



Episode 1: Russell Hornsby (CFA'96), Accomplished Actor

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Accomplished actor Russell Hornsby (CFA'96) is best-known for his performances in *Lincoln Heights*, *Fences*, *Seven Seconds* and now, the critically acclaimed film *The Hate U Give*. Russell joins the podcast to discuss his formative experiences while a student at BU, embracing acting as a craft throughout his career and preparing for his recent roles which have powerfully addressed racial injustice.

Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast.

Today's guest is accomplished actor Russell Hornsby. Russell is a graduate of the College of Fine Arts from 1996. His career spans across theater, television, and film. You'll likely recognize him from his best known performances, including *Lincoln Heights*, *Grimm*, *Seven Seconds* and *Fences*. He sat down with me to explore his journey beyond Comm. Ave, the pivotal moments of his career, and his most recent role in the critically acclaimed film, *The Hate U Give*.

Well, Russell, thanks for being here and thanks for coming back to campus. How long has it been since you've been to BU? Did you get here frequently or not so much?

Russell Hornsby: Two years. Two years ago this fall I was here the last time I was promoting another film of mine and I came to BU. At that time I was able to have sort of a masterclass with some of the acting students.

Jeff Murphy: Great.

Russell Hornsby: Which was a lot of fun.

Jeff Murphy: Yeah, we're psyched to have you back on campus. We're really happy to be here in the WTBU studios. Thank you to Hannah our engineer and some other folks. You're currently living in Los Angeles?

Russell Hornsby: Technically. Currently living in Chicago, living in the windy city.

Jeff Murphy: But I think I read you grew up in the California bay area?

Russell Hornsby: Yes. Grew up in Oakland, California.

Jeff Murphy: So can you tell us a little bit as a California guy, how did you find yourself making the trip all the way to Boston for your college experience?

Russell Hornsby: You know, when I was in high school, I didn't study acting, I just did some plays on the side as a hobby and you know, when they started to ask you that fateful question of what do you want to study when you go to college, I had no clue. And a bunch of my friends in their infinite wisdom said you should just be an actor. Like that's easy. They don't do anything and you know, of course you want to get away with doing as little as possible. It's cool. And so, you know, 'bing' the light goes on and I auditioned for BU among other schools, got into BU and I realized that Boston was the furthest point, like from one end to the other and I said I wanted to get as far away from home as I can possibly go. And so that was Boston and on top of the fact that I had family here as well.

Jeff Murphy: So acting, the arts, not a big part of family life growing up, really was just high school and something you found as a hobby or did you always have an inkling that it was, you know, you're passionate about the arts and performing and things?

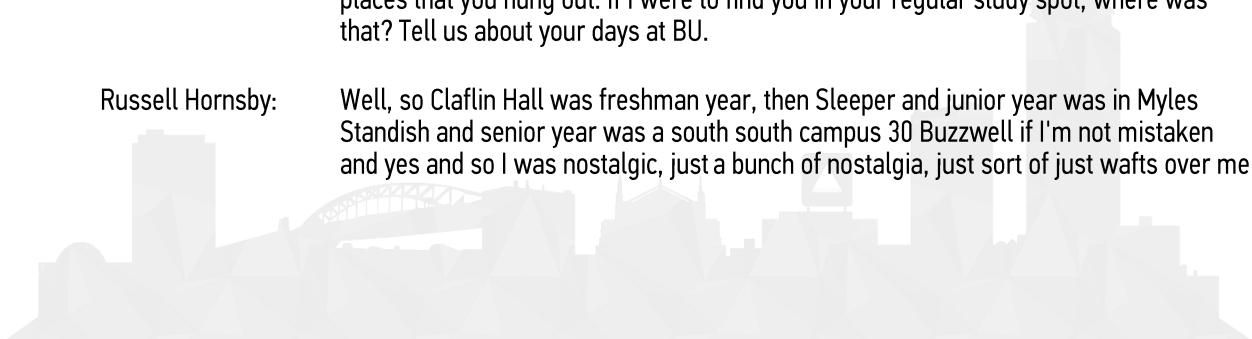
Russell Hornsby: When I think back on it, my mother, was a, a public health nurse, worked at a high school and so she would be supporting her students and you know, Friday or Saturday night we'd have to go to the play, you know, to the school play. And so of course she has to bring her kids and you know, I'm like second, third, fourth grade on up going to these high school plays and not really understanding what the impact it's having at that time. It's only in retrospect, you sort of see it. But I grew up as, you know, primarily an athlete and theater sort of started on as a dare, you know, from a friend, you know, and sort of get some extracurricular activity, an extra grade and to see some girls. So that was it. And so, my motivations were pure. [laughing]

Jeff Murphy: At what point did it turn into, I could do this as a career? Was it when you were at BU before you got here?

Russell Hornsby: You know, it was after I graduated, really, you know, you're just again, I'm doing it as going, you know, as an opportunity to go to college basically. And quite honestly, I didn't really look at it as my life's pursuit. It was really like, let me get out of Oakland, let me say I'm going to college really. And my mother said, you know, you can go, that's great. Follow your dream but you can't quit. And so I had that in the back of my mind constantly, like I wanted to leave after my freshman year. I wanted to leave after my sophomore year, but I knew that, you know, I can't quit and you know, and of course my mother will say now, I wasn't serious, you know, but she was and that just wasn't in my mind's eye, so I had to stay, stick it out. And then once I get to my junior year, things start to open up, opportunities change. And then I, when I left and I got to New York and I realized I couldn't do anything else really.

Jeff Murphy: Alright, well before we talk about New York, I want to ask a couple of things about your BU experience. Just as a student. I wonder if driving down Comm. Ave today sparked some memories for you. I'm curious to know where you lived on campus, if there were places that you hung out. If I were to find you in your regular study spot, where was that? Tell us about your days at BU.

Russell Hornsby: Well, so Claflin Hall was freshman year, then Sleeper and junior year was in Myles Standish and senior year was a south south campus 30 Buzzwell if I'm not mistaken and yes and so I was nostalgic, just a bunch of nostalgia, just sort of just wafts over me



whenever I drive up and down Comm. Ave. Hung out in SFA and in front, you know, it like it's sort of reminding you guys are too old. I'm dating myself, but like the beginning of like Fame were like, they're all in front of the school, dancing and singing, you know what I mean, like sort of felt like that, like just getting their creative, um, spontaneous creativity out of their system, you know. And um, but you know, when I was in college, you know, we didn't have any money so you just, you hung out in people's apartments, you know, all the time and whoever could get the beer and that was pretty much it.

Jeff Murphy: Well you talked about CFA or SFA at the time now, CFA being such a crucial part of your experience, I'd like to hear more about your academic experience at the College of Fine Arts. If you could tell me about, you know, are there particular classes or productions we were involved in that really stood out or there were there mentors you had here at the time? Professors that you still remember to this day?

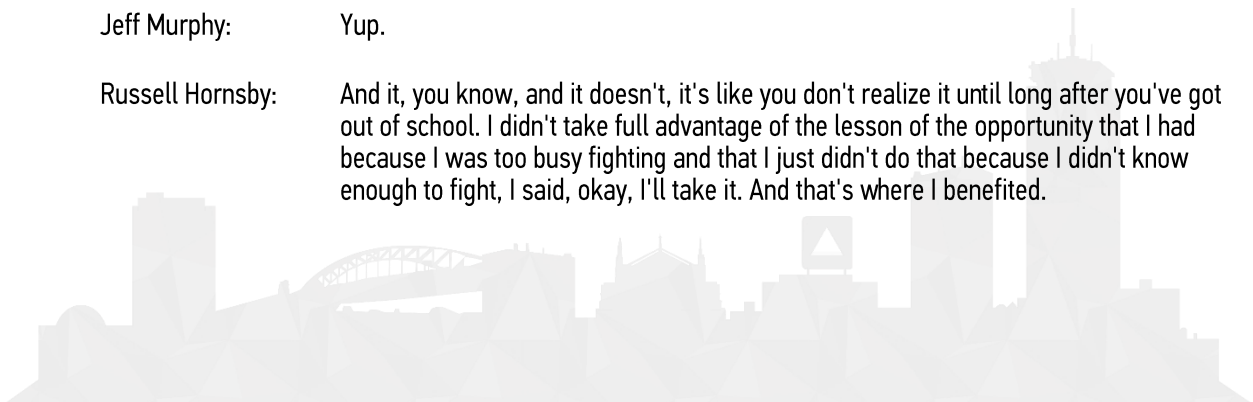
Russell Hornsby: Yeah, I mean, you know, classes again when I talk about really getting in touch with who I was or who I am, that was through theater, you know, you, you have, you know, growing up in Oakland and, and you know, being, you know, being black growing up and having this bravado, you know, growing up at the time of hip hop and rap music and whatnot. And so you have this provider where they're sticking your chest out. And so I was able to find through acting exercises, improvisational exercises with John Lipski, um, you know, vocal exercises with Robert Chapline to get in touch with my real center, get in touch with my soul and my spirit like really, and let go of, of all of that false bravado, all of that image that I felt was black and hip hop or whatever, and then sort of build him back up and, and find the man who would the beginnings of the man who would end up being Russell, you know, when you get into your, your, um, your emotional center, your emotional core, not being afraid to be sensitive.

Jeff Murphy: So do you have, I'm curious to know for our students who are at CFA now being sort of tasked with doing the same thing to find themselves? Do you have advice to share with them about how, what, what was successful for you in doing that?

Russell Hornsby: I think for me, the, I had the good fortune of not having any previous acting experience, you know, quite honestly not having any specific acting experience like, you know, Stanislavski or anything like that that was just get up and do it instincts. And so I was open. Uh, I was uh, you know, an open book. I was a blank page, you know, all of that and I was able to just receive whatever they were giving. It was imparted to me. I think around the middle of my sophomore year, Bob Young, Robert Young, said, just take what we're giving and you can discard it later. And that was like, that was like deep. That was profound. And so my advice would be don't resist, you know, take the lesson, just take every aspect of the lesson that they're giving you and then, you know, use what you want and use what you need and discard the rest or put it in your pocket, put it in your closet and save it for later, then go back and get it. I think oftentimes, you know, because we, especially young, you think you know, but you don't, you know what I mean? Like in 18 to 22, you don't know nothing.

Jeff Murphy: Yup.

Russell Hornsby: And it, you know, and it doesn't, it's like you don't realize it until long after you've got out of school. I didn't take full advantage of the lesson of the opportunity that I had because I was too busy fighting and that I just didn't do that because I didn't know enough to fight, I said, okay, I'll take it. And that's where I benefited.



Jeff Murphy: So, it sounds like you had a great experience here around sort of the art of the performance and I'm wondering, my, my outsider impression is that being an actor, there's some education that has to happen around the business side of the industry as well. Are those lessons you learned here or once you moved to New York?

Russell Hornsby: Well then you know, you learned it in the cold streets. There was no business, you know, a class because the truth is I don't really think they knew at the time, you know, that wasn't broadcast news really, you know, just sort of the business and when you're, when you're telling you know, actors, they're going to go to New York and Los Angeles, all, all your, your, your equipment you're imparting them is just how to be an artist. That business comes later.

Jeff Murphy: Okay.

Russell Hornsby: Yeah, I mean and I think but actually, I mean it's a different time now, but I actually appreciated that.

Jeff Murphy: Okay.

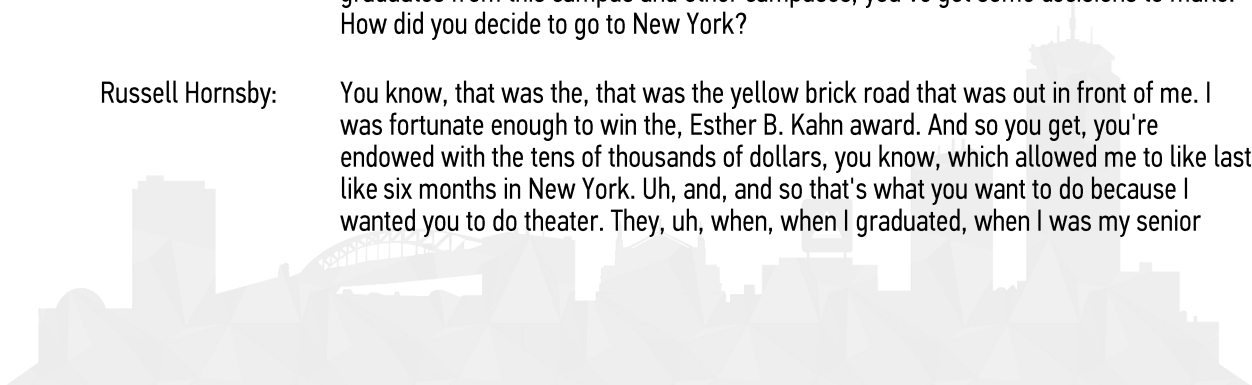
Russell Hornsby: You can just focus on the craft. You know, I, I never went. I didn't go to New York one time while I was here. I didn't try to take, you know, pursue a movie and let me go, you know, I have to leave early and all that kind of stuff like that. I just was a student for four years and it took everything in and as I possibly could and when I got out, it was time to get dirty.

Jeff Murphy: Now I've got some of my information from Wikipedia, so I might be wrong, but you mentioned New York, does that happen right after BU or you also attended Oxford, right?

Russell Hornsby: Yeah, that was during my junior year. During my junior year for like a semester, you know, you go, yeah, I have a semester. You just go into like the beginning part especially you go over there and stuff classes and learning the different dynamics for, you know, how the Brits, how the English approach theater, how they approach character versus Americans. I think that from my, from what I saw at the time and what I experienced, the English are very heady, you know, generally. Whereas we're very visceral and emotional, you know, and when you look at historically when you look at the characters, the American characters versus the British characters or what have you, or those actors, we come with all of this bravado and they sit back and he notes think about this, ponder things. So do you know, that kind of thing. But, uh, it was great to get the lesson to, to be, to be a feeling, to be a thinking actor is to be a feeling actor and vice versa. You have to use both and that's where you start to build upon the craft of acting, not the instinct of acting.

Jeff Murphy: Okay. So, you finished up your time at BU and then like every other student who graduates from this campus and other campuses, you've got some decisions to make. How did you decide to go to New York?

Russell Hornsby: You know, that was the, that was the yellow brick road that was out in front of me. I was fortunate enough to win the, Esther B. Kahn award. And so you get, you're endowed with the tens of thousands of dollars, you know, which allowed me to like last like six months in New York. Uh, and, and so that's what you want to do because I wanted you to do theater. They, uh, when, when I graduated, when I was my senior



year in the fall, '95, August Wilson was doing Seven Guitars here and I, I ran into, I'm Ruben Santiago, Hudson, Keith, David and Viola Davis at the time. And I had a conversation with Ruben and he was asking me what I was going to do and I said, I'm going to go to LA and star. He said, brother, you need to go to New York and become an actor first. He said, before you go to la, he said, you're going to want to give them some theater, getting some plays, giving some workshops, become an actor first. He said, you next, you never know. You might get in one of these August plays lo and behold, two years later, I can't, I'm coming back to, you know, to Boston, you know, representing an August play Jitney. So he was right and I'm grateful for that.

Jeff Murphy: So it sounds like you had some mentors in your life. My impression of the performing arts industry is that building a network is also a crucial piece of that and I'm curious to know once you got to New York, is it, is it all about networking and the hustle you're able to get work immediately or is it, has, was it a challenge for you?

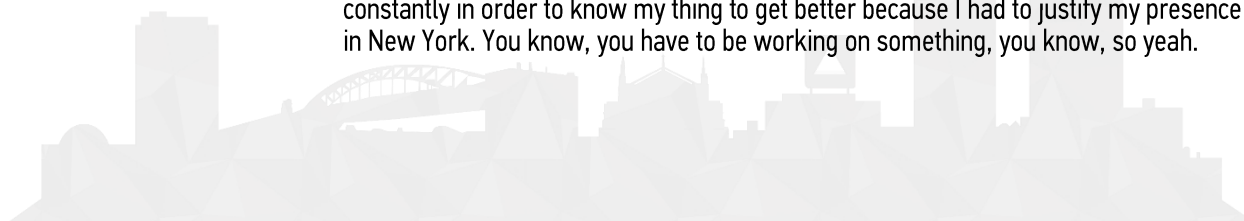
Russell Hornsby: You know, in looking back, I got work pretty, pretty swiftly. Pretty, pretty immediate, you know, two years. Within two years I was a working actor. In that time, but my approach, once I got to New York, I had only one job where I waited tables and that was, I lasted a month and I got fired. After that I decided that every job I would have after that would be a job of performance, whatever it was. I'd be a performer. So I dressed up like Santa Claus, you know, dressed up like a, a, what is it, a pilgrims at Thanksgiving, you know, black pilgrims, right? Teddy bears for corporate events, you know, those doing those, what do they call those? Industrials, you know, but you're making a living. But I was making a living and then I would do a, what are those phone where you do like phone message, you know, telemarketing, ask surveys. So what I did was though I, I took and I said, I looked at the region of the country that I was calling and I would change my voice and pitch and everything to reflect whatever region. And that was, you know, me working on dialect work and I could, you know, my uh, I, I closed, I did a whole bunch of surveys based because I was able to sort of change my voice and diction and everything like that. But the one that always killed was the British RP. It was just like, it just relaxed people. Oh this is, this is a voice I can trust. It sounds so.

Jeff Murphy: And you pick that up when you were in England?

Russell Hornsby: Yeah, and you know, everywhere else, you know, I can't say England because then my voice and speech teacher would be like, come on now. But yeah.

Jeff Murphy: So how long are you in New York and, and what are some of the things that you did that really stand out for you as being things that you were proud of, of your work as a, as a young alum?

Russell Hornsby: Well, I was in, I was technically in New York for like six or seven years, but you know, just willing to, having the willingness to take any project. And again, that's what I wanted to leave myself open for. That's why I didn't, I didn't wait tables. I didn't become a bartender, you know, I worked at night because I wanted to be flexible. And so when somebody said, Hey Russell, we're doing your reading of this, play, this screenplay. Yes, I'm there. We're going to do a workshop. Yes, I'm there. I did everything, that was performance. I was always available. Whether the play was good or not, it didn't matter. I had to constantly be in pursuit and exercising, you know, my instrument constantly in order to know my thing to get better because I had to justify my presence in New York. You know, you have to be working on something, you know, so yeah.



Jeff Murphy: So you've got some advice that you needed to go to New York to be, to learn to be an actor and but then at some point you make a decision to move to Los Angeles. Tell us about that decision process.

Russell Hornsby: Well, once I was attached to August Wilson's *Jitney*, we did a two year tour of the country, ended up in Los Angeles in the December of '99 and open and ran through 2000. I auditioned for a television series, got the series. They offered it to me, but they said you have to quit the play I said I'm not going to quit the play. They increased the money. This money. Here you go. I can't quit the play. Like this is what I do like everybody's, if I don't take this play to New York, I didn't do it. So fortunately in me sticking to my guns, they were able to shoot me out in four days. I was able to do the play in New York, be part of it for three months, left to play. Then came back to Los Angeles to do the series and the rest is art history.

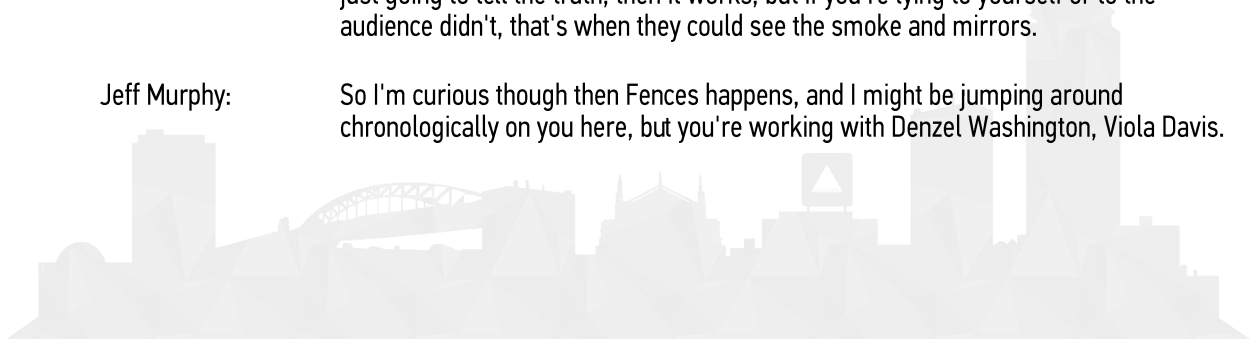
Jeff Murphy: So was there a specific decision that you made? You mentioned that you went during BU you were like, I'm going to be a theater actor. Is there a specific decision that you made to target film and TV roles instead of theater or is it just all kind of worked out that way?

Russell Hornsby: Just it's a workout. You just looking for a job, you know, the opportunities presented themselves. But the conscious decision I did make every year is I did a play a year for about 12 years. I averaged to play a year and I'm very proud of that. The last play I did was 2010, but up until that point I was doing a play a year saying, you know, to the country or my representatives who wanted me to stay in town to get a TV show or movie, whatever. I said, no, I have to go to this regional theater, that regional theater to do a play because I am an actor. And that was also me wanting to keep the respect of my peers, my theatrical peers, you know, you, you want to, you want to hold yourself up to that standard. And the people that I came in with or I came up with or that are respected, we're all theatrical is they're all theater actors and I wanted their respect so I knew that I had to stay in theater so that when I came back I wasn't a foreigner.

Jeff Murphy: So then, but then you go onto some, some really well known TV shows, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Law and Order*, *Grimm*, *Seven Seconds*. Is there a big transition from being a theater actor to being a film and TV actor and what are what are the differences that you might be able to tell us about?

Russell Hornsby: I think that the difference is the scope. As an actor you have to modulate a performance when you're coming from, from the stage to the screen or film and that takes, that's a learning curve. Some people get it and some people don't. I had wonderful mentorship and my mentor, he said to me, you don't have to give everything you have on every role, and so historically because black actors didn't have opportunities, they wanted to show you. I got, I got it, I got fire and brimstone, I can do all of the stuff, and he said, you just don't have to do that. He said, be patient with yourself and just take your time. And so I was able to do that. And you approach the role and you approached the work, I think what you have to do is just approach it, approach it honestly. The saying goes, there is no right no wrong, there is only truth. So if you come to the moment with the idea of I'm just going to tell the truth, then it works, but if you're lying to yourself or to the audience didn't, that's when they could see the smoke and mirrors.

Jeff Murphy: So I'm curious though then *Fences* happens, and I might be jumping around chronologically on you here, but you're working with Denzel Washington, Viola Davis.



Do you have to give everything you have to that role? I mean, I assume you're going to bring everything you have.

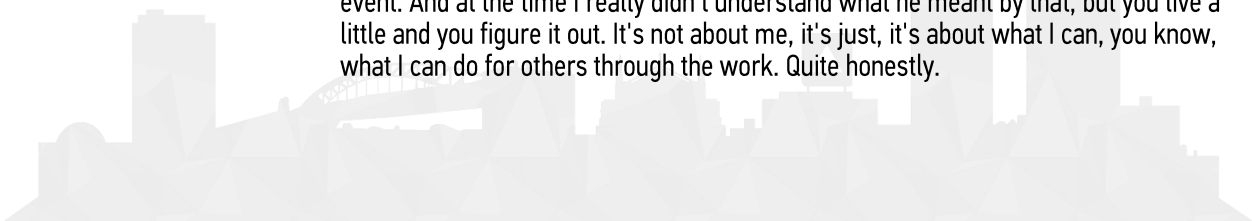
Russell Hornsby: The thing is, it's not about giving everything you have. I already had it. The work had been done. Do you know what I mean? So I wasn't, I was respectful. I was honored to be there, but I wasn't intimidated. I had to. I had already shown what I had by being a part of the play and even in that moment I wasn't scared or intimidated. I was honored to be there, but I know I'm supposed to be here and so you step into the room because here's the thing, I know from experience, from talking to other actors, Denzel and Viola, they don't want you to sit in reverence of them. They want you to come in ready to go. Let's go. You can, you know, salute whatever you want and bow and scrape and genuflect later on. But not when we're coming to the room to do the work. So I knew that, I mean, the idea of like I have to come here to work and so I was ready. And so that represented a great opportunity for me because again, I had done the work leading up to that, all the theater I had done, you know, challenging myself, the television work challenging myself. So when the time came, when they knock on your door, they call you, you're ready to go and they know that that's why they call.

Jeff Murphy: Sure. Well, and now I, I don't speak for the entire university, but I know that BU is excited for you for this latest role with *The Hate U Give*. I'm curious, you know, *Seven Seconds*, a story about a young black man killed by the police, *The Hate U Give*, a story about a young black man killed by police. How, how does somebody prepare to do roles that true to life and heavy. And how would you, uh, what kind of advice would you give to people who are also acting who would need to prepare for roles like those?

Russell Hornsby: For *Seven Seconds* I just lived my life, you know, the secret of life is in the living. And I continue, you know, as a black man in America, you're living your life. I'm paying attention to what's going on in the world and what's going on in my community, what's going on around me. And so all you have to do is just live in the circumstances that are set before you and just be honest. And that's it, because if you know your, you know, your life, art imitates life. So if you're living it fully, all you have to do is be present in the moment now. You know, and so all the, again, all the work that I've done, all the living that I have done leading up to that enabled me to find that character and enabled me to invoke a real sense of truth with a sense of dignity and integrity as well.

Jeff Murphy: I'm curious, this is a question that I think I'm sometimes uncomfortable asking, but success is such a personal thing, you've got this great role in this movie coming out, now I know you're going to be in *Creed II* which I'm excited for. Um, do you feel like you're successful? Are you able to, to, to enjoy that and feel that?

Russell Hornsby: You know, I, yes, I feel I've been successful. You know, where others fall down, I fall up. I've been exceedingly blessed and fortunate. I have my lovely wife here with me. We have two beautiful children that success for me. I'm 44 years old. Like if you don't know who you are by now, you will never know. So the blessing is that I'm attaining this level of success at 44 versus 34 or 24. I've taken the journey. I've lived the life, I've had disappointments, I've made mistakes, so I get what it is. You know, Roscoe Lee Brown, wonderful, fabulous old actor back in 2004, I was doing *Intimate Apparel* with Lynn Nottage and Viola Davis. And he said to me, we're at a party. He says to me, young man, he says, I can look at you and tell you're a handsome man. You're beautiful, intelligent and talented. He said, but one thing, never mistake your presence for the event. And at the time I really didn't understand what he meant by that, but you live a little and you figure it out. It's not about me, it's just, it's about what I can, you know, what I can do for others through the work. Quite honestly.



Jeff Murphy: Well, I'm glad to know that BU continues to be a part of your life. I know that you've been involved with our Black Alumni Leadership Council. Thank you for doing that. And then I know tonight even you're going to meet with some students and some of our alumni at a screening that you're doing just for BU and I'm guessing you'll take questions from the audience. I'm sure a lot of our students will just be asking you for how do, how do I get into the business? How do I do this? And I'm sure you're asked that question all the time, but I'll, I'll ask you again, what, what tips do you give to people who want to be working actors?

Russell Hornsby: Work. And what I mean by that, there is no magic formula. There is no magic pill to take to get into. You have to just continue to do it. I'm old school so I don't, so therefore I just believe that if you do the work, good things will come. If you're in pursuit of good things will come. I don't necessarily believe it's how much you Instagram and how many videos. I just don't believe that. I just believe it's about the work. So if you were on a stage somewhere, if you're filming something somewhere, if you're working on student films, if you're constantly working in pursuit of the work, opportunities will find and also if you deal with that level of high level of, of respect and integrity, opportunities will find you. That's what I believe, but and I also believe that you really have to be about the craft. You. It can't be about celebrity. I hope that people stay in that mind frame of being about the work and not about being famous and not about making a whole bunch of money. It has to be about the work. We've lost some of that in my opinion. You know, because people get so many opportunities and there's so many things about content and this and that, that I think people don't really get an opportunity to really see that acting is a craft. Again, they look at it as a, an instinctual pursuit of just something, oh, I can say these lines and say these words aren't I great, and I'm beautiful too. Right? But it really is about the pursuit of the craft.

Jeff Murphy: Well that's all good advice. Russell, thanks so much for being here. Thank you for all that you do for BU and we're really excited for, for some big roles coming out for you and the success you've had, so thanks again.

Russell Hornsby: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Jeff Murphy: Thanks again to my new friend, Russell Hornsby, it was fantastic getting to know him. Don't forget to see him now in *The Hate U Give*, and you'll also be able to catch him later this fall when he stars in *Creed II*. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be proud to BU. The Proud to BU podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. This episode was recorded in partnership with the College of Communication and our friends over at WTBU. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit bu.edu/alumni/podcast.

