

CELEBRITIES CHOOSE SIDES: WHO'S BACKING WHOM FOR PRESIDENT?  
WOODY HARRELSON'S GAY MOVIE + JASON BATEMAN'S FLIRTY SIDE

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plains. "And sure enough, when I needed to express that emotion in fiction, there came a windshield: the central metaphor for *Taxi Driver*.

"It's the same kind of feeling in *The Walker*, only in the case of someone like Carter Page it's not so much a windshield but a kind of Plexiglas cube that surrounds him. He seems to be part of it, but he's not quite part of it."

It's an interesting turn for the free-wheeling Harrelson, from whom Schrader extracts one of his best performances. Yet it's a performance Harrelson has been shy about trumpeting. The actor declined an interview with *The Advocate* and did not promote the movie at its world premiere at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival. "I'll tell you what happened," says Schrader. "He was very keen to do the film, felt very good about it after we finished, was very eager to see it—and then I made a mistake. I sent him an early cut of the film on DVD, and he didn't like it; he didn't like himself. He has not seen it since, although I just heard last week that everyone likes him so much in this that he's starting to come around."

Schrader doesn't know why Harrelson doesn't like his performance. "Actors are mysterious," he says. "While we were shooting, he wanted it to be a little fluffier than it was, a little more 'gay.' He wanted to show a little more of the pink dress." The pink dress? Schrader smiles: "I did a film with Rupert Everett [1990's *The Comfort of Strangers*], and Rupert would always say, 'You've got to tell me if the pink dress is showing.'" Still, despite the star's lack of cooperation, Schrader is confident that Harrelson's performance—like the film—will stand on its own. "ThinkFilm, which is releasing it, had the same situation last year with Ryan Gosling, who didn't like *Half Nelson*," he says. "It wasn't until the film started getting good reviews that he said, 'Oh, boy, I'd better rethink this.'"

As pleased as he is with the film's early notices, Schrader is even more excited by the audience's reaction to the sexuality of its main character. "I've taken the film to several film festivals around the world now, and Carter being a homosexual is about as big a nonissue as you can imagine," he says. It's a big relief considering that when he first wrote *The Walker* six years ago, Schrader asked his best friend, gay producer Alan Poul (*Six Feet Under*), to vet the script.

"By the time it got made, that whole concern was completely gone—the sense that you would need someone known in the gay community to put their stamp on it and say, 'This is OK.'" Schrader says. "Now it's not even an issue—that shows you how much things have changed." ❖

## SHORT ANSWERS

# Jamal Airs His Dirty Laundry

Maurice Jamal first blipped on the pop culture radar in 2003 as a recurring player on *Chappelle's Show*, the deliciously politically incorrect variety and sketch show on Comedy Central. A year later Jamal broke into film with *The Ski Trip*, a campy black gay independent feature that he wrote, directed, and starred in. His next project is the much anticipated *Dirty Laundry*, which opens in December and tells the story of Patrick, a successful gay man, played by über-hottie Rockmond Dunbar (*Prison Break*, TV's *Soul Food*), who returns home after many years and comes out to his family. Notable heavyweights in the cast include Loretta Devine (*Waiting to Exhale*) as the mother and gay icon Jenifer Lewis as Aunt Lettuce. The script has created a buzz for being a rarely seen mainstream black-themed drama with a gay subtext. We caught up with Jamal to ask him what it's like to break the film barrier. **By Rod McCullom**

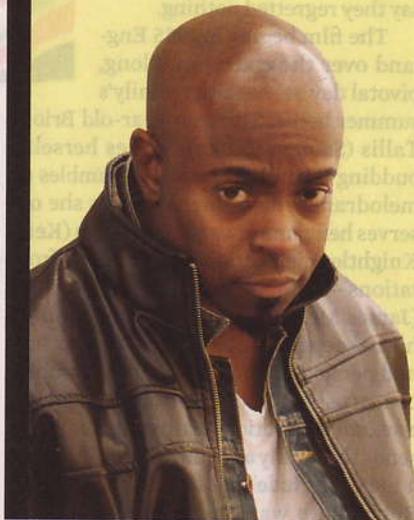
**The *Ski Trip* was a gay-themed romantic comedy. Why did you decide your next film would be a mainstream black family drama?**

I've always wanted to do a black family film. Something that would resonate with our people—one minute you're laughing, the next minute you're crying. The ultimate goal of filmmaking is to tell a wonderful story, so if I can do that with *Dirty Laundry* plus break down a few barriers, then it would be a wonderful thing.

***Dirty Laundry* is probably the first mainstream black feature film with a gay protagonist. Did you intend to make history?**

It wasn't so much that I wanted to tell a gay story, but the story wanted to be told.

In my experience, coming out is very singular. The process is very self-involved; it's about discovering your sexuality, your life, your freedom, it's all about you. So my idea was to think about the family: How does the family accept, react, and process the coming-out of one of their own? We have never seen this before in black film.



You have these wonderful and wacky characters—just like anybody's family—who have to cope. The wonderfully acerbic but sweet mom, played by Loretta Devine, the perfect Southern lady, so much like my own mom. The homophobic brother of the gay character. They are all wrestling with Patrick's coming-out and, ultimately, dealing with it.

**Is Patrick the prodigal son?**

Exactly. Patrick is like so many gay men. He was raised in a small town but never thought that he fit in there. As soon as he left for college, he packed up his bags and never looked back. He moved to the big city, started working out, got a fabulous job, a fabulous apartment, fabulous boyfriend. Then he has to return home and deal with all of his demons.

**This is Rockmond Dunbar's second time playing gay. First *Punks*, now *Dirty Laundry*. Few actors, black or white, would make these choices.**

Let me tell you, Rockmond is an actor's actor. Through him you can see Patrick grow in many ways, more than was intended. Just the raw emotion is wonderful.

When I asked him about taking on the role, he had some reservations. He was worried about being typecast. You know what? Rockmond told me that since he was worried, as an artist, this is exactly where he should be going.

**What do you hope people walk away with after seeing *Dirty Laundry*?**

I was at *The Advocate's* 40th anniversary party, talking with John Amaechi, and an older woman approached John and shook his hand. She said, "Thank you. I didn't know there were gay African-Americans." That moved me. Of course there are very many of us, but our voices and faces are often invisible. I'd like to create the same discussion in our community.