



ROCKMOND DUNBAR CLOSEUP

BY REGINA R. ROBERTSON
PHOTOGRAPHY ASTOR MORGAN
GROOMING CLAUDIA HUMBERG
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ROCKMOND DUNBAR by **regina r. robertson** photography **astor morgan**

Oftentimes, creative artistry wholly consumes the life force of its submissive host, so much so that one might be silenced to ponder the dichotomous notion of the gift as curse—and vice versa. Whether acting, writing, producing, directing or making a broad stroke with his paintbrush, Rockmond Dunbar is making strides as both an artist and a man.

While many are familiar with Dunbar's work by way of Kenny Chadway, the hardworking entrepreneur, husband and father he portrays on Showtime's *Soul Food*, he's also set to appear alongside Val Kilmer and Robert Downey, Jr. in Joel Silver's *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*. Christened by TV Guide as one of *Television's 50 Sexiest Stars of All Time*, Dunbar cut his teeth in the theater, got his break on Steven Spielberg's *Earth 21* and has since maintained his position on the radar. Along with his role on the now-defunct series, *Good News*, he's made the rounds on the primetime circuit including appearances on *Felicity*, *The Wayans Bros.*, *The Practice* and most recently, *Girlfriends*.

And then there's Darby, the sexually adventurous character he so convincingly portrayed in the indie film,

Punks. Oh, and since we're on the subject of eroticism, it's certainly no exaggeration to state that many a tongue is still wagging after the publication of his 2002-2003 calendar. Long story short, Dunbar, who proclaims himself a *passionate person*, is posed in the buff, with a ball and not much else. But we'll get into all of that later.

At the top of the month, Dunbar offers his latest effort, *The Great Commission*, a sordid tale of a hooker who has become obsessively delusional about her role as a soldier in God's army. The short film marks his debut as a producer and director and features an array of talent ranging from Clint Howard, Joe Torry and Obba Babatundé, the latter whom portrays his father on *Soul Food*. Dunbar is also hard at work developing a television drama, *Solitaire*, which he is expected to executive produce.

Venice caught up with Rockmond Dunbar at home with his new wife, Ivy, and their two pint-sized puppies. Upon being greeted at the entryway by a life-size statue of a Dancing Shiva, the Dunbar home, which he describes as a cross between the Ivory Coast and Bali, is quite cozy. Immediately following his photo shoot, Dunbar chilled out on the sofa and shared with us the essence of his life as a creative conduit, his challenging work on iSoul Food and the joy he experienced from behind the lens.

Venice: Before we even begin this interview, I have to get my dibs in for one of those provocative calendars!

Rockmond Dunbar: [laughs] Yes, the calendar was provocative, but also, very tasteful. They've sold out, but I may be able to dig up one for you.

OK, now that we're past the formalities, let's talk about iThe Great Commission. How did you get your hands on the script?

A friend of mine invited me out, but didn't tell me that he'd also invited 4 other cats who were all trying to pitch me their ideas. Halfway through drinks, I realized what was going on. A guy by the name of Andrew Burroughs Trotman was among the group and I asked that he send me his script because it was the one that sounded the most interesting. It wasn't very mainstream and had an indie, underground feel to it.

Andrew is a director himself and originally, he wanted me to play a part in film. So, he sent me the script, I read it and three months later, Showtime gave me the opportunity to direct a short. So, I called him up and said that I had money for the film and that I'd love to direct it. His immediate response was, iNah, that's my baby, but he called back 5 minutes later and said, iAlright, dude, go ahead.

How was your experience as a director?

I love being a part of a creative team, which is basically what being a director is all about. The process of hiring all the people was very interesting to me as there were those who thought outside of the box as well as others who brought some different creative juices to the project.

For example, I wanted to shoot the confessional scene as a 360 so that you could see on each side of the wall, simultaneously. I asked every art director who came in how we could make it happen and there was only one guy, Stefan Beese, who said, iYou know, maybe we can do it this way. I knew that it had never been done before, but every other art director wanted to change the idea and I knew immediately that I didn't want to work with that person.

Stefan came in, drew a diagram and after about 30 minutes, we figured out how to do it, under budget. We ended up getting a great shot and I already have directors telling me how they want to steal that shot ñ that's a great compliment.

You began your training in the theater and have since gone on to work in television and film and now you're also producing, directing and writing. Which medium offers you the greatest artistic freedom?

It really depends on how I feel when I wake up in the morning. It's almost like being a bisexual man, you know?

A bisexual man? You might have to explain that one.

[laughs] OK, maybe a bisexual woman.

OK, now you've totally lost me.

Well, I've heard that term from so many of my friends. It's kind of like when you try to decide what clothes to put on on any particular day ñ it really depends on what you're feeling.

How I'm feeling at 3 o'clock in the morning or 5 o'clock in the afternoon plays a role in deciding which art is really going to feed me at that time ñ it could be writing or painting or whatever calls me. For instance, I haven't painted for the past 6 or 7 months because I've been writing and acting and trying to think up new projects that are outside of the box.

Since you've mentioned your painting, can you give me a little background on iArt Therapy?

I'm big on therapy and I believe that everybody, at some point in time, needs therapy. I paint for therapy. It all started when I met a woman who brought out the best in me, creatively, through paint and canvas. Within the first few months of being with her, I painted maybe 30 or 40 pieces and had a show, which I called iArt Therapy.

Then she got cold feet and ran away three months before we were to be married.

Her leaving sparked another creative movement and as a result, I did 30 more paintings. I was in Toronto at the time and had my second show, iRock, Art & Soul,î which is where I debuted the 13-month calendar. I didn't want to become one of those brothers who are abusive to women after they come out of a relationship, so the art acted as my therapy, not so much to get over her, but to work through the hurt, pain and abandonment. I wanted to feel sexy again and the art just helped me express some of the emotions that I really needed to get off my chest so that I could have a healthy relationship again [gesturing toward his wife].

As I'm sitting here with you, I feel as though I'm talking to Kenny Chadway, who is such a simple, yet complex man. Which of your characters has posed the greatest challenge to you?

You don't want me to do the Kenny voice, do you? He kind of talks like this. [deepens his voice and laughs] I would have to say that playing Kenny has been the hardest for me. I was always more comfortable playing the gangster and when I first auditioned for iSoul Food,î I gravitated toward the Lem character. It was actually [executive producer] Tracey Edmonds who suggested that I read for Kenny.

When we started the show, I was 26 and had never been married nor did I have children. So, there I was, trying to be the father of a son, who, if I'd had him in real life, would have been conceived when I was about 13. Also, I was playing husband to a wife, who, in reality, was older than me. I remember sitting down with [director] Eric LaSalle after Aaron [Meeks] and I rehearsed a scene together and he said, iBrother, you've got to step up.î I was already scared and all I could think about was how good the kid was. So, I've had to pull from my father and my uncles [to bring the character to life]. If you were to ever meet my father, you'd say, iOK, that's where he got Kenny from.î I'm not like Kenny at all ñ we think nothing alike and we definitely don't dress the same!

Can you share the premise of the television drama, iSolitaire,î that you're currently working on?

Solitaire is a game that you play by yourself and when you get to Hollywood, it's really about you playing by yourself. Even though there may be other elements and people involved, you're really on your own.

I wrote the piece, which is basically my story combined with those of my friends and how we moved to Hollywood to try to gain some longevity on the scene. I also included elements from some of the Hollywood Babylon stories you hear about kids who come to LA with the hopes of becoming the next Brad Pitt or Jennifer Lopez and instead, they get turned inside out. We're pitching it right now.

So, how would you like for the Rockmond Dunbar story to unfold?

Well, I don't choose to write or direct or paint. Those things come to me and I, then, have to go out and try to make it happen. If I had the choice not to be an artist, I might [concede]Öbut then again, I love it. It's excruciating ecstasy.

I would love to be the i-go-toî man and also have some serious longevity in this business. I'd love to be in-demand and unavailable until I die.

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About the Author

Regina R. Robertson is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles, CA.