

A Conversation with the Brilliant Actress: Carmen Ejogo

Written by Kam Williams

Thursday, 22 November 2012 15:29



[Carmen Ejogo](#) was born in London on New Year's Day 1974 to Elizabeth Douglas and Charles Ejogo, a couple of Scottish and Nigerian extraction, respectively. She made her U.S. film debut opposite Eddie Murphy playing Veronica 'Ronnie' Tate in the 1997 comedy *Metroland*.

Ejogo then went on to star in films such as Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*,

What's the Worst that Could Happen?

opposite Martin Lawrence, Neil Jordan's

The Brave One

opposite Terrence Howard and Jodie Foster, Gavin O'Connor's

Pride and Glory

opposite Ed Norton, and in Sam Mendes' 2009 indie hit

Away We Go

opposite Maya Rudolph. Ejogo can next be seen starring opposite Tyler Perry in the feature film, *Alex Cross*

, a psychological thriller based on the James Patterson novels about Washington DC detective Alex Cross.

Additionally, Ejogo garnered the attention of television critics and audiences alike for her portrayal of Sally Hemmings, the title character in the 2000 CBS miniseries *Sally Hemmings: An American Scandal*.

Later, Ejogo starred as Coretta Scott King in HBO's critically acclaimed film *Boycott*

opposite Jeffrey Wright and Terrence Howard. Her role earned her a 2001

NAACP Image Award

nomination for Outstanding Actress in a TV film or miniseries. In 2005, Ejogo starred in HBO's Emmy nominated

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Lackawanna Blues

. Her role as Aalen earned her a second

Image Award

nomination. Ejogo will next star as FBI agent Baca Sunjata in the highly-anticipated ABC television series

Zero

Hour

opposite Anthony Edwards.

Carmen and her husband, actor Jeffrey Wright, live in Brooklyn which is where they are raising their two children. Here's she talks about her latest role as Sister in *Sparkle* opposite Jordin Sparks and the late Whitney Houston.

[This interview was conducted last summer]

Kam Williams: Hi Carmen [Ejogo], thanks so much for the time. I really appreciate it.

Carmen Ejogo: Thank you.

KW: My brother Larry is the librarian at a Friends school that I think you're very familiar with.

CE: Oh, wow! That's so cool! That's where one of my kids got their start. Small world!

KW: What interested you in *Sparkle*?

CE: You wouldn't ask that question, if you'd seen the movie, Kam [Williams]. This role is to die for. It's such a great role. The highs and lows of the character's sister [Sparkle, played by Jordin Sparks] are so dramatic, nuanced and layered that you'd be a fool to turn this role down.

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KW: Did you go back and Watch Lonette McKee's performance in the original version of *Sparkle* in preparing to do this role?

CE: No. No, I don't know how you make a role your own if you do that. So, watching another actress play the same character in preparation for my own performance is the last thing I would ever do, particularly with Sister, since Lonette made it so iconic that it would be a crazy idea to watch her. I think our movie pays homage to the original, but it's definitely different in numerous ways.

KW: What message do you think people will take away from the movie?

CE: It's essentially about not letting your light be dimmed by anybody who doesn't appreciate the dream that you're trying to pursue. It's about knowing who you are, and following your path even if you're not given support by those around you. And it's also about family.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier [from www.megadiversities.com] says: I loooooooved your performance in *Metro*

. She asks: Do you enjoy being a member of Mensa and what is your IQ?

CE: [LOL] That is hilarious! Oh my God! I had no idea until recently that my being in Mensa was even on Wikipedia or somewhere else. It is true, but it's funny that it should come up as interview question.

KW: So, how high is your IQ?

CE: 156, for anyone that's interested. But I probably wouldn't be able to get as high a score after raising two kids and losing a lot of brain cells in the process.

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KW: Patricia [Turnier] also says: Musicals are an amazing art form. We used to see a lot of them with people like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and The Nicholas Brothers. They were an integral part of Hollywood and it was common to see actors sing, dance and act. But by the 1950s, the decline began and we rarely see big musicals anymore besides *Chicago* or *Dreamgirls* for instance. How do you explain this phenomenon and what do you think it will take to reverse the trend?

CE: I'm not a film historian, so I couldn't say for sure. But my guess is that the costs involved in making musicals was pretty high, and that the taste of what was pleasing to movie audiences changed by the time you got into the Sixties and Seventies. I was a big fan of John Cassavetes, his wife, Gena Rowlands and this epoch. That era of filmmaking was about realism and represented the antithesis of the dreamy escapism you found in musicals. I'm guessing that musicals didn't make sense anymore because of the changes in the political environment that began in the late Sixties, an era of self-awareness and social revolutions. Musical are finally kind of coming back to a degree now, perhaps out of a sense of nostalgia.



KW: Marcia Evans says: I'm a huge fan of yours. I loved your role in my favorite film, *Lacawanna Blues*. I was so proud that HBO showcased such an amazing story about a piece of the patchwork to our cultural history quilt. You PLAYED that role! What was it like for you to portray Alean, and to be paired opposite the gorgeous and talented Jimmie Smits?

CE: What's interesting is that role was actually Halle Berry's. She had to pull out at the very last minute, which meant I literally had only a couple of days to prepare for that role. Honestly, it was

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like baptism by fire, because I was so underprepared that I had to work on instinct. I was feeding off the energy of those excellent actors while trying to find my place which made it a really exciting experience for me.

KW: April Hughes asks: What was it like working with Whitney Houston?

CE: Amazing! She is an icon, and she brought a passion from the heart for telling Sparkle's story that made her an inspiration to watch every day and it also made it a pleasure to perform opposite her.

KW: April would also like to know if you have any advice for aspiring actresses/singers?

CE: Yes, go back and watch the great performances in your business so that you can understand the heights that should be aspired to. There are many mediocre entertainers who don't aspire to much more than fame and glory. It's very easy to have them as your role models because there aren't as many greats. Go back, discover the greats, and take it from there.

KW: Larry Greenberg says: I read that your director, Salim Akil, worked with schizophrenics before he started working with actors. He asks: Did that make him a more patient director than others you have worked with?

CE: Oh my God! I had no idea. But that makes sense. He is literally the calmest director I've ever worked with. He was so willing to step back and let us do our work without feeling that he had to interfere and tell us what to do just for the sake of looking like a director. He had such confidence in himself. So, it wouldn't surprise me, if he's had experience outside of the business, because he has much deeper soul than that. Working with people troubled in that way could be great training for working with actors who themselves can be a little schizophrenic at times. [Laughs]

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

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CE: Oh yeah. A lot. The great fear I've had to overcome, particularly this past year, is the fear of failure. It can be safer to stay in a comfort zone that's not stretching yourself. I tried to overcome that fear playing Sister. You have to be willing to be afraid, if you're going to be an artist.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

CE: Yes. I'm happier than I've been for a very long time, for all kinds of reasons. I'm glad my kids are happy. I'm grateful that my work is going well. I'm happy that this moment in my career arrived at this age, because I'm ready for it in a way that I might not have been at 20.

KW: What is your guiltiest pleasure?

CE: I don't have a lot of guilt.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

CE: Darwin's Cathedral. It's about evolution and religion and it's gonna serve me well for *Zero Hour*

my new TV show that I start filming soon.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0226901351/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: I see that you'll also be starring opposite Tyler Perry in *Alex Cross* this fall.

CE: That's right! That's coming out in October. That was fun, too!

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

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CE: I make a really delicious eggplant and squash curry that's inspired by Vij of Vij's Restaurant, a great chef and restaurateur in Vancouver. I like to cook that dish because it's really simple but the flavor is so pungent and intense that I feel like I'm a real chef whenever I create it.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles says: You've portrayed Coretta Scott King and Sally Hemmings. She's wondering whether there's another historical figure you'd like to play in a biopic?

CE: I'd love to play Betty Davis, one of Miles Davis' wives. She was sort of like [Madonna](#) before there was a Madonna. I'd love to play a full-out rocking chick. Like a Sister 2.0.

KW: Dante Lee, author of "Black Business Secrets," asks: What was the best business decision you ever made, and what was the worst?

CE: Leaving my first agent was both my best business decision and my worst business decision. It depends on how I want to look at my career because of opportunities that may have come had I stayed with him and because of the opportunities that did come because I had to fight harder for roles.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

CE: Oh, my goodness me! [Chuckles] A mommy.

KW: How hard is it to balance working and parenting, giving that you and Jeffrey are both actors?

CE: It explains why I haven't been onscreen very much the last ten years. [Laughs] It's very hard. It's been getting easier as I give myself permission to work again. It's all about my guilt level.

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KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

CE: Great question! Ooooh, gosh! You know what? That is a question I don't have an answer for. You've stumped me!

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

CE: That *Sparkle*'s a huge hit! [LOL]

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

CE: Summers in Scotland when I was 3.

KW: The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

CE: That depends on how you define success. Success for me will be where the body of work I've done afforded me the opportunity to be as good as I can be, and to explore myself and to see what I'm capable of. People like that share a willingness to be scared and to take chances.

KW: The Rudy Lewis question: Who's at the top of your hero list?

CE: Oh man, it's so hard to answer that. In terms of dignitaries, Nelson Mandela's up there. In terms of artists, this will change, but I'm really into a performance artist named Marina Abramovic' right now.

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KW: The Sanaa Lathan question: What excites you?

CE: My children.

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh with them?

CE: There's a lot of laughter in our house. I get their American/British sense of humor and they get my British sense of humor.

KW: The Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

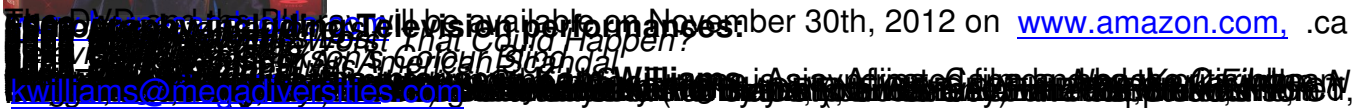
CE: Oh my! I'm a bit young to be asked that [Laughs].

KW: Yes, you are. Sorry. Thanks again for the time, Carmen [Ejogo], and best of luck with
Sparkle.

CE: Thank you, Kam [Williams].

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DVD and Blu-ray will be available on November 30th, 2012 on www.amazon.com, .ca
 and .uk. *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* is also available on DVD and Blu-ray.
 For more information on the DVD and Blu-ray, visit www.megadiversities.com or contact kwilliams@megadiversities.com.