

EDGE

interview

Mekhi Phifer & Dulé Hill



Photo courtesy of Nadine Raphael

Anyone who questions whether acting is a craft needs to spend a little time with the cast of a play like *Stick Fly*, which opened to rave reviews this past winter at the Cort Theatre on 48th Street. Produced by Alicia Keys and directed by Kenny Leon, Lydia Diamond's engaging family drama explores themes of race and class through the story of an upper-class African-American family. While this may be unfamiliar territory for most Broadway theatergoers, the two male leads of *Stick Fly* are instantly recognizable. Mekhi Phifer (*ER*) and Dulé Hill (*The West Wing* and *Psych*) rank among the most beloved and talented ensemble television actors of our time. Hill is an old hand where Broadway is concerned, while for Phifer *Stick Fly* marks his debut. EDGE Assignments Editor **Zack Burgess** met with the co-stars before a performance at the Cort over the holidays. Three-way Q&A's can be tricky—especially with so much ground to cover—but as usual, Zack just pointed his subjects in the right direction and they took it from there.

EDGE: Did either of you have a professional relationship with Alicia Keys prior to this production of *Stick Fly*?

Dulé Hill: No. But I have always been a fan of hers. Who's not a fan of hers?

Mekhi Phifer: I knew her, but of course not to the level of our friendship since this project got started.

DH: I had done a version of *Stick Fly* about five years ago in L.A. It was a staged reading with mikes. It kind of reminded me of old-school radio. It was fun. I hadn't thought about it since then, and then I got a call back in the

summertime to do a project. I knew they had an offer out to Mekhi, which really piqued my interest. Once I was told the name of the play, I said *I'm in*. Alicia's involvement was the icing on the cake.

EDGE: You both have done lots of television and film work so you have a good background in terms of shared experience. The exception is probably that Dulé has spent time on the Broadway stage. Mekhi, how has Dulé helped you adjust to performing on stage?

MP: Dulé has done Broadway four times. I've never done a play, so I've asked him a lot of questions. It's always helpful to be surrounded by people who are veterans and who are good at what they do—who know what is entailed in making this thing work. Being able to go to Dulé was very helpful for me to get acclimated to this environment.

DH: Remember that the other pieces have mostly been musicals. This is only the second produced play that I have done. So it's still kind of a new world for me. I'm not going to be putting on any tap shoes or singing.

EDGE: Dulé, what did you see as Mekhi's immediate strengths in terms of stagework when you guys started rehearsals back in the fall?

DH: It comes down to being a brilliant actor. He brings it every time. That's the case whether he's on *ER* playing Dr. Pratt or the star of *Paid In Full*, coming on *Psych* or playing Flip in *Stick Fly*. That alone is it. Having those skills. There are things you have to do when you're dealing with the stage versus film and television, and Mekhi took everything in, learned and adapted. He asked questions and processed information very quickly. You wouldn't know that this is the first play he's ever done. I really respect him for that.

EDGE: Dulé, are there any parallels between the LeVay Family in *Stick Fly* and your own experience growing up in New Jersey?

DH: I grew up in a middle-class family, although I don't think we had anywhere near the type of money of the LeVays. But I definitely relate to the LeVays' dysfunction. I have a great family, but we have our level of dysfunction, too. There are things we don't talk about. We don't always address issues



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when we should and they end up simmering underneath and then exposing themselves in other areas.

EDGE: What about similarities to your character, Spoon?

DH: Spoon is trying to figure out where he wants to go in life. And that is foreign to me because I started doing theatre at the age of ten, and started tap-dancing when I was three. I've always been on a journey of self-discovery and owning who I am as Dulé—not trying to fit into the mold of what other people think I should be. Spoon doesn't own his vision. He starts to figure it out during the play, but in a way his family never supported him or gave him the opportunity to really find out what he wanted to do. I'm very thankful that my parents supported me, exposed me to new experiences and let me find where I want to go in life.

EDGE: Is that what *Stick Fly* is about?

DH: It's about family dysfunction, self-identity...and daddy issues.

EDGE: Daddy issues in what respect?

DH: The idea that, when you're a child, your father is perfect. For instance, I love my dad to death, but growing up

there's this issue of trying to fit into the mold of who you think you should be because of your father. Then one day you realize that your father is a man just like you. He has his own faults and Achilles' Heel.

MP: My character, Flip, emulates his father. He's a doctor, like his dad. He's just living life. He's off the cuff. Flip has what is seemingly a closer relationship with his father than the one Spoon has. But I think what makes Dulé's character stronger than mine in certain respects is that Flip took the more accepted route by becoming a doctor.

EDGE: What was your family background like, Mekhi?

MP: I grew up in a single-parent home and never met my Dad. At the same time, my mother was a schoolteacher, a dancer and a choreographer. She always stressed academics, but she was also about the arts. There was never one way to do something. She favored an obtuse way of thinking versus an acute way of thinking. So my mom wanted me to have great grades and she looked over my homework. But she was always supportive of the arts. So when I was a kid and I would do little talent shows, or rap in freestyle and battles, she was always very supportive.

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EDGE: What nuggets of wisdom have you guys picked up from your co-stars over the years?

DH: We've worked with phenomenal co-stars.

MP: I agree, we've both been blessed to work with some dynamite co-stars.

DH: On *The West Wing*, Martin Sheen used to say to me, "It's got to cost you something. If it doesn't cost you something, then it's meaningless." Whether it's the journey of the character or you as an individual, you really have to put yourself into it. Something—time, energy, whatever—has to be sacrificed if you're going to have a successful career. For example, if I'm hanging out all night partying and then try to come on stage the next day, it's just not going to work. You have to make choices and say, "This is where I want to go. This is what I want to do." That always stuck with me. What also struck me about Martin was his humanity, how personal and gracious he was with everybody. I try to take that part of him and apply it to my own life.

MP: The first piece of advice that really stuck with me came while I was doing my second film, *Tuskegee Airmen*. Laurence Fishburne told me then that "less is more"—especially when you're dealing with film and television. Another piece of advice I got was from Bill Cosby. He said somebody had asked him what was the key to success, and he said he didn't know, but he *did* know the key to being *unsuccessful*, and that's trying to please everybody. Those two poignant statements have stuck with me throughout my career.

EDGE: From Martin Sheen and Laurence Fishburne we move on to Jon Lovitz...Mekhi, what do you take away from a crazy comedy like *High School High*?

MP: Jon Lovitz was wonderful. We were all young in that movie and I always remember him being so nice. He was extremely successful at that point, just coming off of doing *SNL*. That was early in my career and it was a little bit of a whirlwind for me. But Jon's one of those guys that will stop you on the street and talk to you, and after awhile you'll be like, *All right Jon, enough is enough. Enough jokes. I've got to go.* So like Dulé said about Martin, yeah be successful, but be gracious as well. Live life and get to know more people.

EDGE: Dulé, you got to know Wesley Snipes working together on *Sugar Hill*. What insights did he give you as an actor?



Photo courtesy of Nadine Raphael

DH: There was one thing that Wesley told me that stuck with me. I had just gotten to L.A. and it was right before I got *The West Wing*. I was auditioning for stuff and I wasn't getting the roles, the scripts weren't very good, and I was going to get dropped by my agent. I ran into Wesley one day and he said, "If there's always one way, there's always another." I asked him what he meant by that and he explained that if you see a bunch of people going up a hill and falling back and not making it through, then try to look on the other side. There's not just one way to get to your destination. I don't know what he meant for me to receive from that, but it always stuck with me. From then on I've always looked for different angles on how I approach a character, and my career.

EDGE: I am curious how the involvement of a major musical personality changes the culture of a movie or a TV show or a stage production. For instance, Mekhi, when you worked with Eminem on *8 Mile*, was that a very different experience than the other films you've done?

MP: It was great. Pure fun. I'm 26, 27, we're in Detroit, Eminem is at the apex of his career. We had a month of rehearsals so that Eminem could get dialed in. We partied hard and it was fun. It was a great experience working with a director like Curtis Hanson and all these actors who were relatively unknown at the time. We had a blast. What I loved about Curtis was that he trusted us. Even when we were doing the battles—that stuff was not scripted. And the people in Detroit were great. What made those battle scenes real is that those people were real people. They were

not day-to-day extras, they were real people from the neighborhood.

EDGE: Every successful actor has that role that he almost got, but it went to someone else. So tell me, each of you, what was the “one that got away”?

DH: That’s a tricky question, because if it got away then it was never really mine. There are roles throughout my career that I *wanted*, but I’m very happy for the actors who got them. One was Savion Glover’s role in *Tap*, because I’m a tap dancer. To work with Gregory Hines, Steve Condos, Harold Nichols, Jimmy Slyde and Sammy Davis, it really hurt when I didn’t get it. I just wanted to be in that space with those great actors. A lot of those guys started passing on right after that. *Antwone Fisher* was another role I really wanted. I would love to have shared the screen with Denzel Washington for that amount of time. Derek Luke got the role and Derek’s a good friend of mine. It really exploded his career. I was happy for the actors who got those parts, but I would be lying if I said I hadn’t wanted those roles.

MP: Right after I did *Clockers* with Spike Lee, I auditioned for *Dead Presidents*. I was right down to the wire for the role of Anthony and they decided to go with Larenz Tate, which was fine because Larenz is a friend of mine. They were shooting in New York, it took place in the Bronx, and the Hughes brothers were just riding high off *Menace II Society*. I remember meeting with the casting director, who thought they were going to give me the part. But I guess the Hughes brothers already had a relationship with Larenz—who had stolen the show in *Menace II Society*. I guess they figured *We’ll ride with him*.

EDGE: Have you ever walked out of an audition thinking you’d messed it up?

DH: Going back to *Antwone Fisher*, I got a chance to read with Denzel. Now normally after I read a script, I don’t usually get caught up in the things that are in parentheses—words like *ANGRY* or *UPSET*. I leave that alone and go with my own journey. For some reason in that particular situation, I saw the word *ANGRY* sticking out. So when I’m in the room and it’s me with Denzel, that word kept popping into my head. So I’m reading and I’m being angry. The first thing Denzel said to me was, “Why you so angry?”

EDGE: But your career survived.

DH: It did. So to all the people out there, I say just because you mess up on one thing doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world.

EDGE: Back to *Stick Fly*—Dulé, how does this cast compare to some of the others you’ve worked with?

DH: One of the perks of being in this business is just the camaraderie that exists with the people we work with. That’s what makes a show like *Psych* successful. These people are really good at what they do. And they also happen to be really nice people—people that you want to hang with and have drinks with later. Look at *Stick Fly*. When you work with actors like Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Tracie Thoms, Rosie Benton—they challenge you just to step up to another level. Ruben is a bona fide professional veteran, Tony Award winner and dynamic actor. You can’t half-step it with Ruben. It’s not going to happen. They’re all phenomenal actors. Then you get blessed to be in a situation where you’re seeing someone like Condola Rashad—someone who is already great, but her career is just getting started. I’m really honored to be on the stage with her. She’s knocking it out of the park now, but in ten, fifteen years I truly believe I will be saying that I was a part of her journey to greatness.

EDGE: What does your director, Kenny Leon, bring to the show, and how might someone in the audience at *Stick Fly* experience that?

MP: Kenny brings a realism to it. I’ve been to many Broadway shows and the worst thing in the world is to sit there and you’re bored out of your mind. You start fidgeting, you start falling asleep. Kenny not only stresses pace, but telling a story and being good at what you do as an actor. A good analogy would be a dog race. We, the actors, are the rabbit. The audience is the dog. We want them to come up to our speed, and I think we succeed. Doing a play is a totally different machine when it comes to directing. I love Kenny’s direction.

DH: I have to say that most of the directors I have had a chance to work with have been brilliant. But there are things about Kenny that remind me of George Wolf, the director of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*. They are both very specific about every little detail. Everything we’re doing on stage in *Stick Fly* is meant to draw the audience’s attention to where Kenny wants it to be. That’s cool, because sometimes as an actor you forget those things.

Editor’s Note: Zack Burgess writes about politics, sports and culture for a variety of publications and web sites. You can read his work at zackburgess.com.