

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

With an Oscar-Nomination under his belt, and starring in this summer's blockbuster "The Island", Djimon Hounsou is a leading man in waiting

People like me don't belong in the Peninsula Hotel. It's too crisp, too clean, too damned littered with obscene displays of wealth for me to even smile. Walking awkwardly towards the palatial front entrance in Beverly Hills, I try to shoot nodding glances towards the valets and bellhops, but even they seem to recognize that I'm out of my element.

Nevertheless, this is where I'm scheduled to meet Djimon Hounsou (pronounced Jie-mon Hahn-soo), the Oscar-nominated Actor who exploded onto the screen years ago as the lead in Steven Spielberg's "Amistad". As I weave through the low-lit lobby, I spot the imposing figure that is Djimon. Standing nearly 6'4", he stands out amongst the B-list celebrities milling about aching to be noticed. Casual in a baseball hat and chewing on an apple, Djimon extends his hand and a smile so gracious and glowing, I suddenly feel welcome in this foreign world.

For such a relatively young career, Hounsou has had incredible exposure in high profile projects. The African born actor appeared in a string of music videos for a who's who list of pop icons, from Madonna to Janet Jackson to Paula Abdul (where he was Directed by a young up-and-coming David Fincher). But it was his breakout performance in "Amistad" that propelled him to new heights.

Imagine wanting to be a politician and suddenly finding yourself running for president. Or longing to be a boxer, and for your first fight, Mike Tyson is staring at you from across the ring. For a film actor, working on your first major motion picture under the direction of a cinematic monster like Steven Spielberg must be bone chilling.

"The intimidation, that was the drive," says Hounsou, eyes wide and glossy as he recalls working for Spielberg, "it was fuel to keep up with such a great, profound story. It was pretty amazing experience."

I suggest it was very much like learning how to swim by being thrown into the deep end of a pool.

"Exactly," he smiles, "do you want to survive, or do you want to drown?"

Originally born in Benin, Africa, Hounsou moved to Leon, France to further his education. Bored with the city, and wanting to further his acting dream, he moved to Paris. After struggling with the language, as well as the pace and size of the French capital, he was discovered by a fashion photographer and began a fledgling career as a model. It was modeling that brought him to the states and began his acting journey.

Hounsou's work with Spielberg led to a reoccurring small screen role on "ER" and to a major supporting role along side Russell Crowe in the Oscar-winning "Gladiator". Next came his most noted role to date in Jim Sheridan's "In America", for which he garnered an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor in a Supporting Role. In his role as Mateo, Hounsou displayed such extraordinary range and performed in such deep, tragically intense scenes; I was left wondering what method allowed him to draw out such taxing emotional broad strokes.

"There's no 'method' for me," he says, referring to the style of acting made famous by the likes of Marlon Brando and James Dean. "(My) method is imagination. I think it's playing a beautiful game of belief. I draw from imagination. It's limitless where you can go. Dreams (and) imagination keep us alive."

With few exceptions, Hounsou's roles have played into his ethnicity. The absence of good roles for African-American actors has been well documented. Yet, for an actor of African origin, the burden of limited roles and stereotyping is tenfold.

"I still get offered roles for the generic African look - the Amistad role if you will," Hounsou says. "I like to think (the stereotyping) is less and less. I struggled for so long with the dilemma of trying to speak

without an accent. This is my 5th language, so it takes me a minute to break it down, to bring it to a place where it seems organic.”

As Hounsou continues to display his brilliance as an actor, more dynamic roles continue to come his way. This summer, he plays a major part in Michael Bay’s Action/Thriller “The Island”. The film is lined up to be a summer blockbuster, and from the looks of the trailer, puts on display incredible new range for both the actor and filmmaker.

“ I play a villain who does his job... a job with implications that my character doesn’t necessarily care for. But there is redemption in the end.”

Redemption in the end, indeed. Redemption for the boy from Benin fueled to unimaginable heights by imagination. Redemption for the Oscar-nominated actor he’s become, waiting to pounce on a leading role, with his gracious and glowing smile welcoming all to his world. Redemption even for me, as I walk out of the Peninsula Hotel and the valet smiles.