhere. You have a course, you look at the elements; the ocean and the waves are all around you. It's great." As he talks, his voice is flush with excitement. He grabs one of the two phones he carries (one is for "people I don't want to talk to") and pulls up a photo of himself leaning hard behind the giant wheel of a sailboat, his brow serious. "Look at this," he says. "How 'hood is this right here?"

Don't let all the posturing fool you. He may be a badass, but friends and those who work closely with the director will tell you he also can be a compassionate gentleman. Many refer to him as "family." On his movie sets, Singleton fosters an inviting, collaborative atmosphere while maintaining a laserlike focus. One minute he's wisecracking with someone from the crew who wants his blunt romantic advice (Script supervisor: "John, what does it mean when a man says you're devious?" Singleton: "It means he wants to sleep with you"), the next he's standing by the Technocrane operator as actors rehearse, cuing the complex camera movement that will capture the gravitas of the scene. What makes John great, says *Abduction* producer Lee Stollman, is "he just gets film, gets people, and is good at connecting the dots. He can look at a story on the page and know how to translate it to a 70-foot screen. Really great filmmakers have that gift. It's not something you can teach."

Lately, though, Singleton hasn't been translating much of anything. *Abduction* is his first movie-directing gig in six years. The hiatus turned out to be anything but a vacation. "I had a couple big movies go down," he says, slightly peeved. "I was on *The A-Team* for a year before I left because they were going to make a corny movie. I wanted to do an '80s action picture, a man's movie like *The Dirty Dozen*. They just made a mess." Another project, *Tulia*, with Halle Berry, stalled when the star learned she was pregnant. Then there was a Tom Clancy movie, *Without Remorse*, that never made it out of development.

He's also had some personal issues. In 1999, the director pleaded no contest to one count of battery. He claims nothing actually happened and that his daughter's mother was angry because Singleton wouldn't let her take their child during his weekend "so she could get into a kid's celebrity birthday party." Asked if he has any regrets, Singleton says, "No, because I didn't do sh--. We argued in front of my house, and the next day she went and [told the police], 'He jumped on me.' " Singleton was issued a $300 fine, given three years' probation, and ordered to make a short film on domestic violence, the result of which is the 15-minute *Drama*, featuring Henson.

It was dealing with that kind of turmoil that led Singleton to file for and gain custody of four of his children between 2005 and 2006. He has six in total with five different women and is currently in a relationship with his infant's mother. The child he does not have custody of lives in Ghana with her mother, actress Akosua Busia (Nettie in *The Color Purple*), to whom he was briefly married.

"I was a single dad for a while, which was humbling," says Singleton. "I spent a lot of time taking my kids to the library. It was a big difference between being a weekend dad and a full-time dad, having to cook spaghetti or tacos. My kids are like, 'Why we having tacos again?' I never had to worry about grocery shopping [when] I was a bachelor."

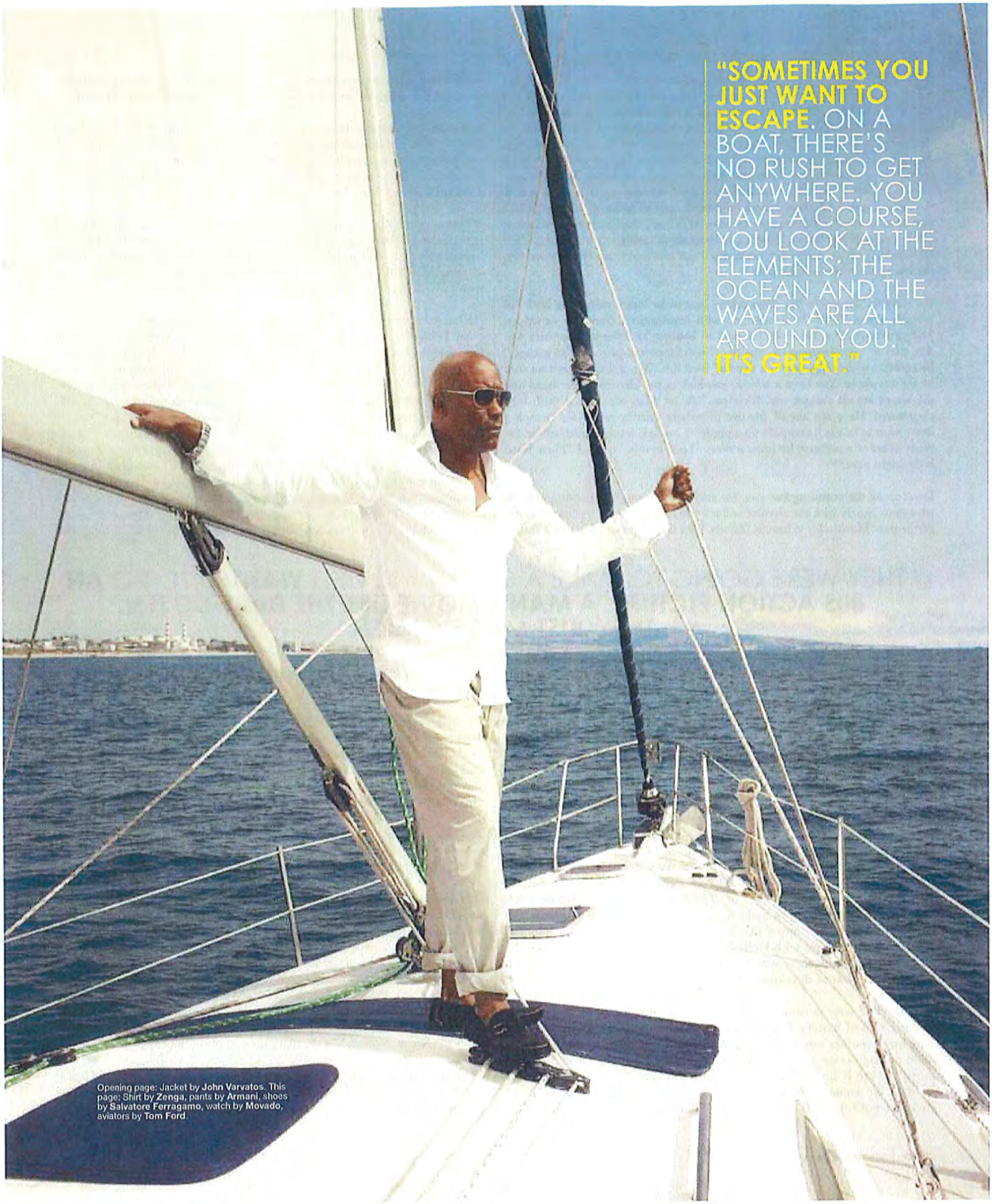
He laughs about it now. "When I got my kids full-time, they drove me so crazy I could've made a movie about that sh--. I wanted to throw them out the window. I was like, This is harder than whatever!" Singleton says he felt as if everyone was against him—the baby mamas, his own mother, who accused him of being vindictive—but like almost all of the stories he tells, this one is about him conquering the odds. "I just wanted to raise my kids myself," he continues, "so that whatever they become they become because of my influence, not because I sent a check. My career was secondary to raising these kids. See, now I'm a true success," he says, tapping the table for emphasis, "because my firstborn is in college. My second-born is in one of the most prestigious boarding schools in California. I never wanted to be one of these successful people whose kids turn out to be f---ups. That's 99 percent of people in show business. I said, 'I'm going to live by my word.' Now all the mamas are happy, like, 'Wow, what you've done with them.' Because they've never seen no man do that stuff. Even my mother never saw a man do that."

"THEY WERE GOING TO MAKE A CORNY MOVIE. **I WANTED TO DO AN '80S ACTION PICTURE, A MAN'S MOVIE LIKE *THE DIRTY DOZEN*.** THEY JUST MADE A MESS."

AT NOON THE NEXT DAY we meet up at the barbershop (the guy who shaves his head "was in jail with Mike Tyson") and drive to Baldwin Hills, a wealthy black neighborhood overlooking South Central Los Angeles. This is where Singleton lives, on a cul-de-sac, in the modest four-bedroom home he purchased in 1990. Much of the original furniture remains. His upstairs office, where we're sitting now, looks like it was never decorated. The coffee table in the middle of the room is covered with sailing paraphernalia, and in the corner there are boxes of comic books. "That's just this year," he says when asked about it. He slides open a mirrored closet door to show boxes of comics stacked to the ceiling. "I'm pretty much a geek," he later tells me.

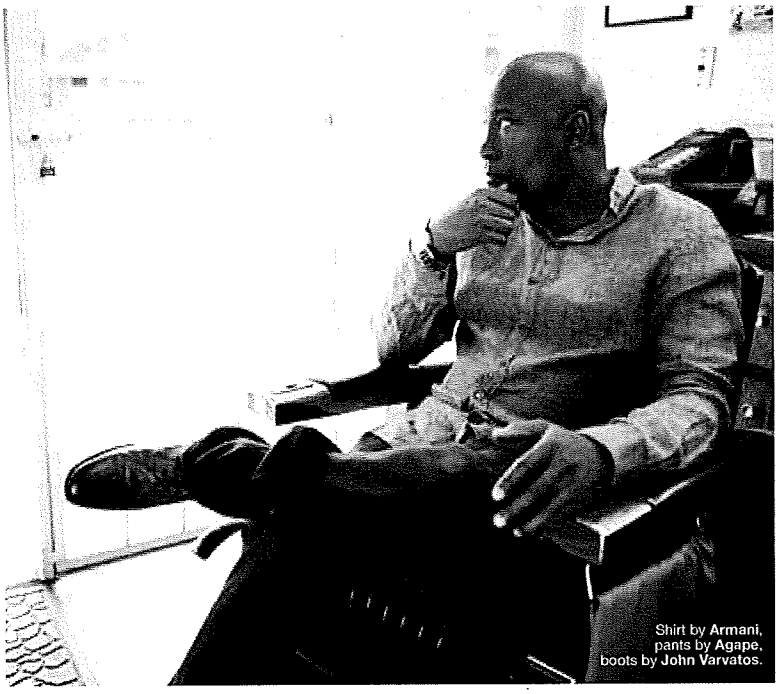
Growing up, Singleton was smaller than most kids and wore glasses, so he often would have to prove to kids that he was someone to be reckoned with. "I had that L.A. mentality," he says, sitting behind his desk. "You puff your chest up like you bigger than you are so that you become what you want to be." That mind-set served him well when he was trying to break into Hollywood. As a student at USC, Singleton was called into a meeting with Columbia Pictures chairman Frank Price. The studio was interested in his *Boyz* script, which Singleton had insisted on directing. The story goes that Price asked, "What would you say if we wanted to pay you $100,000 to take the script?" to which Singleton briskly replied, "I'd say that's the end of this meeting."

Of course, Columbia agreed to make the film with the first-time director. Casting started almost immediately. Singleton already knew he wanted Laurence Fishburne to play the dad—the two had met while Singleton was working as a P.A. on



"SOMETIMES YOU JUST WANT TO ESCAPE. ON A BOAT, THERE'S NO RUSH TO GET ANYWHERE. YOU HAVE A COURSE, YOU LOOK AT THE ELEMENTS; THE OCEAN AND THE WAVES ARE ALL AROUND YOU. **IT'S GREAT."**

Opening page: Jacket by **John Varvatos**. This page: Shirt by **Zenga**, pants by **Armani**, shoes by **Salvatore Ferragamo**, watch by **Movado**, aviators by **Tom Ford**.


Shirt by Armani, pants by Agape, boots by John Varvatos.

Pee-wee's Playhouse—and the character of Doughboy was written for Ice Cube, who had given Singleton a ride home from a party one night. The remaining actors (Cuba Gooding Jr., Morris Chestnut, Nia Long) all came from the first casting session. The movie, budgeted at $5.7 million, was shot on a hurried schedule, but the big gamble paid off. When *Boyz* premiered at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival, it received a 20-minute standing ovation and went on to gross $100 million worldwide.

Last year, when the spec script for *Abduction* sparked a bidding war, directors lined up to take the film that would launch Lautner's career as a leading man. From the start, the producers say Singleton's name was at the top of the list, in large part because of his knack for eliciting strong performances from young actors. Singleton and Lautner talked about what it was going to take to show the star, perceived as a pretty boy, in a different light. "I told Taylor, 'The first time you get smacked, all the girls will go [mock screams] and the guys are going to go, 'Yeah,' because guys think you're this good-looking kid. You got all the girls. They're jealous. But by the end the whole audience is going to be with you.' When Taylor saw the movie like that he said, 'Okay. I get it.'"

Singleton looks at the clock: time to go. He is taking me to USC, where he's a guest speaker at a naming ceremony for the John Williams Scoring Stage. Years ago, he and Williams, the legendary composer, worked together on *Rosewood*. The other two speakers, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, are childhood idols turned friends. In fact, it was a biography on Lucas that inspired Singleton to go to film school. Now he's sitting in a large conference room inside the School of Cinematic Arts' main building, flanked by Lucas and Price (the man who green-lit *Boyz*), discussing the commercial prospects of Lucas' new film about the Tuskegee Airmen.

"There's a huge audience out there that wants to see an action picture with young black males in it, even if it's a period movie," Singleton says. "It's really *Star Wars* with P-51 Mustangs," Lucas explains, prefacing his comment by noting that the movie isn't a "woe-is-me tale" about the black experience.

"Right," Singleton says. "As long as it's marketed right and it doesn't feel like a history lesson, people will flock to it." Getting up to grab a glass of water, he gives Lucas a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll show 'em."

After the ceremony we grab a quick bite, then head to New Deal, the production company Singleton founded in 1989. The offices are located in Leimert Park, the arts center of black L.A. As we talk, Singleton shows me around. He's still buzzing from the event. While speaking, he received a big laugh from his story about meeting Williams (it had to do with the composer's insight into "the souls of black folks"). On the way back to his seat, a smiling Singleton playfully tapped Spielberg on the chest. "Top that!" he said.

Being around those guys clearly inspires him. "Man, I got a lot of work to do," he says. New Deal is where Singleton plans out and casts his movies. The 3,000-square-foot space is in stark contrast to the state-of-the-art facilities at USC, whose buildings were modeled after old Hollywood studios. The film school is pristine. New Deal is rugged; the windows have iron grilles, and the couches in the screening room look like they were bought at a thrift store. The whole place has a lived-in feel. "I like it here," he says. "I'm close enough to be influenced by normal things."

In his second-floor office, two script coverage letters from *Boyz* are on display. One, from Columbia Pictures, is a glowing report. The other, from Orion Pictures, is a scathing attack: "The script fails on every fundamental, technical level." Singleton tells me he tries to keep all of his script coverage, good or bad. I ask if he's ever learned anything useful. "No," he says. "They don't know."

Several years ago, when the director sought financing for *Hustle & Flow*, a movie he wanted to produce about a pimp who tries to make it as a rapper, he was shot down by every studio in town. "John was pissed," recalls producer Stephanie Allain. "He was like, 'F--- 'em. I'm gonna show them!' And he did." Singleton bankrolled the film, which cost about $3 million, out of his own pocket. "We went to Memphis and in 24 days shot the hell out of that movie," Allain continues, "took it to Sundance, and then all the people who said 'no' were in one room saying 'please.' John sold it for three times what he paid for it. It was brilliant."

Hustle & Flow, directed by Craig Brewer and released in 2005, went on to win an Oscar for Best Original Song, and there's talk now of turning it into a Broadway musical, one of many projects on Singleton's slate. He's also developing a miniseries for Epix about the first black government agents. But the project that makes his eyes twinkle is another 'hood movie he's already written that would reteam Gibson and Henson. "I got to do something for the folks soon," Singleton says. "There are hardly any black films outside of what Tyler Perry is doing, and even with his success, he can't hold it down on his own."

The year that Singleton arrived on the scene two decades ago, there were 19 films by black directors. "[That period] was great," Allain says. "And the range of films was interesting, everything from *Menace II Society* to *Eve's Bayou*. It was 'in' to be black and a filmmaker." Singleton credits his buddy Spike Lee for Hollywood's sudden (but temporary) open-door policy toward black filmmakers. "I never would've directed a movie a month out of film school if it wasn't for Spike's accomplishments," he says. "Spike was saying exactly what needed to be said. He made things easy for me. I didn't have to say I was going to hire a bunch of black people; I just did."

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Singleton plops down on the living room couch and powers up the flat screen, raising the volume to a level that's more suitable for nursing homes. An underwater documentary plays. "This is the lab," he says, the same room he was holed up in years ago when he was the toast of the town. A few of his directors chairs are positioned against the wall, and DVD cases are everywhere: in bookshelves, on chairs, spread out on the ottoman with Netflix envelopes. Singleton, who is schooled in the classics, watches at least 10 movies a week.

He checks to see what's on, and while searching the listings he notices that *Poetic Justice* is about to start and turns to the channel. Normally, he skips his own movies on TV, but it's been ages since he's seen it, so he wants to watch

From top: In the editing room, 1991; on the set of *Poetic Justice*, 1993; almost famous, 1991.

PHOTOS: ANTHONY BARBOZA

PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE: JESSICA KOLLAR. GROOMER: MARISSA MADRIAGA/CELESTINE AGENCY

the first few minutes. The movie, starring Janet Jackson, opens with a spoof of romantic dramas that still draws laughs from Singleton. Over the opening credits, he tells me he regrets rushing *Poetic*. "I wrote it in three weeks," he says. "I just wanted to get another movie out."

When it opened in 1993, *Poetic* was panned by critics and audiences alike. But despite its flaws, the movie does have some clever writing. Singleton always has had a flair for vernacular speech. It's one of the things actors love about him. Henson, who has worked with him on three movies, including *Baby Boy*, is dying to do it again. "Some people are incredible writers, but when it comes to dialogue they don't know how people speak," Henson says. "John does. You don't even have to ad-lib with his dialogue. It just sounds like something I would say or my character would say."

Singleton says the key is to listen. "I'll go places and just blend in. I learned that from August Wilson. He used to sit at the bar and write his plays, just listen to stuff and act it in his head. That's how you get the sh--."

During his days off while filming *Abduction* in Pittsburgh, where Wilson is from, Singleton says he would go to "the grimiest areas and just sit on the curb and watch people buy crack and do stuff." He'd wear sunglasses and carry a bottle of Mad Dog, poured out halfway ("You drink that and you f---ed up"). He pretended he was tweaking out. "I'd just be like this," he says, slumping in his seat and then rubbing his head in pain. "I'm a bit of an actor too." He clenches his fist and lightly bangs it against his skull a few times. "I'd just be sitting there with a bottle and mother------- are walking by! It was crazy."

His juices flowing, Singleton leaps off the couch. He wants to roll by Maverick's Flat, a nearby supper club on Crenshaw. "It's different where we're about to go. Everybody's going to know me." Minutes later we're posting up at the funktastic bar, catching the act. The crowd is a mix of young professionals, hoodsters, minor celebrities, and some brothers and sisters who are just out trying to forget their troubles. As the night goes on, many of them approach Singleton to take a picture or just tell him their cousin worked on his film. One cat sporting cornrows says he wants to play Ice Cube in an NWA movie the director hasn't committed to. Singleton just grins, says "Okay," and fist-bumps him. He's not here to find his next star or to glean some juicy dialogue. Tonight, John Singleton just wants to be one of the folks in the crowd. ◻