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# THE Hollywood REPORTER



**'WE ARE THE PILLAR  
OF SOMETHING NEW'**

JOHN BOYEGA and LETITIA WRIGHT join director STEVE MCQUEEN to tell the unheralded stories of Britain's Black immigrant life with *Small Axe* while finding power in their own Hollywood struggles: 'I don't care about trying to mesh in with the system'

From left: Boyega, McQueen and Wright

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*"We Are the Pillar of Something New":  
Steve McQueen, John Boyega and Letitia Wright  
on the Emotional Journey to Spotlight  
Black British Life in 'Small Axe'*

*The director and actors discuss their film anthology about London's  
West Indian community and embracing their power amid Hollywood's racial reckoning:  
"I don't care about trying to mesh in with the system in order to secretly work it."*

by Rebecca Keegan (November 2, 2020)



Photographed by Seye Isikalu. "I had to still understand who I was and where I was, and where I wanted to go to achieve these films," says McQueen, who conceived the 'Small Axe' project years before he was ready to make the films.

John Boyega was in his first year at the University of Greenwich when he received what he considered a sign from God. During his film studies class, in the middle of a dull lecture, a loud pyrotechnic explosion rocked the hall. "I ran to the window along with the other students, thinking, 'What's going on?'" Boyega says. "We looked down and I saw Johnny Depp on top of two carriages, balancing himself, as Jack Sparrow."

The University of Greenwich is a popular filming location and was being used that day for a *Pirates of the Caribbean* shoot. An astonished Boyega, who was in the midst of grappling with how to tell his skeptical Nigerian parents that he wanted to pursue acting full time, bounded down the stairs to the set — and never returned to college. "I saw what I wanted to do," Boyega says. "I thought God sent the whole film set right here. He sent a film that I would love to star in, that I'd love to be a part of. I never went back."

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A decade later, Boyega is a genuine movie star, having recently finished his six-year arc on the *Star Wars* franchise, and a man in the midst of another major awakening. This time, however, it's also a kind of homecoming, which sees him teamed with British acting school classmate Letitia Wright in director Steve McQueen's potent collection of films about Black British life, the *Small Axe* anthology. "The creative [side of acting] was like a family member that I had ignored for too long," Boyega says, drawing a contrast with his blockbuster work. "For the first time in my acting career in a long time, I looked at my art that I really do love and I said, 'I missed you and it's good to be here and I'm happy doing this.' "

For McQueen, who became the first Black director to win a best picture Oscar for the decidedly American indictment *12 Years a Slave*, *Small Axe* is an opportunity to shine a light on a much lesser known history, that of his own West Indian community in London. "In our mainstream education system, we don't learn about these specific stories," Boyega says. "Any historical information I know about Black British history, about me as an African, and then also the Caribbeans as well, is mostly from community stuff. Various different extracurricular activities that I would take outside of school was the only place that expanded our knowledge on other parts of our history that wasn't just Henry VIII."

That the collection is coming to screens as the Black Lives Matter movement reaches new levels of awareness globally — including at a London protest in June where Boyega delivered a speech about police violence that went viral — is a quirk of timing. "Our presence as Black people and what we've done has changed the fabric of the U.K. within politics and within wider culture," says McQueen, 51, who was born in London of Grenadian and Trinidadian descent. "For me, this needs to be recognized. I needed to see those stories."

*Small Axe*, which will premiere Nov. 20 on Amazon Prime and drop a new film each week, takes its name from a Jamaican proverb popularized by Bob Marley: "If you are the big tree, we are the small axe." The five feature films, which tell stories of Black resistance, resilience and joy within a Britain that has been largely inhospitable to its Black immigrants, include *Red, White and Blue*, in which Boyega plays Leroy Logan, a real-life London police officer who integrated a hostile department in the 1980s, and *Mangrove*, a 1970s-set courtroom drama about activists fighting for the rights of a local Trinidadian restaurant owner, starring Wright as Altheia Jones-LeCointe, a real leader in the British Black Panther movement. (All but one of the films, *Lovers Rock*, are based on true stories.)

The films are packed with sensory details — steaming pots of goat curry simmer in the kitchen, a sweaty crowd sways to Janet Kay's 1979 reggae pop anthem "Silly Games" at a party, Boyega's young police trainee heads to a nightclub in leather pants reminiscent of Eddie Murphy's *Delirious* look. "It's called Black," McQueen says, explaining the aesthetic world he creates in the films, speaking during an emotional interview over Zoom with Boyega and Wright in mid-October.

As the trio discuss their shared histories — including a lack of acknowledgment in their industry, and the feeling of winning their immigrant parents' reluctant approval — McQueen's eyes get wet. When Boyega describes what it felt like to have his father, a Pentecostal minister, call and ask about his next audition while he was working in L.A. — the communication of love and an acceptance of his career path with few words — McQueen talks about friction with his own father. "My dad was very protective of me, he was 'Get a trade, get something that you can fall back on,' " McQueen says. "I come from a different generation to Letitia and John's. So my dad was seeing what the landscape was around. And at that time it was very hostile."

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In casting Boyega and Wright, and populating most of the rest of his *Small Axe* cast with little-known young Black British actors, McQueen was extending a hand to the next generation. He hired Wright, 26, for her role before Ryan Coogler cast her as T'Challa's precocious younger sister in *Black Panther*, and didn't ask her to audition, relying mainly on conversations they shared for his sense that she could inhabit the serious and intense woman she was to play. "It threw me off because, with myself and John, we go through this process of people always trying to make us prove ourselves time and time again," says Wright, who had worked predominantly in TV and theater in the U.K. "You hardly are given the opportunity to play characters like this. Hardly, hardly, hardly. You have to fight and scrape and grit your teeth for words to come out your mouth like this as an actress, as a Black actress. So when Steve said to me, 'Tish, you need to trust that I know that you can do this,' that fueled me."



Dan Kitwood/Getty Images. Boyega's speech at a June London Black Lives Matter protest went viral.

In July, Boyega arrived on the set of *Red, White and Blue* just as something powerful was beginning to shift inside him. One month earlier, the actor had screamed himself hoarse at a Black Lives Matter protest in London, delivering a raw, spontaneous speech in which he spoke about the pain of being "reminded every day that your race means nothing." The actor, who had grown up having his family stopped and searched by police in southeast London, invoked the deaths of George Floyd and Sandra Bland in the U.S. and Stephen Lawrence and Mark Duggan in the U.K. "I don't know if I'm going to have a career after this," he shouted into the megaphone at one point, as if startled by his own candor, "But fuck that." In answer, several filmmakers tweeted their desire to work with Boyega in the future, including Jordan Peele, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Elizabeth Banks, and Lucasfilm published a statement of support, calling Boyega "our hero."

Around the same time, in a then not-yet-published interview with British *GQ*, Boyega had begun to talk openly about his frustrations working on the *Star Wars* franchise, where racist internet trolls had targeted him from the moment he was revealed in the first trailer as a stormtrooper, and screenwriters had written a much thinner storyline for his character than for those of his white counterparts, Daisy Ridley and Adam Driver. In speaking about how his race had shaped his experience on the Hollywood tentpole, Boyega was breaking the unspoken industry rule that young actors, especially young Black actors, must only appear grateful for such career opportunities. "I'm the type of person that came into an industry in which I felt there was, not to give it the L.A. stab, just a lot of pretense," Boyega says. "I don't roll like that. I've been in situations in life in which I know what it feels like to have your life at risk."

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There are deeper things going on here. I don't care about trying to mesh in with the system in order to secretly work it. That's just not my way. Everyone's just got to have an honest and open conversation. It doesn't have to be conflicting or rude, but it's a chance for us to actually, really and truly understand where each other is coming from."



David James/Lucasfilm. Boyega's candor about feeling discriminated against on 'Star Wars' prompted Disney to reach out for a "very honest" conversation.

In September, Boyega would also break with an endorsement partner, Jo Malone, after the British fragrance company replaced him with a Chinese actor for the Chinese-market version of an aftershave ad that he had created, starred in and directed for them in his London neighborhood of Peckham. "Their decision to replace my campaign in China by using my concepts and substituting a local brand ambassador for me, without either my consent or prior notice, was wrong," he wrote on Twitter. "While many brands understandably use a variety of global and local ambassadors, dismissively trading out one's culture this way is not something I can condone."

The buried frustration that was beginning to surface offscreen also showed up — usefully — during the filming of a confrontation scene in a dingy rec room in the English city of Wolverhampton. McQueen had shot 95 percent of *Red, White and Blue* before the pandemic, and when production resumed in July after the long break, it was to film an incident where Boyega's character has just been abandoned at a dangerous crime scene by his white police colleagues after enduring months of their taunting and exclusion. When Boyega enters the room where the white officers are smoking and playing pool, he coolly takes in the scene before eventually building to an explosion of rage, shouting, "I'm sick of this!" The effect of the moment, a bracing one for the audience, was healing for Boyega. "My performance is heavily influenced by my reality," Boyega says of the rec room scene. "The filming was therapy. I had so much to give and so much bottled-up emotion."

For McQueen, Boyega's experience on the *Star Wars* films and Logan's in law enforcement are parallel ones. "John is this golden boy, who had the situation to be in this amazing franchise," McQueen says. "Leroy Logan passes all the tests and is set up to be the poster boy to encourage other Black policemen. But when he's in there, the carpet gets pulled from under his feet, and not because of anything he's done. Not being given the leg up. Not being supported. That's just one aspect of life for Black people, in the movies, the police force, this is the issue. We want to participate, we want to integrate, but there seems to be resistance."



Photographed by Seye Isikalu. "I'm the type of person that came into an industry in which I felt there was a lot of pretense," says Boyega. "I don't roll like that."

After Boyega's interview decrying his experience on *Star Wars* was published, the actor says he was contacted by a Disney executive. "It was a very honest, a very transparent conversation," Boyega says. "There was a lot of explaining on their end in terms of the way they saw things. They gave me a chance also to explain what my experience was like. I'd hope that me being so open with my career, at this stage, would help the next man, the guy that wants to be the assistant DOP, the guy that wants to be a producer. I hope that the conversation is not such a taboo or elephant in the room now, because someone just came and said it."

Boyega's experience of feeling isolated on *Star Wars* helped inspire his decision to found his own production company, UpperRoom Productions, which this year signed a slate deal with Netflix to produce non-English-language films from West and East Africa. "With my acting career and with my earned privilege I'm just trying to use that to expand the opportunity, much like what we experienced with coming on set [on *Small Axe*]," Boyega says. "We were really shocked to be surrounded by Black individuals, people that otherwise I would never see on a film set."

Boyega, in turn, inspired Wright to found her own production company, Three/Sixteen Productions, named for the Bible verse John 3:16. It is producing *Le Brio*, an English-language remake of the 2017 French comedy-drama, with John Legend. "John [Boyega] said, 'Don't wait for anybody to put it on a platter for you,'" Wright says. "'Let's get creative.'"

Boyega and Wright have known each other since they were teenagers at the Identity School of Acting in London, founded by actor and agent Femi Oguns in 2003 to foster Black talent, and they speak to each other like siblings, including when they affect their parents' respective accents and play-act the

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conversations they have had with them about acting. "Femi had to go to my dad's house and say, 'Uncle, John's got real talent. I'm going to make sure I take care of him. But he has to go to L.A.,'" Boyega says. "Obviously my dad's like, 'He's already decided to go to L.A.'" Wright jumps in, speaking in a baritone as Boyega's father, "When did you decide this with my son?" A decade after they started at his acting school, Oguns, who once paid for Wright's headshots because she couldn't afford them, continues to represent both actors, and helped broker their Disney deals.

At Identity, Boyega's youthful ambition was obvious and infectious to Wright, she says. While she was excited to book an episode of British medical drama *Holby City*, Boyega had his eye on playing a lead in a feature film, and he became the first in the group to book one, in the 2011 sci-fi comedy *Attack the Block*. Boyega used to refer to Wright and his peers at Identity as "IG Knights" (for Identity Group). "Anybody that booked a job he was like, 'IG Knights, go. Get on your horse and go,'" Wright says. "He forced us to think bigger. Him simply saying, 'I don't want to go and do *Holby City*. I respect people that go do it, but I want to be a young Black man in a feature film. I want to lead it.' He was all of 19, 20, and he did that, and he enabled us to dream big."

"The creative industry is not something that is seen as a go-to — it's a hobby," says Wright, whose family moved from Guyana to London when she was 7. "So when I started to do it, my mom's like, 'This is a nice little hobby thing you're doing here.' It didn't equate to success because she never had seen anybody do that. We are the pillar of something new within our community."



Photographed by Seye Isikal. "When I started to act, my mom's like, 'This is a nice little hobby thing you're doing here,'" says Wright, whose family moved to London from Guyana when she was 7. "It didn't equate to success because she never had seen anybody do that."

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A key moment of acceptance came when Wright's family, including her then-3-year-old sister, was watching an episode of *Holby City* where her character dies. "The episode finished and my little sister looked at me, looked at the screen and started crying, really crying because she thought I had died," Wright says. "I was like, 'No, I'm alive. That's not real.' And I remember from that point on my mom basically saying, 'Yeah, I think you should go ahead.' That was the turning point for me, presenting something to my mom and saying, 'Mom, this is not just a school play anymore.' "

Like Boyega, Wright has gone on to star in a major Disney tentpole, Marvel's *Black Panther*, which suffered a devastating loss this year when its star, Chadwick Boseman, died unexpectedly of colon cancer at age 43. Wright declined to speculate about the future of the franchise, including fan theories that her character, Shuri, would take over as the lead, which happens in one of the comic book series on which the film is based. She has been intensely private about her grief. "I'll never forget the day I met him," Wright says of Boseman, whom she met in 2017. "God told me he was my brother and I am to love him as such. I always did and always will."

Filming *Small Axe* represented an arrival back at a familiar place for Wright. "It felt just beautiful to be on set and the lingo of Trinidadians, Jamaicans, just flowing and you know exactly what they're saying," Wright says. "You don't have to go get a little dictionary. You just know it. You feel it. It's in the food. It's in the way we walk. It's in the way we talk to each other. The way we would suck our teeth. Whatever it is, it was us, and we were unapologetically Black on our set and it was beautiful. Everything that you were born with just comes out and everybody on set gets you, feels you."



Marvel Studios 2018. Wright with 'Black Panther' star Chadwick Boseman, who died of colon cancer in August. "God told me he was my brother and I am to love him as such. I always did and always will," she says.

The other films in *Small Axe* include *Lovers Rock*, a fictional Cinderella tale that unfolds at a 1980 house party; *Education*, a true story about the use of special needs schools to segregate Black children; and *Alex Wheatle*, about the award-winning Jamaican-British novelist, who served jail time for participating in the 1981 confrontation between police and protesters known as the Brixton riot. Amazon joined the project as co-producer and distributor as part of its pact with the BBC, but McQueen has since signed an overall TV deal with the streamer and is at work on a science fiction series for the company called *Last Days*.



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The director first pitched the idea for *Small Axe* to the BBC 11 years ago, after he had made the well-reviewed indie film *Hunger* and as he was about to make *Shame*, and he initially envisioned the project as a TV series. McQueen would later decide to make *Small Axe* as a group of stand-alone films that rely on cinematic language, including different film stocks and aspect ratios for the different stories and eras. He wrote the films with British writers Alastair Siddons, who made documentaries and wrote the 2018 *Tomb Raider*, and Courttia Newland, a novelist and playwright.



Photographed by Seye Isikalu. John Boyega

McQueen stepped away from the project to make other films, *12 Years a Slave* in 2013 for Fox Searchlight and *Widows* in 2018 for 20th Century Fox. "I wasn't ready to delve into this narrative, because I had to mature," McQueen says. "I had to still understand who I was and where I was, and where I wanted to go to achieve these films." Some of that maturation meant claiming his space in an industry that could seem unwelcoming. "There's been two generations of Black artists ... who have unfortunately ventured into other avenues because the film world in the U.K. didn't want them. They weren't accepted. People go where they're wanted or where they can feel comfortable. I had to get to a stage where I could deal with it myself emotionally."

McQueen shot all five films between June and October 2019, save for some pickup shots. That summer, he had dinner with Amazon Studios chief Jennifer Salke. "For him the biggest questions were, how would you present this to global customers?" Salke says. "There are a lot of people who have a snobbery about streaming. He wanted it to stream. But he wanted us to be able to treat it like a film, in the sense

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of the kind of respect that it would get. He wanted to make sure that it would be treated as an event for Amazon, which I could assure him that it would be." (Three of the titles debuted at the 2020 New York Film Festival). Says *Small Axe* executive producer Tracey Scoffield, "Everybody at the BBC has learned not to call this a show. It's a collection of films. Steve had a really good laugh once when people referred to these films as 'content.' "

Amazon will also campaign the projects for next year's Emmy Awards. Asked about new rules at the U.S. film Academy modeled on those at BAFTA and designed to encourage more inclusive casts and crews in Hollywood, McQueen bats away the topic of awards. "I don't care about that," he says. "I care about Black and brown people who have been excluded from the film and TV industry in [the U.K.] to fulfill their dreams and to be invited in to be said, 'Hey, maybe you want to be an editor. Come and have a look at what this is.' That's what I care about. Awards, that's for down the road. That's Mount Everest. I'm more interested in what's here and now. What I can actually have some influence in changing."