

VARIETY

December 5th, 2017

REVELATIONS ENTERTAINMENT AT 20

Diversity Before and Behind the Camera

Morgan Freeman and Lori McCreary formed a 2-decade long and productive partnership

By TODD LONGWELL

Revelations Entertainment has explored a wide variety of topics since Morgan Freeman and computer-programmer-turned-producer Lori McCreary founded the production company two decades ago: The projects have been both global and universal, tackling South African politics (the 2009 feature "Invictus") and women in power (CBS' "Madam Secretary") in addition to fundamental issues such as love, belief, rebellion and peace (the National Geographic docu-series "The Story of Us").

But the impetus to form the company came from a deeply personal place in Freeman.

Like many men of his generation, Freeman grew up playing cowboy and watching Westerns. But, as an African-American, he didn't see many people who looked like him riding high in the saddle on the big screen, literally or figuratively. There were a few who were given respectable but not necessarily fully developed roles, including "Spartacus" gladiator Woody Strode and "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" co-star Rex Ingram, but most high-profile black actors appearing in mainstream films, such as Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland and Willie Best, played subservient, stereotypical characters.

"There was no historical evidence that anyone black was doing anything other than nothing," says Freeman.

The climate had changed significantly by the time Freeman had securely established himself a movie star in the mid-'90s. He was proof of that. But even in success, there was an

echo of how far we hadn't come. As rich and well-rounded as his Oscar-nominated roles were, they still had him playing a pimp (1987's "Street Smart"), a chauffeur (1989's "Driving Miss Daisy") and a convict (1994's "The Shawshank Redemption").

One day, Freeman expressed his frustration to his "Outbreak" co-star Dustin Hoffman, who told him he should start his own production company.

"The point was to address that loss, that lack, realizing that, 'OK, so I'm dissatisfied, but nobody's going to tell your story,'" says Freeman. "If you want your story told, you have to tell it yourself."

Saying you're going to do it is one thing. Making it work is another, especially when you're a busy movie star traipsing the globe. Freeman needed a partner, so he turned to McCreary, who had produced his directorial debut "Bopha!" (1993), but at the time was still earning her living as a computer programmer.

"I remember saying, 'What do you want to do?' And she says, 'I want to run my own company,'" recalls Freeman. "And I thought, 'Well, heck, I need someone to do that for me, so why don't we hook up?'"

"Inside, I was going, 'Yes!' says McCreary. "But on the outside, I said, 'So... what would that [company] look like?'"

Freeman explained his vision to McCreary. His ambitions went beyond achieving proper representation on the screen. He also wanted to explore challenging issues and reveal hidden truths, so they chose the name Revelations.

On the surface, the two would appear to have little



in common. Freeman is an 80-year-old black man from Mississippi. McCreary is a white woman from Northern California, 24 years his junior. But from the beginning, working together on "Bopha!," they found their thought processes were very similar.

"Whenever there was an argument or a discussion, we always had the same points we were making,

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The point was to address that lack... If you want your story told, you have to tell it yourself.”

Morgan Freeman

whether the conversation was creative or financial," says McCreary.

Freeman and McCreary launched Revelations with the announcement that they were developing a big screen adaptation of the novel "Rendezvous With Rama," an intellectual sci-fi epic written by Arthur C. Clarke of "2001: A Space Odyssey" fame (it's still on their slate today, but now they plan to turn it into a TV series.) Their first completed project, a telefilm called "Mutiny" debuted in 1999; it tells the story of 50 African-American seamen who refused to load live munitions on to ships in World War II in the wake of an explosion that killed 320 sailors and civilians, most of them black.

In the early days, Revelations had almost as many interns as salaried employ-

Co-Production
Lori McCreary and Morgan Freeman put their talents together and set up Revelations.

ees. But the size of its staff has ballooned in recent years as it's ramped up production of factual TV programming such as the Cooking Channel show "Food: Fact or Fiction?" and "Through the Wormhole With Morgan Freeman," which concluded its eighth season on Science earlier this year.

"A lot of people stay with us from project to project, and that's really attributable to Lori's management style," says Kelly Mendelsohn, Revelations' senior VP of production and finance. "She really focuses on the fact that they're people with lives." →

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CONGRATULATIONS
TO OUR FRIENDS
AND PARTNERS
MORGAN FREEMAN,
LORI MCCREARY
AND EVERYONE AT
REVELATIONS
ENTERTAINMENT
ON 20 AMAZING YEARS

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← Revelations' most ambitious projects have been its two globe-trotting docu-series for National Geographic, "The Story of God" (2016) and "The Story of Us" (2017). The former had Freeman visiting exotic locales from Mayan temples in Guatemala to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, exploring the differences and, more often, the similarities in the way people worship. In the latter, Freeman travels the world talking to everyone from Ethiopian tribespeople to former President Clinton, in an effort to understand the common forces that bind humanity together.

"Morgan is not just a talking head. Those shows are very much his personal journey, and the audience goes along with him," says Courteney Monroe, CEO of National Geographic Global Networks.

Often, Freeman finds himself in remote corners of the world that his acting fame has not penetrated.

"We were at the Bodhi tree where the Buddha was enlightened in India, and there was a lama teaching a bunch of people," recalls James Younger, executive VP of factual productions for Revelations. "He had no idea who Morgan was, but they had this magnetic connection. He recognized not Morgan Freeman, the actor, but Morgan as a fascinating spiritual seeker."

Like Freeman, McCreary is very interested in religion and spirituality, but she's also a technophile with a computer science degree from UCLA. In September, she hired former Intel exec Kevin Corbett to head Revelations' digital efforts, including potential short-form programming for such

social platforms as Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat.

It has to be thought-provoking content that sparks conversation and helps communities to effect change, Corbett says. "To me, that really lines up with the Revelations brand."

In the meantime, Revelations remains committed to traditional content.

In addition to a multi-part docu-series about Rodney King, it's also developing a range of scripted projects, including a biopic about former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and the big screen thriller "Cold Warriors"; both will have Freeman attached to star.

The shingle is also looking to produce a series for a streaming outlet based on the life of legendary Western lawyer Bass Reeves, a former slave who was one of the first black U.S. deputy

marshals.

One of the projects on Revelations' initial slate back in 1997, it was originally meant to star Freeman, but he's now aged out of the role.

On top of everything else, McCreary wants to win a lead actor Oscar for Freeman. While he took home a supporting actor Oscar for 2004's "Million Dollar Baby," he came up empty both times he was nominated for lead actor ("Driving Miss Daisy" and "Invictus," in which he played South African President Nelson Mandela).

But, in Freeman's dream scenario, they both take home statuettes.

"I want us to win an Oscar for best picture," says Freeman. "You never know which [pic] is going to do that, but hopefully we have it in our back pocket." **TV**

Eclectic Slate

Revelations is developing a diverse mix of TV and film.

"Rendezvous With Rama" 1997-Present: Revelations first project, a film adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's sci-fi novel, is still part of the Revelations' slate.

"Mutiny" NBC, 1999: The telefilm, Revelations' first completed project, tells the story of 50 African-American seamen who refused to load live munitions on to ships in World War II.

"Under Suspicion" 2000: Morgan Freeman stars as police captain investigating the murder of a young girl in this crime thriller co-starring Gene Hackman.

"Along Came a Spider" 2001: Freeman plays detective Alex Cross in this adaptation of a James Patterson novel.

"10 Items or Less" 2006: Freeman stars as an actor that meets a quirky grocery clerk (Paz Vega) in Brad Silberling's road trip movie. It was released online while still in theaters via Freeman and production partner Lori McCreary's now defunct ClickStar venture.

"Invictus" 2009: Freeman picked up an Oscar nomination for his performance as Nelson Mandela in Clint Eastwood's film.

"30 for 30: The 16th Man" ESPN, 2010: This installment examines the South African rugby team featured in "Invictus" and is narrated by Freeman.

"Through the Wormhole With Morgan Freeman" Science Channel 2010-17: Freeman explored the mysteries of the universe in this docu series.

"Madam Secretary" CBS 2014-present: Now in its fourth season, the CBS series stars Tea Leoni as a fictional U.S. secretary of state balancing diplomacy and family concerns.

"Food: Fact or Fiction?" Cooking Channel 2015-present: Michael McKean hosts a look at age-old food mysteries.

"The Story of God With Morgan Freeman" National Geographic Channel 2016-17: Freeman hosted this series about how religions perceive life after death.

"The Story of Us" NatGeo 2017: Freeman explores cultures around the globe.

"Cold Warriors" film, in development: Freeman is attached to star as a retired CIA agent who tries to finish a Cold War-era mission.

"Powell" film, in development: Freeman is also attached to star as former Secretary of State Colin Powell in this film project.

Rodney King TV project, in development: Revelations plans a multi-part docu on Rodney King, whose videotaped beating by police led to their trial and acquittal, which sparked the 1992 L.A. riots.

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Wearing Many Hats
Morgan Freeman and Lori McCreary work on the set of "The Magic of Belle Isle."

COMPUTER BIZ WIZ TURNED POWER PRODUCER

Lori McCreary learned how to balance technology and creativity early

By TODD LONGWELL

Four years ago, Revelations Entertainment CEO Lori McCreary saw the writing on the wall: the funding for the meaningful mid-budget films she and company co-founder Morgan Freeman favored was drying up. Friend and fellow producer Mark Gordon suggested she consider television, so she set up a lunch meeting with then-CBS Entertainment president Nina Tassler. She had no projects to pitch, only questions about what to do. Tassler told her to find a person or place that viewers could spend 100 hours with, then get back to her.

Initially, McCreary was at a loss. It was hard enough to find a character sufficiently interesting to warrant a 90-minute film. Then she saw Hillary Clinton's forceful reaction to the controversy surrounding the

terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, and she had her answer. It would be a series loosely inspired by Clinton and the two other women who've served as U.S. Secretary of State (Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice). The result was "Madam Secretary," created by Barbara Hall and starring Tea Leoni, now in its fourth season on CBS.

Like McCreary's other Revelations projects, "Madam Secretary" strives — and succeeds — to be a popular entertainment that explores challenging, socially relevant issues. And the path McCreary took to bring it to the screen is consistent with her history of jumping in head first, asking tough questions and seeking out new solutions.

It started with her first film, the 1993 adaptation

of the Percy Mtwa play "Bopha!" She had been struggling to bring the anti-apartheid drama to the big screen since 1986. After six years, it was finally set to go at Paramount with Freeman directing and Danny Glover in the lead. But, at the time, McCreary was a computer programmer who had never made a film, and they were going to be shooting in Zimbabwe, working with as many as 500 extras.

"I was told by all these producers that Paramount was never going to send me to Africa to make a movie," recalls McCreary. "They're going to put a real producer on it."

But when McCreary was called into a meeting with a Paramount exec, she came armed with her Compaq portable computer, equipped with an early DOS version of Movie Magic budgeting and scheduling software.

"He said, 'You have too many grips, cut it down by seven' and, not knowing what a grip was, I did control-search-grip, changed it to the number he was asking, and said, 'we'll save this much money!'" recalls McCreary. "Because I knew the computer, I could tell

him all these things, so they just gave me the benefit of the doubt that I would know what to do on set, which was very generous."

Her nimble response wasn't a fluke. It was the product of years of technological-creative cross-training.

Growing up in Antioch, Calif., 45 miles northeast of San Francisco, McCreary dreamed of one day opening her own theater. She began working in local stage productions at the Storyland Theater at the age of 8, and by the time she entered Antioch High School, she was a veritable stage vet, tasked with running the cutting-edge computerized lighting board in its new state-of-the-art theater.

"The first show I

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Because I knew the computer, they gave me the benefit of the doubt I would know what to do.”

Lori McCreary

designed with it, the computer didn't turn on on opening night, and I was like, 'I have to learn this thing called computers,'" says McCreary.

McCreary wanted to double major in computer science and theater at UCLA, but, forced to choose one or the other, she picked the former, figuring she already had a wealth of stage experience. While at UCLA, she co-founded the software company CompuLaw. It was a success, but, a few years out of college, she decided she didn't want to spend her whole life helping lawyers bill more effectively.

After seeing "Bopha!" at the National Theater in London, she and a partner took out an option on the play, and McCreary's Hollywood journey began.

In the years since, McCreary has kept up with the cutting edge of entertainment technology, often dragging her peers along with her. In 2005, Revelations partnered with chip maker Intel on its Digital Home initiative, designed to educate the industry about the coming wave of tech and the potential for secure streaming content distribution. In 2006, she and Freeman put those theories into practice, co-founding the internet movie distribution company ClickStar, which was the first to offer legal streaming of a movie (the Freeman-starrer "10 Items or Less") while it was still in theaters.

In 2009, she had Revelations fund a side-by-side comparison test of seven digital cameras to educate the industry on the capabilities of each system. And as president of the Producers Guild of America with Gary Lucchesi since 2014, she's been active in anti-piracy efforts.

"Lori has been way ahead of the curve on everything," marvels Gordon. "She has her finger on the pulse." ■