

An Interview With Charles Thompson C.E.O of Prestigious “Black BAFTA’s” Screen Nation.

Charles Thompson, CEO of the Screen Nation Film & TV Awards, denies being a trendsetter but the Ghanaian has a history with pirate radio at the beginnings of what would turn into the club music scene we all know today, and his efforts to bring to the mainstream an annual celebration of black achievement in British film and TV may be seen as nothing short of being ahead of the game.

Can you tell me a bit about what has been an influence on you in your early life, in terms of impacting your work ethic and just your way of life in general?



I'm from a family originally of nine children, from my mother who worked very hard obviously, but when I was a young boy two of my elder brothers died in accidents when I was very young so I didn't really get to know them. What that left was five sisters, four of which who are older than me and one was just a year younger than me, and on top of that my mother was the eldest of seven sisters, so my biggest influence on my life that actually has made me as much of who I am I imagine is women, and African women generally. Through my immediate family, my siblings and my aunts, they were all extremely strong women, professionals, as well as mothers, housewives and the like, and had a very strong work ethic, and were very nurturing. Being a boy amongst all of that I actually learnt about women and their...magic, lets put it that way.

How important is it to have an annual award show celebrating black achievement in film and TV?

I suppose it is important to recognise the excellence in people when they've achieved good things. If they're not being recognised elsewhere, if say these individuals are part of the British film and TV industry, and they feel that they have achieved very good standard, have done the best they can, have worked very hard, made sacrifices like many others, but for one reason or another, very complex and difficult reasons sometimes, they're not being nominated, never mind even winning. There then is a sense of, a lack of motivation to kind of really do more, in this context anyway they might think to move somewhere else where they'll be more recognised, and so in that sense an award show which rewards the sacrifices for the most part, their creativity, their excellence, is an important moment for them to be seen, that their peers are acknowledging them, and that what they have done has some value. So in that respect it is important, it's also great to have a great party and a get-together once a year too.

How hard was it to make Screen Nation happen?

It was very hard, it is hard now. *laughs* Just because you make a movie and it makes ten million dollars, doesn't mean that the next movie you make is going to be easy, it might be just as hard. It's just another experience, so in that respect it's a continuous journey. It's been hard to get it started because the concept, the idea of it first of all. A lot of people will say "Well if you do something that is generically known as a black film and TV awards, and award people of African heritage, won't you be ghettoizing them, won't you be excluding them, won't you be marginalising them?" and I say "No, actually I'll just be recognising them." That's all I'll be doing. If you see that they're marginalised or excluded, then that's your perception. I'm saying this is what we're doing in a positive form.



So it's difficult to get the support, not just from the mainstream where you need the support in terms of sponsorships and deals, etc, but from the sector. That's from the black film and television sector where they're like "No I don't want to be part of these awards because I see myself as a British filmmaker, I should be nominated in the BAFTAs" and I'll say "Fine, I'm not saying that you shouldn't. I'm saying this is what is available to you if you wish to take it, take it on board positively, don't take it on board negatively" because I don't look at the BAFTAs negatively because they haven't nominated or awarded many black actors or technicians. I'm just saying they need to address and develop on that point of view. Try and challenge it positively, and so in that sense it has been hard to get the consensus of agreement on how we can proceed forward, but its been most difficult in terms of financing it. Awards by their very nature are expensive, if you want to set a standard and there is; the standard is the Oscars, which is high gloss, high glamour, etc, etc, and you're basically PR'ing your business to the world and that costs money. Then you need the support of the BBC, channel 4, ITV, etc.

Do you perceive a lack of black acting talent allowed to shine in central character roles in British mainstream films?

I think that's reasonably clear. People see it, you know, its not like you cant see it. There are a lot of extremely talented black actors who could play leads, but its not a straightforward question as to, well is it the producers not being put in that position, is it...its about writers being able to write any which way they like, as producers and directors help develop these works with a view to an audience. Its about casting directors being open to colour blind cast and leading characters who's written as 'John' to play the hero, lover, whatever, to be [from] any type of culture, not just black. Then there are producers who are confident enough in the awareness of the talent to be able to pitch them hard enough to distributors who finance these movies for the most part, for them to believe that there is an audience that will come and watch them.

There's all of those things that...its proven time and time again from many, most of the African-American actors, there are some British, who are leading men, from Denzel Washington to Laurence Fishburne to Samuel L Jackson and this is across a range of movies, not just movies that are set in a generically 'black story' as such, but completely outside [such as] an action comedy. Its proven that people who come to see these people are not just people who are of that culture but other people, so yes there is a lack and when you consider that someone like Chiwetel Ejiofor, from Dirty Pretty Things, his talent is acknowledged. It's been acknowledged for a long time, he's been in a lot of major works but he wasn't acknowledged for Dirty Pretty Things. I think he was acknowledged two years later, or a year later, as a rising star, and in the same year he plays alongside Denzel Washington in a Spike Lee movie and he holds his own against Denzel. This is a guy who just played a lead in Kinky Boots. For someone who is a rising star he's done bloody well, considering he's a black guy, so that has to be looked at and if he was any other actor, in fact if he was Keira Knightley. *laughs* Do you know what I mean? Who's a god now almost and she's a 21 year old kid who's done a couple of movies and you know, anyway its clear.



Also when you consider classically, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, the actress from Secrets & Lies. Historically nominated as the first black British women to be nominated for an Oscar, but yet when British Screen as it was at that time took what was the young hot talents at that year to Cannes, to parade them and say "This is our talent", they didn't take Marianne Jean-Baptiste who was Oscar nominated. Not one of them had been anywhere near an Oscar nomination or had the charisma or appeal as an actress and she quite rightly said "That's it, I'm quitting England", so yes its clear that there is a lack of black talent in central roles in mainstream films.

You used to be a DJ, can you tell me about your experiences?

I was a DJ back in the day, as they say. This was in the early to mid 80's, before the DJ was the DJ, if you know what I mean.

Before the Carl Cox's and the like.

Yeah, before house music, the summer of love, all of that. So back then it was something fun to do, that I enjoyed with my friends, but we were just on the verge of beginning to create the club music scene that is now here. I basically did it as a bit of fun, joining my friends who were actually guys who started a sound system, and then we talked our way into a club in the West End and then began playing the West End which was not that usual for young black guys to be playing what was then kind of electronic music, early hip hop, pre-house, it wasn't house music then, in the West End just for a mixed crowd any type of music, because mostly now you generally get certain styles of music in certain clubs, and that's the way it went.

But it was a really great experience; it was the time of the pirate radio, when pirate radio was beginning to become legitimate. Kiss FM was a pirate weekend station at that

point, where many of the world-renowned DJs started. Also Choice FM was then a pirate radio station, etc. I was doing some pirate work and I met people like Trevor Nelson, Trevor Madhatter as he was called then as part of his sound, Jazzy B from Soul To Soul sound system as opposed to Soul To Soul the band, Gordon Mac former managing director of Kiss FM who was just a DJ and entrepreneur, Paul Trouble Anderson one of the great house/garage DJs who was just Troublesome at that point, all these guys that were coming up.

Do you consider yourself a trendsetter, considering your involvement with radio and now with Screen Nation? Are you ahead of the game?

I don't know if I'm ahead of the game but I suppose I must be in a circle of things, and people, that are doing things that are making some kind of change or having an effect in London at the very least, maybe the part of the planet that we're in. I don't think about it because you just do it and then it happens; it takes a lot of circumstances to make that all happen.

How and why did you get into the film industry from radio?

Well I didn't make it a conscious thing, you end up on radio because someone says "We're doing a pirate, come on we need you to fill a slot." I take the late night slot because I'm up late at night and I can play what I like and my personal music is jazz funk, that's what I really like. You just get used to knowing how to communicate in another way and that's interesting, as well as just with your music. I didn't go into film and TV purposely. I was unemployed for a while in the 80's and not sure what I wanted to do because previously to that I was training to be an accountant, what my mum and dad wanted me to be, and I saw a thing. It was through a, what is kind of now known as a New Deal scheme, to train in video production. So I went to a place called Pimlico Arts & Media and learnt about video/television production. From there I realised this was something that I was interested in and went forward with it and here I kind of am now.

What has your experience as a producer been like?

Well over many years things change, you know. I started off as soon as I knew about video television production. I knew I wanted to be a producer but I knew I couldn't just be a producer because you need to know quite a lot, you need to have a lot of relationships and you also need something to fall back on. I was an editor first, for about three or four years because I understood that filmmaking, anything audio/visual, is in the edit. That's where it happens.

It was my backup as a job but all the time I was trying to gear myself towards making work and I understood that to make work, to actually be in control of it was not to be the director but was to be the producer. Now, my experiences over that period of time have gone up and down as my experiences increased, so my circle of relationships has increased, because that's the key thing. The more relationships you have, the more significant relationships you have as a producer, the more you can get things done. Because it's just about getting things done.

The contacts you have.

Yeah, ultimately, and beginning to make them as well. With a background that people will at least sit down and listen to you because you've got something behind you. So it's been pretty difficult, but I've been reasonably lucky in that I made, well I opted to make, a lot of first films by new directors because my interest was to develop a whole bunch of directors that would all work for me, and I would make feature films with them in the future. I did that and many of those directors have all gone on to work in television, commercials, doing movies, different things like that, and I have relationships with them.

So it's been different from the beginning to now, but it's not been easy, because raising money, which is the bulk and serious part of what a producer's work is, is extremely tough for anybody, and when you're trying to raise money for projects that are maybe deemed not to have the audience value that you might feel it could have. The financiers with their institutional private or industry...they are sometimes reluctant to take the risks that are involved in making any film production.

There are many sponsors involved.

Yeah, you need that, but the reason there are many sponsors because the many give very little, so you need all the very little's to make it work on a bigger scale. So it's been difficult in that respect, just getting to grips with all the political questions and issues to do this, because I make films. I try to make films as opposed to give awards and acknowledge people.

There are many sponsors involved with the Screen Nation Awards. Do you think you're established now?

No, not at all. It would be silly for me to think, just because I've had all the broadcasters in the industry or most of the institutions support the event over the years in various ways, that we're established. It's not the case. Every year you have to go back and make the case for support, continuously. It's not like they just say "Yes we'll sponsor you for the next five years" and so in that respect I know we're not established. There are many supporters and individuals in the business who understand what I'm trying to do and see it as a positive thing, especially these days with regards to the interest in cultural diversity and all those things, but yet there isn't a consistency in terms of the financial support increasing as the costs and the scope of the awards increases.

So in that respect I wouldn't say it's established. It's established from the point of view of: it's now known, people know what it is. I understand more of what it can do, it has made definitive relationships with Americans who are in the higher end of the movie business at the very least, African-Americans that is, and so in that sense it has kind of found its feet, but I wouldn't say it's formally established. I would say it's another two years before that's fully the case but we're on the verge of success, a significant step which is a TV deal which then opens the door to many more people that learn about the event and so increases the potential for sponsorships.

Screen Nation is not just an awards ceremony but a foundation. Can you explain a bit more about that?

The foundation was conceived right at the outset of the awards in 2003. It's taken a while to formally make it happen. The reason being is that the foundation first of all is designed to create an entity like the Academy, like the BAFTA Academy or the American film Academy, which is first of all a voting body. A body that kind of keeps the 'history of' the film and TV in this sector in its hands and helps to promote and develop film and TV to young people, for other people who want to find out about it.

The foundation was conceived first of all as an online presence because of this day and age, people all over the world, its easy to be seen in that way as opposed to in a building where someone can go and meet up and have a drink, have a meeting, etc, etc, that will cost quite a bit of money to put together. The online presence is now nearing completion with what effectively is a comprehensive website which is database driven, which will hold, as in many respects IMDB does, information on black British talent, because that's the focus here, and within that context they will then be able to communicate with each other because notoriously in the movie business, in any kind of music business usually, you know, actors don't talk to other actors, directors don't talk to other directors. So sometimes business that could be done isn't being done, people have to talk to everyone's agents in order to get things moving and that can sometimes hold things back.



So the idea of the foundation is to create a network and an opportunity ultimately, through the database. All the individuals who have been nominated before and who've won before will be the people who will decide every year over who should be nominated. That's its first role. Then there after they can network and create opportunities and decide on how the awards itself moves forward, so then I can step back, and let the people who it's for, run it. That's the foundation.

I interviewed independent black director Kolton Lee recently, in his opinion he felt that it was very difficult for black filmmakers to get funding, not just because they're black but because investors and the industry itself are not willing to invest in a film with central characters that are non-white.

Yes that's true; it goes back to that question of...

He said racism runs deep.

Yeah, it's misunderstood. Its not people don't quite appreciate that a black character in a film who has a central role can appeal to a broad audience and so therefore should quite rightly if that role is within a well written, well constructed script that is within a package that is attached to a talented director who's got experience, etc, etc. Because it takes a lot to make a film, there's no reason that film shouldn't be financed, but the final hurdle is getting money. The financiers are the most risk averse, they don't want to take any risks if they can avoid it, and so when you've got something that is very not common to them, they will probably reject it for reasons that they don't consider to be racist, but they might consider it to be financially historically financial *laughs* Yeah? These things have worked before, that's because people have tried it enough times, etc, etc and so yes what Kolton is saying is true.

There is a sharp contrast between England and America where you look to America and there's loads of famous black actors and over here, and to look at the example of Dirty Pretty Things, the white filmmakers had trouble casting a black actor in the main role.

Of course and America despite the fact that it's more overtly racist understands the power of money. It's about that. Its about "Well who's going to come to the cinema to watch these guys, have these guys got that constituency out there that will pay, yes they have, people love the rappers and everybody else" and so that's across the board not just from the black communities and so they'll put them in these roles. Over here they haven't yet gone past an idea of what Britain is yet, and understood that fully to accept it, and haven't appreciated it, or rather maybe the black communities economic muscle has not been wielded to the point where the film industry can see it and say "Ok there's an effect that happens if you put someone in this role", you know. Someone like Ashley Walters has the potential to be a leading actor in mainstream movies as well as films that have a definitive interest to the black audiences and change the way British movies are financed by virtue of a film that proves they can be successful, and they'll say "Well alright, lets put him in every movie" but others will hopefully given a shot and a chance.

Yes, Kolton is right, there is a inherent racism that is in the business and it's historical and there usually is economic reasons why they use that argument but it's difficult for a creative person and business person to understand it when all they're trying to do is tell a story, that's all they're trying to do. People tell stories that are close to them, women tell stories about women, children tell stories about children, and things that they know, and there's nothing wrong with that, and in fact its good to see different perspectives and fortunately what's happening now is that there are stories being told but they're coming, once again as in music, from a youth culture perspective. You know, we've got Bullet Boy, Kidulthood, Life 'n' Lyrics and they're all youth orientated films rather than films that might appeal to slightly older audiences from the black community. It's a question of, you know at the end of the day you have to live with this as a filmmaker, you've got to say "Either I will let this thing stop me or do I keep going on and find ways around it."

We've talked about British actors and directors; we see that once they've tasted initial success in this country they immediately move and work in the USA. Do you see the USA as a threat or rival?

No, not at all. They'll never take all the talent because they've got as much talent over there as we have here. Its different acting styles and I think that's partly why that won't

happen as well. Also I think Americans and British people have different mindsets, really at the end of the day, where all Americans are heading to Hollywood, you know it's about being a big star for the most part, for most of them, and being acknowledged for who they are. A lot of British actors are about the craft and about finding their way through with what they have. They also want to be well known, rich, famous and all the rest of it, but I'm not sure that the black British actors that do go over there will weaken the British industry. They do by virtue of the fact that they take an experience and talent out of the mix but at the end of the day they're British, it's a global business, you should be able to work anywhere and America, Hollywood, you know, LA, Miami or New York to a certain extent, that's where most of the work is for English language film and so if these guys want to be given the chance to play more characters, get paid more, I understand it.

I really don't think necessarily that it's a threat because there is a lot of talent trying to come through. They just won't be able to benefit from having these guys, their peers, to get experience from, but what it will do is that those guys will be given their shot, maybe a little bit earlier than they would have been because what tends to happen with the black acting fraternity is that a few are chosen and they are the ones who are always put forward in all the roles and there's others who try and get through, who can play the roles, who don't get through. Also many of these actors have reached a certain age where they no longer can play 25, they have to play 35, 45, because that's who they are, so they need to move to another level, and those roles aren't necessarily here in England and when they move to America where there are slightly more of those roles, usually the cop kind of scenario, they're up against very experienced American character actors who know the lay of the land. Of course they can compete because their acting ability is more rounded, this is what Americans generally think of British actors, that their ability to act is more rounded, but yeah I don't think there's necessarily a threat.

The media has dubbed Screen Nation as the 'black BAFTAs', do you think there is a risk that the longer established ceremonies like the BAFTAs will see Screen Nation as an excuse to not award non-white actors so much, knowing that they will eventually get awarded at the Screen Nation awards anyway?

That's a good question. There is that possibility but I also believe there's more likely the possibility that they will be vain enough to think that "Well we should do something about this and get some of that value." That comes from being seen as doing something positive, you know. That's the way to...you can look at it that way as well.

I think if we look at what the comparison is with the Brits and the MOBOs. The Brits was going on fine, getting along, promoting their pop music and all the rest of it. There were times when there were a lot of black music artists that were making stuff and they weren't necessarily getting promoted, fair enough that's just all about record buying public and all the rest of it, but the MOBOs came about and it was seen that there were a lot of music artists who were appealing to the broad record buying public that weren't being acknowledged at the Brits. What the Brits did was to create the urban category. By doing that they thought "Well hey, we're not going to not reward the black British talent, we're going to actually acknowledge them because we don't want the MOBOs having awarded them" you know, the value, the flavour, but what they did in doing that was they added on a category which was misunderstood or misinterpreted and which had a range of nominees from very new emerging artists to experienced artists across from, grime music right through to soul, and then the question was asked, "Well what is

this urban category? How am I being compared to someone who's being doing music for ten years?" You know, compared to someone who's just had maybe a top thirty hit, but they're very flavour of the day, they're in the grime scene which is an underground music scene, they're all in the same category together and the public's been asked to choose.

The BAFTAs, I don't think that they will respond to it in that way. I think as new people come into the BAFTA organisation; its about committees who vote, that decide who nominees are, which is why not so many people get nominated, and as more people maybe go into the BAFTAs, who have wide experiences of diverse communities, they may be more open to acknowledging their peers, so I think that will actually change.

Urban is used a lot in relation to music, most notably music of black origin. I wrote an article on it recently and personally thought of it as an unfair term, what's your take on it?

Urban is the city environment, you know, that's kind of an opinion, that's the way I understand it and an interpretation of what urban means, those people that live in an urban environment, those people are going to be from a broad cultural base, but its understood that its come up in recent times as a categorisation to include...mostly it was geared towards music but its now been absorbed into many different areas to kind of represent what was music of black origin but is now being interpreted and being brought back out by all cultures. So rather than call it black music, any culture wanting to make that music would make it as urban music because its by virtue of living together in an urban environment that they took on these influences and then it came out in this new way. That's how I understood urban to be created, as a categorisation which will allow it to be marketed in the music business, but it's been taken on board in many different ways...

It seems to group a whole load of genres...

Yeah, and its inappropriate for it to be used in that way and its more inappropriate for people not to really have a deeper understanding of how it came to be and why that word came to be, you know it's a marketing thing as far as I understand it. It makes it easy to sell certain ideas without people feeling that they can't represent a certain thing, but what happens is that those people who originated the music, where they came from, they no longer can necessarily, or it seems make, what is deemed as black music.

It's like you can't mention black music anymore.

Yeah, you can only make urban music. *laughs* You know, the danger is what all this morphs into because its going to morph into something else in time and will the connection then to its historical base will be lost? Because things move so quickly and also a lot of young people aren't necessarily interested in history, they're just interested in what is happening now.

Joss Stone won best urban act, she's from Devon ...

Yeah, this is what it allows to happen and young people just accept it because they think "Well look, we're all together in this urban environment, we all listen to similar music, we all try and make it in a certain way, why cant we all be described in this way, and we're

not black, we're not white, we're urban." Now there's nothing wrong with that kind of idea but if you're going to use it you have to understand how it came to be that this idea now exists because there's a lot of sacrifice and pain that's gone into that process for people to just simply bandy it around in any way they like and more importantly like you say its become sometimes difficult for even black people to be able to say "I'm making black music."

"I'm making urban music to appeal to an urban audience, I'm an urban musician" now whatever all those things mean, they have to work it within themselves; people say different things to get through their lives. I don't know where the continent of black is, but I understand how it's used so I use it easily, but I'm a Ghanaian person. I'm from Africa, I'm generically known as a black man and so my experiences are within my black lifestyle, so I understand it, I'm not afraid to say it. If people have an issue with it, my thing is simple: Get over it. That's it. Get over it because I'm not thinking about it, you can if you want to but I'd advise you get over it quickly because I'll keep doing this thing, and if you want to focus on that one word to then imagine something else, its up to you, but I'll say get over it. That's not a blind foolish way to look at it, it's the real deal. That's my view on urban.

What kind of films and music are you into? (Don't say urban)

Well my music tastes can become urban *laughs* Because I'm older now, I like jazz funk music, that kind of style of music which most people think isn't music for dancing but actually it is. I also like hip hop, I appreciate good production. I have a strong identity with people like KRS-One and Guru, people like that. More kind of conscious hip hop; saying something. I also like very strong beats, or west coast hip hop. I'm not into too much house and all that kind of stuff, I don't mind garage if it's soulful. I also like some classical music but I don't get a chance to absorb it in all the time. You know; all kinds of different grooves but my personal preference is to just put on a record that will take me into a certain place, like jazz and jazz funk style.

Movies, I like thrillers. Cleverly plotted, very well written genre pieces for the most part that don't necessarily have to be Hollywood or British, they can be Turkish or Japanese or whatever. I like all cinema because to see how different people respond to different situations, that are very similar but they just respond to it differently, but its within the context of the genre, and that's all about human nature and its usually the edges of human nature, and I'm interested to see that, just to see how people really can be given the right or wrong kind of motivations. That's the kind of movies that I like.

You think you could get into directing?

No, not at all. I'm not interested in directing, not the slightest iota. I have a lot of respect for directors, they do what they do and I don't think I can do it.

Being CEO sounds like a stressful occupation, what do you do to chill out and take a step back from work?

That's a good question. Sit down and talk to my very many sisters about all their bloody problems, because they all come to me *laughs* No, well to chill out, basically I kind of don't have anything anymore really where I...I used to play cards with my friends because it was just something we did and so you kind of get to that zone where the only

thing is, well what's the numbers in front of me and who's trying to beat you *laughs* You know you just kind of play, but I tend to now just go for walks, just to be in a space where people aren't close to me necessarily. It's more the environment that's close to me.

I tend to sit in front of the TV and watch late night TV and its more like vegging, I'm not actually watching *laughs* I know that because I don't remember most of it, I just remember images, and half the time as a consequence you discover little programmes where black people are in, you think "Oh right ok, that's interesting" and then you see someone's career move from late night TV to more commercial and you think "Oh yes I think I remember seeing him on that late night show" and what's interesting is that, someone like Craig Charles whose very well established and has issues and problems started off in late night television many many years ago as a poet, and so you kind of, when you see someone, they'll be someone quite well known with a substance abuse problem later down the line...but no generally I kind of just do what most people do, have a drink, have a chat, I don't have any particular hobbies.

What has been the highlight of Screen Nation for you so far?

The highlight, well, there's a couple of highlights; its difficult for me to say there's a highlight. I suppose just getting to the time when somebody says "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Screen Nation awards" is a highlight! Just that alone, and it's not because I'm like "Yeah, we're there again" its just "Thank God we're there again!" The first ever event...you've got to understand this, the awards was not something that I dreamt about, had a vision about, you know? It came to me...I was running the international film festival since '99, the BFM international film festival and we decided we would honour an individual every year a lifetime achievement award, the first one went to Horace Ove whose known as the godfather of black British cinema. The second year, 2000, we honoured Sidney Poitier. Sidney couldn't come, we dreamed that he would appear and we'd give him an award; we would show a series of his films, because what we did was we showed a season of a person's films.

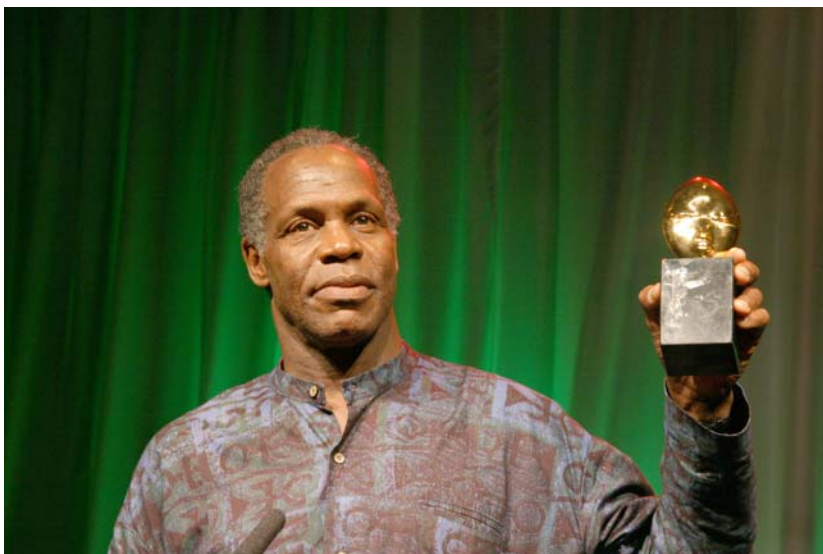
The third year in 2001, we were going to honour Harry Belafonte and I'd been working to get Harry to come to London, show his films. He was in South Africa. His people said ok, he'll fly by London; come pick up an award. So I thought, oh shit, if he's going to come and pick up an award we better do something for him, like drinks or whatever. In the end we gathered 450 people and people were excited that this event would happen and Harry Belafonte's coming, the guy we've known for a long time and I thought well if we're going to give Harry Belafonte, a non-British person, a lifetime achievement award, why don't we give a British person a lifetime achievement award as well, because they're going to be there. So I created a lifetime achievement award for a British person. Turned out unfortunately that Harry Belafonte was very tired from the racism conference that he was going to and couldn't make it last minute, but in town for the film festival was Billy Dee Williams, whose a long established actor, and many other American actors were there, so he was nominated to pick up the award on Harry's behalf. It just turned out that that day was September the 11th, the day everything occurred and these Americans were in town and it was all over the screens and you know, it was a difficult day, but we got through it, you know, people enjoyed it for what they could, and it will never leave my mind, as you can imagine, for that reason, as well as the other stuff that was going on.

The following year, now I will get to your question, the following year was another festival and I thought to myself, well this seemed to work, the effort they took to put together 450 people, why not invite a few more people and present a few more awards. Its not rocket science after all. So we held it at the Grosvenor House for 700 people and awarded the lifetime achievement award to Pam Grier. Lenny Henry got the UK version. It was magical. Going to that night, all of the actors, directors, they couldn't quite believe that this was happening and when they got there the atmosphere was electric. It went very successfully, I was really proud, it was the highlight of my career, my life.

To be responsible for all that...

Yeah, I said "Damn, my God, I got all these people together in one place" and you know, they're not fighting for a job, they're all just trying to cheer each other on and everybody's happy and people from the institutions and broadcasters are there, and its entirely possible to do something like this. Where all the talent can be seen in one place.

2004 which was my worst ever presentation where technically, the lighting, the VT guys all missed their cues, the seating plan didn't quite work, people were irate and all the rest of it, and my presenters basically quit on me after the first two awards, just didn't come back out on stage and I had to end up presenting the first couple of awards and in the end guests stepped up as nominees from the audience and took over the presentation. So that was one of those situations where shit goes wrong! *laughs* Now you're thinking where was the highlight? But this was one of the highlights, by the end of that night most people had stayed, all of those wonderful speeches made by people who understood the circumstances of what was going on. A lot of people came up to me and said "Charles it's a conspiracy" because they couldn't quite understand that a guy just had to press a button, just to play the nominees of a category was playing the wrong nominees for the category that was announced. I was saying, "Well I can't do anything about it, these guys rehearsed, I saw them, they did everything right, they got the script, what can I do?" I couldn't kill them now; otherwise we would have no show! So I went through all that and by the end of the night I was actually quite ok with it all because I understood, at that point I knew who were my friends and who weren't. Those who supported me during the time that we did it.



The highlight was when Danny Glover was there, and people came because Danny Glover was there. People couldn't quite believe that Danny was going to be there but when they arrived they were like "Oh God I can be standing next to Danny Glover" and were taking photos of him. There's no VIP status; he's very open. All these other guests

are there, Luke Goss, Linford Christie, this guy that guy, and so it was great. I had a great guest list, everything, but shit happened and Danny just sat there, seeing it all. I'm thinking I know Danny a little bit, by this time I've gotten to know him through communications, etc, so I kind of knew who he was, what kind of person he was, and he's not your Hollywood star type of person. His take on acting is that it's part of a social crusade that he's making. When he got on stage, his first words were, and I didn't see this at the time, I was dealing with some other matter and I just saw this on tape, but his first words that came out of his mouth were "Before I go on, I'd like to thank Charles Thompson and his crew for making sure that the show went on because that's the most important thing, that the show goes on" and I thought "Bloody hell, Danny Glover's just said my name" *laughs* Then I thought about what he said and yeah, he understood it, the only thing that I was doing was making sure the show went on. It wasn't anything else, you know, about blaming or whatever. I was just making sure it went on and I had to take the responsibility to do that, and he let everyone know that that was the most important thing, when these circumstances happen. And he told me personally, "Don't worry", he'd been to shows in America that had been running for twenty years, that when the show should have been two hours long, it was eight hours long, because there's problem after problem, so you know, just to keep doing what I was doing because it was important. So that was another important highlight.

Who is going to be the African-American screen legend at this year's show?

Well this year originally it was going to be someone else but this person is ill at the moment and we're looking to have him next year but this year I'm proud to be able to, a real favour of mine, they're all favours of mine basically, but it's Yaphet Kotto. Yaphet Kotto, most people know him, when they see him he's the "guy with the hair" you'd probably think he's wearing a wig.

He's very imposing!

Yeah, he's a very imposing character; he's been acting since the '60's. It may or may not be known, this is what I've discovered: that he's been in almost every seminal television series ever made. From Bonanza to the A-Team to The High Chaparral to Roots to Fantasy Island, every possible TV show that we all know and love from history he's actually appeared in! Which is very kind of weird. Plus obviously he's been in major movies like The Thomas Crown Affair, Blue Collar, Brubaker, Alien, Live and Let Die, so you know he's been around for quite a while and he is from a royal family from Cameroon, that's his parentage, his heritage, but he was brought up in America, so he's got a lot of stories to tell. He's written his autobiography recently and in there he claims to be related to the British royal family so I'm sure he's a pretty eccentric type of guy anyway, so it'll be fun to have him here. These guys are usually interesting at their age. *laughs*

On the British side we've got Mona Hammond, who is known as the kind of mother of British actors, she was in Desmond's and Porkpie, Babyfather, all those series. She's currently starring in a movie called 10,000 B.C. which is being made by Roland Emmerich, so unfortunately she won't be able to come to the event but she'll record an acceptance. We're also honouring an independent movie that was made this year that had a lot of music artists in it, called Rollin' with the Nines, and also [honouring] a gentleman called Clive Curtis. Clive Curtis is probably unknown to most people but he's

a stuntman, choreographer, action director, worked on many many British movies, early Bond movies. He's the leading black stuntman in this country and his credits are immense and we're acknowledging him as well.

The great thing about this year with the step up that's being made is that the show's on Sky, on Sky Movies on the 22nd of October, which is a great thing, and its screening just after Crash, you know the Oscar winning film. I cant ask for a better thing than that really, and the way its looking is that Sky are looking to invite Don Cheadle, Terence Howard and Ludacris to London, if they can make it, if not they'll record their relationship with the event, because they'll be nominated, so should they win they'll be there to receive their award. That's a great positive step up for the event, those guys will be able to go back to America and say "Hey, these guys are doing what they can in the UK, we should support them." So in that respect everything is positive and progressing, but I need more money to do this thing. *laughs*

What are your plans for the future?

My plan for the immediate future is to try to avoid doing too many things...

More late night TV.

Yeah! To try to relax a bit more, because there's a lot going on in life as opposed to just what you do, when you're in this kind of business it seems like it takes over.

It doesn't seem too different from being an accountant which is what your parents wanted you to be.

Yeah. *laughs* My thing is to just kind of try and relax more and build my family, that's the thing I want to do. This is a young man's game, cant do this forever, and I think just kind of encourage people to do the best and take on what I'm doing; that's what I want to do for my immediate future, to just travel, see different things. Not think about some actor or some director for one day; interests and demands, just forget about it; go swimming in the sea somewhere, things like that, because I don't get a chance to do that enough.