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NY CULTURE

Actor's Journey in Mandela's Shoes

Idris Elba Went Beyond Research for New Role

By BARBARA CHAI

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Idris Elba, left, as Mandela in a scene from the film, 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom,' *Weinstein Co.*

To play [Nelson Mandela](#), Idris Elba studied the former South African president's early life in the Xhosa tribe, his years leading the antiapartheid revolution and the trial in which Mr. Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment.

But it was when Mr. Elba, 41 years old, stayed overnight at the prison at Robben Island (where Mr. Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years in captivity), that he truly began to understand his subject.

"It's very cold there, very shut-off from the rest of the world. It's haunted, so all night you can hear clangs against bars in the jail," Mr. Elba said. "If he could live there for 18 years, after living the fullest life that he's ever had, and then come out and be who he is—this started to

inform how hard I had to work on this film."

The film, "[Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom](#)," directed by Justin Chadwick, is based on Mr. Mandela's book of the same name and opens in New York and Los Angeles on Friday. Mr. Elba said his challenge wasn't just to give a performance as Mr. Mandela. "This is a being. I had to be him."

Mr. Elba, known for his role as Stringer Bell on "The Wire" and a star of the TV series "Luther," wasn't able to meet Mr. Mandela, who is in poor health, but he did meet Mr. Mandela's former wife Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (played in the film by Naomie Harris) and his daughters Zindzi and Zenani.

"Their legacy is a deep one," Mr. Elba said. "They're like a royal family in the sense that whatever they do is either publicized or commented on, and it's been that way since Mr. Mandela entered into politics."

The actor, who was born in London to parents from Ghana and Sierra Leone, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about his new movie.

What was the most challenging part of becoming Mandela?

Going to Soweto to speak to a crowd as Mandela, being from West Africa [myself], not South Africa. Being Idris Elba, the guy that was in a Beyoncé movie ["Obsessed"], not a South African actor. That was quite tough because people were just like "hmp." When you look at the film, you see that we spent a lot of time creating that world. It's probably one of the best pieces of artistic and costume direction because you're dropped right into South Africa at the time, from the costumes to the cars to the streets to the people. Once I'd gotten that energy, that's when I became confident to let my Mandela come out. But it was very tough. Just imagine walking into someone's house and saying "Hey guys, I know you know who your dad is, but I'm going to play your dad today." And be that guy.

What did you experience when you spoke as him?

There's a scene when I walk into a cinema, and I sort of speak over the film, and that was in Soweto with a very young set of extras who had never seen a young Mandela. That was one of those moments when I really stepped into his shoes. This is what he felt like, that's what I had to bring into that room. This is the Mandela that was part of that revolution. For the younger South Africans, they had never seen that. They had only seen the older man. The responsibility for me as an actor was to try and bring that live. It was about channeling Mr. Mandela's energy, to be that leader in that moment. It wasn't like "What's my line again?" What lines? He hasn't got lines. You're talking about a revolution here. That was always in the back of my mind—these are "lines," but this was actually said, and it moved the country.

The film explores Mr. Mandela's life as a young man, when he was a bit of a Lothario,

and his violent political activities. It's a side of him that many people may not know.

There were definite fears, because I didn't want to be the man that defaced Nelson Mandela's image. I didn't want audiences to go "Idris Elba's Mandela was disgusting. That's not the guy we love." But we wanted to be honest. We wanted to portray him as a man, as a human being with flaws. If you understand where he came from at that time, then you understand that journey. Now you realize why it's called "A Long Walk to Freedom," because he has been walking for a long time, and he's not been perfect the whole way. The idea that I was going to shy away from being risqué with the character was just not entertained. These are his words, by the way. This is all in the book.

In the film when he's sentenced, he's simply relieved that he's not going to die. It's startling because we know that his imprisonment later captured the world's attention.

That was a great, great moment for the film. It's such a significant moment because after all the activism, after all the notoriety of who he was, that verdict was the moment when it all ended. Gone to a jail. "Amandla!" ["Power!"] No one's calling back. Prior to that, everybody was standing outside cheering "he didn't get killed!" Justin was like "OK, right, let's go onto the plane when he was traveling to Robben Island that day, in those clothes." Let's show the audience what happens next. That was a really refreshing take on it for me.

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