



DEAR WHITE PEOPLE



AT UK CINEMAS **10th July**

BBC Culture ★★★★★ Time Out ★★★★★

"Justin Simien's thrillingly sharp-witted comedy" Owen Gleiberman **BBC**

DIRECTED BY
JUSTIN SIMIEN

STARRING
TESSA THOMPSON
TYLER JAMES WILLIAMS
TEYONAH PARRIS
KYLE GALLNER
BRANDON P. BELL

RUNNING TIME: 108MINS

CERT: 15

For publicity information, please contact:
Marek Steven & Joe Brace @ Witchfinder
marek@witchfinder.co
joe@witchfinder.co

Winner of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival's Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Talent, ***Dear White People*** is a sly, provocative satire of race relations in the age of Obama. Writer/director Justin Simien follows a group of African American students as they navigate campus life and racial politics at a predominantly white college in a sharp and funny feature film debut that earned him a spot on *Variety's* annual "10 Directors to Watch." When ***Dear White People*** screened at MOMA's prestigious New Directors/New Films, the *New York Times's* A.O. Scott wrote, "Seeming to draw equal measures of inspiration from Whit Stillman and Spike Lee, but with his own tart, elegant sensibility very much in control, Mr. Simien evokes familiar campus stereotypes only to smash them and rearrange the pieces."

THE STORY

The unexpected election of activist Samantha White (Tessa Thompson) as head of a traditionally black residence hall sets up a college campus culture war that challenges conventional notions of what it means to be black. While Sam leverages her notoriety as host of the provocative and polarizing radio show "Dear White People" to try to prevent the college from diversifying Armstrong Parker House, outgoing head-of-house Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell), son of the university's dean (Dennis Haysbert), defies his father's lofty expectations by applying to join the staff of *Pastiche*, the college's influential humor magazine. Lionel Higgins (Tyler James Williams), an Afro-sporting sci-fi geek, is recruited by the otherwise all-white student newspaper to go undercover and write about black culture—a subject he knows little about—while the aggressively assimilated Coco Connors (Teyonah Parris) tries to use the controversy on campus to carve out a career in reality TV.

But no one at Winchester University is prepared for *Pastiche's* outrageous, ill-conceived annual Halloween party, with its "unleash your inner Negro" theme throwing oil on an already smoldering fire of resentment and misunderstanding. When the party descends into riotous mayhem, everyone must choose a side.

Dear White People is written, directed and produced by Justin Simien. The film stars Tyler James Williams ("Everybody Hates Chris," *Peeples*), Tessa Thompson (*For*

Colored Girls, “Veronica Mars”), Kyle Gallner (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *CBGB*), Teyonah Parris (“Mad Men,” *They Came Together*), Brandon P. Bell (“Hollywood Heights”), Malcolm Barrett (*The Hurt Locker*), Brittany Curran (“Chicago Fire”), Marque Richardson (“The Newsroom”) and Dennis Haysbert (“24,” *Far From Heaven*).

Producers are Effie Brown, Julia Lebedev, Angel Lopez, Ann Le and Lena Waithe. Director of photography is Topher Osborn. Production designer is Bruton Jones. Editor is Phillip J. Bartell. Costume designer is Toye Adedipe. Composer is Kathryn Bostic. Executive producers are Leonid Lebedev and Stephanie Allain (*Hustle and Flow*, *Black Snake Moan*).

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Justin Simien took the 2014 Sundance Film Festival by storm with his debut feature film, *Dear White People*, an irreverent exploration of identity in “post-racial” America. Simien adroitly elicits both laughter and outrage with the interwoven stories of four ambitious black students at the fictional Ivy League college Winchester University who negotiate the complex realities of a life lived on the edge of two conflicting worlds.

Simien started the first draft of the script in 2006, when he was an undergraduate at elite Chapman University in Orange, California. “I called it *Two Percent*, which reflected my experience of being one of very few black people at a mostly white college,” he recalls. “It was the position I had been in most of my life—toggling back and forth between black and white worlds.”

In predominantly white settings, Simien says he felt like an awkward representative of his race. “In black communities, I was always trying to figure out what shade and type of black person I should be. That inspired me to tackle what I thought would be an interesting new point of view of black experience in America.”

The lifelong film lover was also feeling frustrated at the lack of a black point of view in what he terms “smarthouse” cinema. “There were no new movies like Robert Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* or Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. That movement seemed to have died. I wanted to pay homage to that genre.”

But like many young first-time writers and directors, Simien had little luck getting the attention of the Hollywood establishment. “A lot of people responded to the material on a personal level,” he says. “But there isn’t much to compare this movie to. We are doing something that feels new and it was frightening to the gatekeepers.”

Without the financial resources or industry connections to move forward, Simien launched a guerilla campaign using social media, including the Twitter feed @DearWhitePeople. Like the film’s Samantha White, a biracial student and the host of an irreverent student radio show also called “Dear White People,” he incited controversy and commentary with acerbic, provocative remarks such as “Dear White People, the minimum requirement of black friends needed to not seem racist has just been raised...to two.”

“The Twitter account was the first thing anybody ever saw,” says Simien. “It looked like a joke account, a bunch of one-liners about the micro-aggressions of white people. The truth is, I was secretly using it as a writing tool. I wanted to sharpen and refine Sam’s voice. I was actually exploring her humor, her mindset and her reactions to events on the national scene.”

The unexpected popularity of the Twitter account had the welcome side effect of building an advance audience for the film. “I was also able to get a sense of how people would respond to Sam in the real world. Both the positive and negative responses I got directly informed the reactions, thoughts and opinions of characters in the film. In some cases, I used almost verbatim responses I got from Twitter.”

With awareness of the project growing, Simien rolled the dice and invested his tax refund in a concept trailer for the film. The notoriety he had gained on Twitter helped the trailer go viral, garnering national attention including an appearance on CNN and driving a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo. Eventually, he raised \$50,000, which was enough for him to begin casting while he figured out how to get the rest of the money he needed.

The challenges we faced led to creative solutions, and I could not have propelled the project forward without the amazing input of producers Angel Lopez, Lena Waithe and Ann Le” says Simien. “Funds are limited when you’re doing something new. We kept asking, how could we do this with the resources that we had and not cut back on ambition?”

Julia Lebedev, one the original Indiegogo donors, was following the development process closely. The principal of Code Red Productions as well as a longtime friend of Simien, she was impressed by the groundswell of grassroots support she witnessed. “I was initially skeptical of its commerciality. Angel and Ann really had to demonstrate the demand and need for such a project in the marketplace. Now I believe the film has legs beyond this incarnation,” she says. “It is a really fresh and funny way to talk about race, and from a financial perspective, it’s relevant to pop culture and music. That spoke to me as a brand. I don’t think this is just a cinematic experience. I would love to develop it as a television series.”

When the concept trailer got traction, she brought the project to the attention of her father, executive producer Leonid Lebedev, who was excited to finance after viewing Simien's clip from CNN and articles from sources including *The Huffington Post*. "That was summer 2013. Once I had the financing in place, we were able to start shooting almost immediately.

When the concept trailer got traction, she pitched her partners, showing them Simien's clip from CNN and articles from sources including *The Huffington Post*. "That was summer 2013. Once I had the financing in place, we were able to start shooting almost immediately."

Another key player in bringing *Dear White People* to the screen is executive producer Stephanie Allain of Homegrown Pictures, whose credits include 2006 Oscar®-winner *Hustle and Flow*. After an initial meeting with Simien in 2009, she had him pegged as a filmmaker to watch.

"I liked Justin's ideas," says Allain. "I could tell there was something special there, so I asked him to keep in touch. Four years later, my assistant, Mel Jones, suggested I take a look at the trailer. I watched and immediately sat down to read the script. I hadn't seen anything as socially relevant and commercial. It was also wickedly smart and funny.

"All I could think was, how can I help make this happen?" continues Allain. "I put my assets and my contacts in play to jumpstart the project. We were on a tight deadline, because Justin's dream was to take it to Sundance in 2014."

Allain, also director of the Los Angeles Film Festival, decided to bring in a trusted colleague, producer Effie Brown, to shepherd the film through production. Brown had also become aware of the script through the trailer, but thought she had lost out on her chance to produce when Allain snapped the script up. She was thrilled to get another shot at it.

"It is a really interesting topic to me on a personal level," Brown says. "So many of my friends and I have had the experience of being the only black face in an all-white place and always feeling like the 'other.' The film talks about that feeling, without ever getting up on a soapbox. It pokes fun at both sides of the issue."

When Brown read the script, it confirmed her initial impression that Simien was a natural filmmaker. "He wrote a beautiful, funny and poignant movie that hits you in the

heart and the gut at the same time,” she says. “He makes this specific experience universal. Anyone of any race is going to be able understand, because it speaks from more than one perspective and captures the ugly and beautiful parts of all sides.”

On the set and off, Simien impressed all his producers with his commitment, visual style and confidence. “He was very lucky to have quality people surrounding him,” says Brown. “It definitely took a village to make the movie. But from the start it was clear that he is a visionary who has something important to say.”

Lebedev adds that she never felt like she was working with a first-time filmmaker. “He knew exactly what he wanted each shot to look like,” she says. “It was very impressive to watch. He never seemed nervous. It was like he was born to do this.”

Simien says he sees the people around him growing disillusioned with the idea that America is entering a post-racial phase. “When Obama was elected there was a liberal sigh of relief,” he notes. “People thought maybe we had overcome racism and all of our racial history in one fell swoop. People are waking up to fact that it’s not true. There are eruptions of micro-aggression, as well as accidental and intentional racism capturing the public’s attention, from [Los Angeles Clippers owner] Donald Sterling’s comments to white celebrities wearing blackface. Accidental racism is very much in the zeitgeist.”

Simien thought he had invented an outrageous idea with the “unleash your inner negro” party in *Dear White People* and was shocked when he learned that such parties were springing up at college campuses across the country. “There was a similar incident at Dartmouth the week we started shooting,” he says. “Two days after we premiered in Sundance, an event happened in Arizona. The central problem is how we survive culturally. How do we find our place in a world where we don’t look like everybody else? But it’s an ongoing struggle even to figure out how to have these kinds of conversations.”

Dear White People could be a first step in the process, says Allain. “The movie speaks to young people about the dichotomy of what we’re being told is happening and what we’re experiencing. Yes, we have a black president, but that has piqued smoldering racism. You see it exploding everywhere, from the courts to these campus parties. No one is really dealing with it.”

“The recent spate of news stories about racist incidents in what some people are calling post-racial America really validates the movie,” agrees Lebedev. “Certain types of

behavior, intentional and overt or not, are taking place and not just on college campuses. I hope it can create a safe place to talk about and laugh about the issues we're facing.”

THE STUDENT BODY

Simien hinges his tale on four high-achieving students at Winchester University, each facing a unique dilemma, but all bound together by issues of race. The characters, he says, each reflect one of the most common responses he's seen in fellow students of color.

"They are versions of all of us at some stage, trying to get on culturally and find a niche in the wider world," says Simien. "The characters are essentially archetypes, so it would have been easy for the actors to play them on one note, but my entire cast brought such life to them. They constantly served up things I didn't expect. Their choices were always brilliant and nuanced and surprising."

Samantha White feels uniquely pressured to pick a side because she's of mixed race. Through quips like "Dear White People, Knowing Li'l Wayne lyrics no longer earns you an honorary Black Card," Sam raises questions about supposed racial harmony on campus. "She hangs her hat on her black identity pretty hard," says Simien. "Her survival technique is to completely root herself in her blackness."

"It was really important that Justin find the right actress," she says. "Sam has taken on this identity of the radical black activist, but she's clearly hiding from her other interests. Tessa Thompson, who plays Sam, had an innate understanding of the idea of taking an identity on and off, and she brings such intelligence to it."

Simien was familiar with Thompson's work, which ranges from the BBC America 18th-Century police drama "Copper," to the contemporary thriller, *Murder on the 13th Floor*. "As soon as we met, I knew she was the one," he says. "She has a giant mind that is always churning, looking at things from every possible angle. I needed that quality in Sam. The character is at once heroic and despicable. It's challenging to play that role and still have people like and care about you. Even when she had nothing to say in a scene, Tessa is able to bring a thousand things to any given moment."

Afro-sporting sci-fi geek Lionel Higgins is an aspiring journalist who is invited to join the student newspaper staff specifically to write about black culture on campus. Gay as well as black, he begins with no sense of identity, according to Simien, because he doesn't

fit neatly into cultural norms. “He chooses to stay apart, which is very lonely. A lot of the film’s narrative depends on him finally picking a side.”

Tyler James Williams, best known for his role as Chris on the long-running sitcom “Everybody Hates Chris,” impressed the filmmakers with an audition that stood out from any other they saw. “It was true to him and so truly Lionel,” Simien says. “I really believed him as this kid. It never felt like he was hitting me on the head with who he thought he was supposed to be as a gay man and a nerd. He never overplayed it, but he consistently made us laugh. That was very exciting.”

Allain, who had just finished filming *Peeples* with Williams when he was cast in this film, says the young actor is surprisingly smart and professional for his age. “His comic timing is so on,” she says. “Lionel is more or less Justin’s alter ego in the movie. When Tyler’s name came up, I knew he would be perfect. He brought a masculine, intellectual approach to the character.”

Colandrea Conners, better known as Coco, is willing to do whatever it takes to fit in with her white classmates, whether it is sporting blue contact lenses and a bone-straight weave or politely answering their insensitive personal questions. “She is playing the assimilation game without qualms,” says Simien. “To survive in this place, she’s going to have to be a certain kind of black woman. She has no problem appearing any way that gets her what she wants.”

Julliard-trained Teyonah Parris, well-known to fans of the television series “Mad Men” as Dawn, Don Draper’s boundary-breaking secretary, transformed herself for the role.

“I know Teyonah personally and I was completely blown away,” says Simien. “The character is so different from who she is as a person. She gave Coco layers of meaning, earnestness, fire and humor. Coco is a very complicated character and Teyonah absolutely found her.”

“Her metamorphosis into Coco is astonishing,” agrees Lebedev. “She’s virtually unrecognizable. And aside from that, you can’t stop watching her. There’s so much going on in her eyes. She is a really unpredictable actor, which was very exciting to watch.”

The fourth leading character is Troy Fairbanks, a handsome and accomplished student leader. Troy has it all, including a father who is dean of the university. After being

deposed as Armstrong Parker's president by his ex-girlfriend Sam, he is contending with his domineering father's expectations as he struggles to figure out his own path.

"Troy lives in the shadow of his father's vision for him," says Simien. "The generation before us, the ones sometimes called 'the talented 10th,' had to fight so hard to get where we are now, so there's extra pressure for their children to succeed. He has to be perfect to walk the line his father laid down for him."

Although Brandon P. Bell played Troy in early workshops of the film as well as the concept trailer, he still had to audition for the role. "We saw a lot of other actors at auditions," Simien says. "Brandon was the only one who didn't play the character on the nose. Troy's life has never been simple and Brandon saw the scared kid who is tap dancing for his life."

"Brandon brilliantly played the insecurity of a successful smart kid who lets his insecurities get in the way," says Lebedev. "The way he tries to make his family happy at his own expense and struggles to fit in with his peers is something every audience member—of any race—can relate to."

Watching from the sidelines throughout the film is Kurt Fletcher, the white editor of the college humor magazine that sponsors the divisive party, as well as the college president's son. "He is one of my favorite characters," says Brown. "He embodies the voice of a lot of young, white people. He has a point of view and it's not mine, but it's not necessarily wrong."

Played by Kyle Gallner, Kurt Fletcher is a complicated antagonist who is not without his own charm, says Simien. "You may disagree with what he has to say, but you can't help but chuckle at it. Kyle is incredibly gifted and he manages the balance between humor and sincerity with a lot of skill. He made sure the character didn't come across as cardboard and one-dimensional."

To play Dean Fairbanks, Troy's father, the filmmakers were fortunate enough to cast Dennis Haysbert, who has brought his impressive gravitas to roles ranging from the president of the United States on the hit series "24" to a 1950s gardener in *Far from Heaven*. "You recognize that voice immediately," says Lebedev. "He embodies the dad that you're kind of afraid of, but want to please. He really loves his son and Dennis captured that superbly. It was very exciting for these young actors to work with someone of that stature."

“Dennis is the man,” Simien says. “When he speaks, you tremble. That was really important for Dean Fairbanks. He can feel almost like an antagonist to Troy, but it comes from love. When I needed to feel the fear that Troy felt at disappointing him, I got it immediately. I was trembling in my boots. Dennis is a world-renowned actor, so it was such a pleasure and joy to see a character I wrote in the hands of someone I have admired for so long.”

CAMPUS POLITICS

Dear White People was shot over 20 days primarily at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. “It was an intersection of timing, tax rebates, availability of crew and great locations,” says Simien. “They have a fantastic film board that really helped us realize the vision of the film with a limited timeline and budget. It was very specific; locations had to be just so.”

Simien worked with production designer Bruton Jones (*Underworld*, *Next Day Air*) to modify those settings to create a distinctive visual style he calls hyper-reality. “I felt that a satire should have that quality,” the director says. “That’s just how I saw it instinctually. So much of black American culture is a pastiche of influences. The characters are piecing their individual worlds together.”

The director also drew on his longstanding love of film to visually honor past greats including Bergman, Kubrick and even Fritz Lang. “It’s unusual for a movie about black people to operate that way,” Simien says. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen classical music or references to films that were shot before 1975 used in a movie about black culture.

“There’s lots of iconography baked into the set pieces,” he continues. “Because the movie is about identity and how we align ourselves based on visual symbols and clansmanship, we scattered objects throughout film to signal how characters align themselves ideologically.”

That idea is also played out in the characters’ wardrobes. “Sam White and her crew have an Angela Davis, 1960s thrift-store military vibe,” says Simien. “They are about the ‘movement.’ Troy dresses in a preppier style befitting a kid with money—and fashion sense. We tried to encase Coco in status symbols she thinks appropriate to the people around her. And Lionel has no style at all. As long as he’s covered up, he’s fine.”

Even before the film’s official release, Simien has been able to gauge its effect on moviegoers, which so far has been profound. “It’s been really validating to see the film connect with diverse audiences,” he says. “I want to speak to the human experience, not

just a black experience. Every screening we've had has sold out. At least 95 percent of the audience stays for a Q&A because they want to discuss the film. They're provoked by it. Even people who struggle with one character or another see something of themselves in it by the end."

To executive producer Allain, the universal response is due primarily to Simien's skill as a filmmaker. "I think black audiences may get the point more quickly, because white audiences may not be aware of how it feels when they ask to touch your hair or whatever," she says. "But Justin makes sure that the audience has permission to laugh. He has the ability to speak the truth and be comfortable in the uncomfortableness."

The film is meant to provoke and challenge audiences in a positive way, says Brown. "I hope that this movie catches fire," the producer adds. "It has the potential to become more than a movie. It could become a bit of a movement. A whole array of perspectives and points are brought up in a tongue-in-cheek way and every character's perspective has a grain of truth. I'm very familiar with my own point of view and it was refreshing to hear the other side's.

"Racism wears completely different clothes today than when I was in college," she adds. "Kids today don't know much about historical segregation. They grew up on Beyoncé, Jay Z, Kobe and Oprah. They voted for Obama. There's a sense that with a black person in the White House, it's over and we should shut up already. This can be a conversation starter for people who might not feel comfortable having that conversation. You can agree to disagree, and you can also laugh."

Simien will be satisfied if the movie sparks conversation, but he also aspires for it to become a stepping stone for a new wave of cinema. "The 'smarthouse' has become a very white place and I don't know why," he says. "It doesn't represent America or American taste. We should see some people of color and minorities in these films. I want people to be talking and seeing themselves and the human condition in a slightly new way. If we get the response from the public at large that we're getting at these festivals, I will consider my mission to have been accomplished."

ABOUT THE CAST

TYLER JAMES WILLIAMS (Lionel Higgins) may be best known for playing the title role on the Emmy Award®-winning series “Everybody Hates Chris.” This performance earned him the 2007 NAACP Image Award for Best Actor in a Comedy Series.

Williams made his return to primetime network television in 2012 by co-starring as Owen on the NBC comedy “Go On,” alongside Matthew Perry. The show was nominated for a People’s Choice Award for Favorite New Comedy.

Williams was seen on the big screen in the Tyler Perry comedy *Peeples*, opposite Kerry Washington and Craig Robinson. Other film credits include *Unaccompanied Minors*, directed by Paul Feig (*Bridesmaids*, *The Heat*).

Previously, Williams starred in the Disney Channel original movie “Let It Shine,” playing a gifted rapper full of self-doubt. His performance earned an NAACP Image Award nomination. Additional television credits include “Law & Order: SVU” and numerous sketch appearances on “Saturday Night Live.”

Williams began acting at the age of 4 on “Sesame Street” and later co-starred in the animated series “Little Bill.”

TESSA THOMPSON (Sam White) is well known by television audiences for playing Jackie Cook on the cult series “Veronica Mars.” She most recently played Sara Freeman on the BBC America series “Copper,” a period drama co-starring Tom Weston-Jones and Kevin Ryan. She has also made appearances on “Heroes,” “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Private Practice.”

Thompson starred in the critically acclaimed film *Mississippi Damned* and joined a stellar cast in *For Colored Girls*, the film adaptation of Ntozake Shange’s stage play. She will next be seen as civil rights leader Diane Nash in Ava DuVernay’s *Selma*.

Thompson began her professional career in classical theater and continues to work on the stage. She is a singer and percussionist in the buzzed-about electro-soul band Caught a Ghost.

Thompson currently splits her time between Los Angeles and New York.

TEYONAH PARRIS (Colandrea “Coco” Conners) may be an up-and-coming actress, but she is no stranger to the limelight. A member of the 2013 SAG Award-nominated ensemble cast of hit AMC drama “Mad Men,” Parris portrays Dawn Chambers, Don Draper’s loyal secretary and the first African American hire at Draper’s firm.

A Juilliard alum and versatile television, film and stage actress, Parris is taking over both the silver and small screens in 2014. Her latest venture is the Starz Network series “Survivor’s Remorse,” a dark comedy from Mike O’Malley and producer LeBron James that is set in the world of professional basketball.

Parris doubled down with two feature comedy premieres at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. In addition to *Dear White People*, Parris co-starred with Paul Rudd and Amy Poehler in the romantic comedy *They Came Together*. Previously, the actress was seen in *How Do You Know*, opposite Reese Witherspoon, and the TV series “CSI” and “The Good Wife.”

Parris made her professional stage debut on Broadway in Tony Award®-winning playwright John Guare’s “A Free Man of Color.” Set at the turn of the 19th Century, the comedy directed by George C. Wolfe also starred Jeffrey Wright.

BRANDON P. BELL (Troy Fairbanks) is best known for his guest-starring roles on the hit television shows “NCIS”, “Two Broke Girls” and “Revenge”, as well as a recurring role on ABC Family’s “Switched at Birth.” He also starred in the Nickelodeon drama “Hollywood Heights.”

Born in Dallas, Bell spent his youth playing sports until his parents enrolled him in the African American Children’s Theater (AACT) to gain exposure to the arts. From that point on he knew that acting was what he wanted to do with his life.

After high school, Bell moved to Los Angeles and was accepted into the USC theater program. In 2007 Bell graduated from USC with a bachelor’s degree in theater and in 2008 he received his master’s degree in education.

DENNIS HAYSBERT (Dean Fairbanks) captured the attention of audiences and critics alike with his groundbreaking role as President David Palmer on the hit Fox series

“24,” for which he received his first Golden Globe Award® nomination. He also starred in the CBS series “The Unit,” an iconic and culturally relevant series produced by David Mamet and Shawn Ryan. Haysbert also appeared in the critically acclaimed CBS drama “Now and Again.”

Haysbert returns to television as Detective John Almond in the new Fox drama “Backstrom,” starring alongside Rainn Wilson and Page Kennedy. His forthcoming film projects include *Think Like a Man Too*, *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* and *Men, Women & Children*.

Other film credits include *Life of a King*, *Welcome to the Jungle*, *Mr. Peabody & Sherman*, *Wreck-it Ralph*, *LUV*, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, *The Details*, *Breach*, *Jarhead*, *Love and Basketball*, *Absolute Power*, *Love Field*, *Major League*, *Heat*, *Random Hearts*, *What’s Cooking*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Navy Seals*, *Suture* and *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*.

Haysbert is a third-party advocate for Allstate Insurance Co. and has appeared in commercials for the company since 2003.

He is active in the fight against AIDS and has been a spokesperson for the Harlem Health Expo’s “Break the Silence” campaign and the Western Center on Law and Poverty. He has done many USO tours, most recently visiting a U.S. Navy vessel and encouraging troops in Italy, Germany, Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.

Born and raised in Northern California, Haysbert began acting with a television role on an episode of the Emmy-winning series “Lou Grant.”

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JUSTIN SIMIEN (Director, Writer and Producer) was recently lauded as one of *Variety's* "10 Directors to Watch." He earned a Streamy Award nomination for the web series "INST MSGS," which was distributed by Revision 3. In addition to producing and directing online companion pieces for Participant Media's *The Help*, *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *Middle of Nowhere* campaigns, he has also directed, written and produced for Take Part TV, Participant's funded YouTube channel.

Before entering the world of content creation, Simien worked as a publicist and marketing specialist for film companies such as Paramount Pictures, Focus Features and Sony Television.

Simien resides in Los Angeles.

STEPHANIE ALLAIN (Executive Producer) founded Homegrown Pictures, Inc. in 2003, a company dedicated to producing for film and television the work of writer/directors who create authentic depictions of people of color. Homegrown Pictures has produced the work of several first-time directors and their films have been nominated for more than 80 awards including Independent Spirit Awards, NAACP Image Awards and Oscars®. These titles include *Hustle & Flow*, *Something New*, *Peeples* and Gina Prince Bythewood's upcoming drama *Blackbird*, starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Minnie Driver and Danny Glover.

EFFIE T. BROWN (Producer) founded the Los Angeles-based production company Duly Noted Inc., the force behind such critically acclaimed HBO Films as *The Stranger Inside*, *Real Women Have Curves* and *Everyday People*. Brown's film *Rocket Science* won the Sundance 2007 Grand Jury Prize for Directing and was nominated for Best First Feature, Best Screenplay and Best Actress at the Independent Spirit Awards. Since then she has produced *Polish Bar* and *The Inheritance*.

From 2011 to 2013 Brown teamed with Jon Avnet and Rodrigo Garcia to produce WIGS, an original-content channel for Google/YouTube. WIGS is currently the No. 1 scripted channel on YouTube.

JULIA LEBEDEV (Producer) founded Code Red Productions, a film financing and production company, in 2009. In addition to *Dear White People*, Code Red has produced such independent films as *The Good Doctor*, *Honour*, and *The Prophet*.

For publicity information, please contact:
Marek Steven & Joe Brace @ Witchfinder
marek@witchfinder.co
joe@witchfinder.co