

## Filmmaker's Spotlight



**Train Ride** is a riveting thriller that takes place on an all Black college campus. Will (Wood Harris) is an upperclassman who, after a night of partying, convinces freshman

Katrina (MC Lyte) to stick around and have a drink. What Katrina doesn't realize is the drink has been spiked with a drug that renders her unconscious. When Will invites two friends to participate in a gang rape, things spiral out of control.

Philadelphia filmmaker Rel Dowdell grew up in Germantown and went to Central High School, then onto Fisk University for Undergraduate and Boston University for Graduate School in film. He was the last director to work with the late, Emmy award-winning actress Esther Rolle in his feature-film *Train Ride*. She also appeared in his multi-award winning short film version of the film when he was a graduate student at Boston University. He was the first African-American to win the top prize in filmmaking with his short film *Train Ride*, at Boston University. He is a Magna Cum Laude graduate (English) of Fisk University and received his Masters Degree in film with the highest distinction in honors from Boston University winning the Redstone Film Festival with his thesis project, the short film *Train Ride*.

Filmed on location in Philadelphia with a relatively unknown cast when this project began who are now major players in the industry: Wood Harris (HBO's *The Wire*); MC Lyte (UPN's *Half and Half*); Kadee Strickland (*The Grudge*, *Anacondas*); Anita Hawkins (*Fallen*, *GreenWorks TV*); Terrence "Tat Money" Thomas (one of Philly's legendary DJs); Colby Colb (PM for 103.9); Johnnie Hobbs (*Twelve Monkeys*, *Freedom Theater*) and, of course the legendary Esther Rolle.

At a recent Reelblack Presents event, Rel Dowdell was gracious enough to provide a little insight into the production of *Train Ride*.

### Interview with Philadelphia filmmaker Rel Dowdell

#### Background on the film

It all started as a short film in school at Boston University and it won numerous awards. I had always envisioned it as a bigger project, since Esther Rolle was involved, and it began to receive more exposure, more than your average short film. So I thought, "Why not make it into a feature?" I had a lot of interest from different distributors and it garnered interest from John Pearson, who helped Spike Lee get started, so I was able to raise money relatively quickly, but the difficult part is to keep that money coming in to make the movie. It took five years to get this film done and thank God it's completed. Ruff Nation Films, a great company in Philadelphia/Villanova, got involved and then Sony came on board and the movie will be released March 2005.

#### Difficulties making this film

Finances. It was like coming in then, it stopped. The film was three-quarters of the way complete, but it needed that final 25 percent for completion. That's why it took five years to get it done.

#### About the Cast

The interesting thing about this film is that the careers of the cast members took off. I had cast them when they were relatively obscure. We all know about Esther Rolle, this happened to be her last film, Wood Harris (Remember the Titans) is now on HBO's *The Wire* and MC Lyte (UPN's *Half and Half*, *Legendary Rap Artist*) revitalized her career.



#### Esther Rolle

This movie is dedicated to her. She was in Boston at The Huntington Theatre Company doing *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, directed by Kenny Leon and she took a big chance and read my script and said to me, "I believe in what you are doing and that you are doing the right thing. Can you arrange your schedule to accommodate me on my day off?" I was like, "Of course!" When I found out we had funding to make this film into a feature, I contacted her and she agreed to come to Philadelphia to be a part of it. At that time her illness had become more advanced and she literally rearranged her dialysis treatments to come from Hollywood to Philadelphia. During her scenes, I had to help her get to her marks, but when I said "Action!" she snapped into professional mode and performed her scenes flawlessly, like the professional she is. When she was on the set, everyone, from make up artists to performers, sat around and listened to what she had to say about the profession we chose to be in.

It would be so quiet; you could hear a pin drop. We were learning history and it was an inspiration to have a talented, Emmy award winning professional who was not at odds to be in a film because of the lack of money to be with us. We had very little money. We had to send her a check. She is the pinnacle of professionalism and it makes the movie exponentially better because of her. She is a testament to what other professional actors should strive to be and an inspiration to young filmmakers.

### Wood Harris

I met Wood at the Schomburg Theater in New York. He was in a film by Malcom Lee, *Morning Side Prep*. When you see an actor in a scene, even if its one scene, that person stands out, and Wood stood out. I wanted him in my film.

### MC Lyte

She immersed herself into this role. I know it took a lot out of her, emotionally, and it was breaking her down and it left her vulnerable. At the time, we knew her as this hard core female rapper, but the role was a complete opposite of that image, as a vulnerable freshman who endures something horrific. Her performance was amazing.

### The Guru

Guru and I are great friends. When I approached him about his part, he thought he might have to audition, but I knew Guru knew what to do, after all, he was a part of Gangstarr and he was in numerous music videos. On his album, "Moment of Truth," he gave me a special thanks for being a part of the film. On the set, he, Joe Clair and Wood Harris did a freestyle rhyme for like an hour. Joe Clair started, then Wood jumped in and then Guru. It was fabulous.

### Ruff Nation Films

Ruff Nation was already established in the music industry, by doing work with groups like The Fugees and Cypress Hill, and they turned their attention film. It was a natural transition since music soundtracks are so important to film nowadays. They basically rescued the film and helped set up the deal with Sony. The music in the film is awesome. Jim Salamone was the musical director. He has a track record in music that goes back to Teddy Pendergrass and Kriss Kross. Jim scored the scenes as well as any multi million dollar studio system.

### Colby Colb

Colby and I are good friends. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have had MC Lyte in the film. He intervened and approached Lyte and said to her, "I know this guy. He's good people." He set it up so that she could see what the film was about and this was a 180 degree turn from the image of her as a female rapper.

God does things for a reason and all of these things enabled me to get finishing funds. The project refused to die and it kept kindling interests and that's how it got done. With people like Mike Dennis, who is becoming the next Russell Simmons in finding film talent. Like Def Comedy Jam, Mike Dennis and Reelblack Presents finds the most talent people and presents them to the public. The beauty of film is, it doesn't matter how much money you spend, it depends on how well that product turns out in the end.

Rel Dowdell

### More about Rel

- Was the last director to work with the late, Emmy award-winning actress Ms. Esther Rolle in feature-film "Train Ride". She also appeared in his multi-award winning short film version of the same film, back when he was a graduate student at Boston University.
- Was the first African-American to win the top prize in filmmaking with short film "Train Ride", at Boston University
- Is a Magna Cum Laude graduate (English) of Fisk University
- Received Masters Degree in film with highest distinction honors from Boston University winning the Redstone Film Festival with thesis project short film "Train Ride
- (source: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com))

Since the making of Train Ride, these cast members have had an impressive and successful rise of their careers!

Wood Harris -  
HBO's The Wire  
Paid in Full (2002)  
Hendrix (2000)  
Remember the Titans (2000)  
Rhapsody (2000)

MC Lyte -  
UPN's Half and Half  
Playas Ball (2003)  
Holla (2002)  
Civil Brand (2002)

Kadee Strickland -  
Fever Pitch (2005)  
Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid (2004)  
The Grudge (2004)  
Anything Else (2003)  
Something's Gotta Give (2003)

For more info:  
[www.reldowdell.com](http://www.reldowdell.com)

### Cast Member Interviews!!

[Johnnie Hobbs, Jr.](#)  
[Terrance "DJ Tat Money" Thomas](#)