

Off the page: S. Epatha Merkerson goes from buying books for her own pleasure to buying rights to film *Leaving Cecil Street*.

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When S. Epatha Merkerson moved to New York City in 1978, her theater gigs often kept her on the road. "Every city I went to, I would look for the black bookstore," she says. "And I would buy books." She's not on the road as much now, thanks to a little television series called *Law & Order*. Merkerson has played Lieutenant Anita Van Buren on the show since 1993. Hers is the longest-running African American character on prime-time television. Although Merkerson's career has changed, one thing has remained constant. "I'm still in that same habit of going to a bookstore and purchasing books," she admits. Last spring, Merkerson made what is perhaps the biggest purchase of her life. She bought the film rights to Diane McKinney-Whetstone's award-winning novel *Leaving Cecil Street* (William Morrow, 2004). (See BIBR, FICTION REVIEWS, May-June 2004.) "When I read stories, it becomes cinema in my mind's eye," Merkerson reveals. "In my mind's eye, I grew up on that street. I know how it looks. I've seen the street."

Very few adaptations speak to her, Merkerson says, but adds, "One of my favorite adaptations is *Devil in a Blue Dress* (adapted from the Walter Mosley novel of the same name [Simon & Schuster, 2002]). It had the feel of the period, the smokiness of the time. Denzel was Easy. And Don Cheadle was Mouse. In my mind, I didn't see either of them (in the roles), yet once the film started, I was convinced."

Putting It on Film

Successfully convincing an audience isn't a problem Merkerson has had as an actor. As a producer, however, she recognizes the challenge it presents to her. "It's a daunting task to say, 'I want to take this book and make it into a film,'" she admits. Merkerson understands authors' trepidation when selling the film rights to their novels, but strongly believes that, "Someone has got to take these stories and let us see them. I think that *Cecil Street* is worth that. I really love the way [McKinney-Whetstone] weaves the pieces. The characters are so odd and interesting. She's an amazing storyteller. All her stories should be filmed, I'm convinced."

McKinney-Whetstone was equally moved when she found out that Merkerson wanted to buy the film rights to *Cecil Street*. "As soon as I heard Epatha's name, I was excited," she says. "The role of community is big in all my novels. The complexities of human nature. I have a sense that that [texture] would remain with Epatha's involvement."

Merkerson's theater-trained *Law & Order* costar Jesse L. Martin agrees. "Epatha couldn't be more talented or more grounded," he intimates. "I really do believe there's nothing [she] can't do. She has proven herself to be such a talent. The opportunities that present themselves to her are amazing. She's in a great position."

That position of which Martin speaks is threefold: woman, African American and over 50. Merkerson, at 53, seems to be hitting her stride, and she realizes the power of her presence in this moment.

Last September, she won an Emmy Award for her role as Rachel "Nanny" Crosby in the HBO original

movie *Lackawanna Blues*, written by Ruben Santiago-Hudson and based on his one-man, autobiographical show.

"The interesting thing about the night I won the Emmy was that Blythe Danner and Lane Alexander won as well," she observes. "It was quite extraordinary that three women of a certain age were able to [receive] this award for the work they do." Her long-standing presence on *Law & Order* is equally valuable because, Merckerson points out, "No one in this [cast] sees the world from a fifty-three-year-old, black, female perspective."

Telling It Right

It's the history of that perspective that Merckerson finds reflected in *Leaving Cecil Street*, the hopeful story of intertwining lives in a black Philadelphia neighborhood in the 1960s. "I grew up in the sixties, when black was becoming beautiful," says Merckerson. "Our lives were changing every day, and our stories weren't being told properly. It hurts me because we really are a beautiful and resilient people."

Frustration with how black stories are told is a great motivator toward purchasing film rights to well-written novels. "For black actresses it's a natural development because of the dearth of roles that exist in Hollywood," author Marita Golden points out. "African American literature is so rich and complex. It's a natural source of great stories and great roles."

Golden, who is also founder of the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation, tapped Merckerson to host the first Hurston/Wright Legacy Awards in 2002. The awards honor literature by black writers. Merckerson hosted the awards again in 2003, and in 2005 she cohosted with the acclaimed Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. Obviously, she loves the program. "First of all, just walking in and seeing all those black people," she says. "You say, 'Wow, this is part of our literary history right here.'"

Golden appreciates Merckerson turning to African American fiction as source material for film and wishes more black actors would follow suit. In addition to *Leaving Cecil Street*, Merckerson says she's talking with her friend Whoopi Goldberg about acquiring the film rights she owns to McKinney-Whetstone's first novel, *Tumbling* (Touchstone/Scribner, 1997).

Merckerson acknowledges that, "It's exciting to be in a position now where I can purchase rights to something and do it seriously," because she recalls when she wasn't seriously considered. Before winning the Emmy, when Merckerson tried to buy the rights to a particular book, she was told she should purchase it for another black actress who was hot at the time. "I just thought that was really rude," Merckerson remembers. "It was extremely insulting. I had the money." The film rights to that book, she says, have not been purchased by anyone else.

Never Accept 'Can't'

That experience could have deterred Merckerson, but she admits, "I'm stubborn." She also has had a strong role model in her mother, who earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in sign language at the age of 78. "When I was a kid going to high school, it was ninety percent white," says Merckerson. "I remember sitting at the kitchen table and [my mother] telling me, 'Don't you let a soul in this school tell you that you can't do anything that you want to do. No one can take your education from you. If they say you can't do it, prove them to be the liar.'"

Merckerson also looks at the example of "little entrepreneurs" like Diddy, Ludacris and Ice Cube. "The language of rap is not something I'm going to uphold, but if you talk to these kids, a lot of them just wanted to be actors. They found another way to get there. If the young bloods can do it, I need to get up off my butt."

Her greatest motivator, however, is her own love for her community. "I love black people," she enthuses. "They make me mad, they make me laugh. I love to hear the lies and the jokes. I love to see fellowship in

church. I love our music, the way we dress, how we wear our hair, the sass and the talk, the booties and the lips. I think what people understand most about me is that I really do love being a black person. People see the kind of work that I do, and I think they understand that there's something about who I am that I appreciate."

It's perhaps her strong role models and rich life experiences that make Merkerson gravitate to strong and complex characters on stage and screen and that attract her to similar characters in novels. "There are so many stories being written by so many writers," she adds.

Looking Inside Characters

A particular favorite of hers is author Pearl Cleage, whom she met in 1982 while performing in one of Cleage's plays. "When I saw *What Looks Like Crazy On an Ordinary Day* (Harper, 1998), I told her, 'Pearl, I got your book, I love your book!'" recalls Merkerson. "I get all her books," she continues. "*Babylon Sisters* (Random House, 2005) is a good story. But the sister is a little too young for me to play." Among other novels that have been optioned for film recently are Martha Southgate's *Third Girl From the Left* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005) and Lolita Files's *Child of God* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), bought by Kanye West. Nina Foxx's *Marrying Up* (Avon Trade, 2005) was optioned for the stage by Garrett Davis.

Merkerson sees in McKinney-Whetstone's novels a chance to glimpse the inner life of characters her age. "It's the woman in the basement," she says of the Cecil Sweet character Deucie. "And her whole train of thought when she's out of that basement. More than anything, that's one of the things that made me really like the story. This character who's lost."

Merkerson credits her theater background with giving her not only a particular eye for recognizing compelling characters, but also a strong bent for producing good drama. "When you're coming from acting," she explains, "you're coming from a very specific way of looking at something. And actors who come from theater and go into film have a different sensibility. There's a depth of work and discipline in theater that allows for a different kind of working environment in film."

Now that she's bought the film rights to *Leaving Cecil Street*, Merkerson has joined the ranks of Alfre Woodard (*The Jesus Thief*), Halle Berry (*Nappily Ever After*), Whoopi Goldberg (*At Her Majesty's Request*) and Oprah (*Women of Brewster Place*, *Beloved*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), our own cadre of sister actor-producers who look to African American literature for their enjoyment, passion and inspiration. "She's certainly at a point in her career where she's ready to take control of it," observes Golden of Merkerson.

"We never, ever are lacking talent in front of the camera," Merkerson points out. "What we are lacking are the people behind the scenes who are the decision makers. That's why I want to produce. I don't think I'm finished with being in front of the camera or being on stage by any stretch of the imagination. But at this point I have the opportunity to open my horizons and try something new." Sharon D. Johnson is a screenwriter and journalist in Los Angeles. Her last article for *Black Issues Book Review* was the cover story (May-June 2005) on Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, their final interview together.

THE ROAD TO STARDOM

Born Sharon Epatha Merkerson in 1952 in Saginaw, Michigan, and raised in Detroit, she was a dancer, and later theater, major and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Wayne State University. In addition to her role on *Law & Order*, she has a long list of theater credits on and off Broadway. Honors she has earned include a Drama Desk Award and Tony Award nominations for best actress for her performance in the August Wilson play *The Piano Lesson*; a 1992 Obie Award for her performance in *I'm Not Stupid*; and a 1998 Helen Hayes Award for starring in the *The Old Settler*, a Studio Theater production in Washington, D.C. She was introduced to television audiences in 1984 in an episode of *The Cosby Show* and later became known as Reba the Mail Woman on *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Diane McKinney-Whetstone is a Philadelphia author who uses the city as a backdrop for her novels. She is the winner of the 2005 award for fiction from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Literary Award. Other honors include a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, the Zora Neale Hurston Society award for creative contribution to literature, a Commonwealth of Pennsylvania citation for her portrayal of urban life and an Author of the Year award from the Go On Gid! Book Club. A wife and mother of twins, she teaches fiction writing at the University of Pennsylvania her alma mater.

Blues Dancing: A Novel HarperCollins Perennial, November 1999 \$13, ISBN 0-688-14995-2

Leaving Cecil Street William Morrow, March 2004 \$12.95, ISBN 0-688-16385-8

Tempest Rising Harper Paperbacks, February 1999 \$12, ISBN 0-688-16640-7

Tumbling Touchstone/Scribner, April 1997 \$13, ISBN 0-684-83724-2