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AWARDS INSIDER EXCLUSIVE

The Making of *Nickel Boys*: How a Pulitzer-Winning Novel Became a Radical, Harrowing Film

The director and cast of the Telluride sensation, adapted from Colson Whitehead's lauded best-seller, give their first joint interview about how they pulled off what most would've considered a fool's errand: "We're being asked to do something that you've always been told not to do."

BY DAVID CANFIELD
August 31, 2024



Nickel Boys feels like some kind of movie miracle. That's less a commentary on its quality, truth be told—though [if you've scanned reviews](#), you might have an idea of just how high this one soars—than on its ambition, so radically realized and yet somehow backed by a major studio in Amazon MGM (via its Orion Pictures label). The adaptation of **Colson Whitehead's** Pulitzer Prize-winning novel premiered Friday night in Telluride to a packed house at the Werner Herzog theater, and you could feel some unease in the room—the good kind. You could feel an audience being challenged and moved in the same breath.

This is the delicate power of **RaMell Ross's** vision. The Oscar-nominated documentarian (*Hale County This Morning, This Evening*) makes his fiction debut with this true-story-based tale of two Black teenagers, Elwood (**Ethan Herisse**) and Turner (**Brandon Wilson**), who bond at an abusive reformatory school in Jim Crow-era Florida. The narrative, punctuated by tragic twists and rendered harrowing in its stark portrait of American racism, stands on its own. But Ross takes things several steps further. In keeping with the innovative *Hale County*, and in honoring the novel's structure, the director and his cinematographer **Jomo Fray** (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*) shoot the film entirely from the two boys' perspectives, with stirring archival interstitials expanding its scope.

Aside from those interludes, we only see what Elwood and Turner see, with the whole ensemble (also including **Hamish Linklater** and **Fred Hechinger** as employees of the school) typically tasked with looking direct to camera. Produced by Plan B's **Dede Gardner** and **Jeremy Kleiner** (*The Tree of Life, Moonlight*), along with co-writer **Joslyn Barnes**, the film's avant-garde approach is cannily balanced by its moral urgency and aesthetic rigor. Like last year's *The Zone of Interest*, it all but reinvents the language for movies about a particular, dark historical chapter, and seems primed to spark conversations about both its content and its form.

"The whole thing is an experiment," Ross tells me. He's sitting on the floor of a small hotel room in Telluride on a sunny Saturday, surrounded by his cast: Herisse and Wilson, arguably coming off of the biggest night in their careers, on the couch to one side; Oscar nominee **Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor**—who gives a powerhouse performance in support, as Elwood's grandmother—in the chair on the other. In their first interview together, they dig into the wild making of what's sure to be one of the year's most essential, provocative films.

***Vanity Fair*: How was last night?**

RaMell Ross: It was all of the adjectives: appreciation and glory for reaching this point after almost five years. But it's also anxiety-ridden. What we did is not traditional in any sense. It gives people subjective responses, and with that, you have no idea what people are going to say or how they're going to feel. It's a pretty vulnerable piece. There are big ideas in there, and when big ideas fail, it hurts.

When you show this film to this kind of audience—a little older, very white, wealthier—do you come in with any particular expectations?

Ross: I'm always like, if I can just finish the project, I know someone will finish watching it. The way that it's built is deceptive in a marketing sense, in that it's really rigorous. Brandon said last night at the bar that he felt such a granular sense of sadness watching it, because the images are so beautiful but they're so ephemeral. There's such a sense of loss but such a sense of gain every time you see one. That's what *Hale County* is to me too—and that's what makes me thrilled to give this to an audience from whom the centrality does not emerge. It emerges from *our* centrality, and it ostensibly is for us, but I'm happy to give it to others. If they start watching and make it through it, they don't even know the work that has been done to them. The images are very complicated.



RaMell Ross at the *Nickel Boys* world premiere.
Vivien Killilea/Getty Images

I'm curious how you experience that too, Aunjanue, as someone who has been on the festival circuit rounds with different movies these last few years, like *King Richard* and *Origin*.

Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor: It is a lot of expectation management. Acting is a vocation, it is not advocacy, but I have been incredibly lucky in the last few years to work on things that I really believe in. Directors I *really*, really believe in. Like, RaMell, I would hold up your mic for you. I believe in RaMell Ross's work on that level. I want people to feel the way I feel. I come in with nerves as well. I want people to get what I got when I read it, when I saw *Hale County*. I want folks to go along with the journey. I know that is not

always going to be the case, so I have to manage my expectations, and that's hard. I'm a work in progress when it comes to that.

I do remember over a year ago, Aunjanue, you described to me your process of "stalking" RaMell.

[Group laughs]

Ross: Wait, what? No.

Ethan Herisse: The receipts are there!

Ellis-Taylor: He thinks I am lying! *[Laughs]*

Ross: *[Hugging Ellis tightly]* I got her message a year after, like super late. So that's triple confirmation. Aunjanue's been there, man. That's amazing. I couldn't ask for anything more than for someone like her to be interested in working with me.

RaMell, this is your first time casting a movie. How did you go about finding Brandon and Ethan, and what did you see in them?

Ross: They're appreciative of being in it, but this is nothing without these guys. That we found them essentially saves the film. They're inextricable from the vision that we were allowed to push.

Brandon was the first person that we cast. We came across him during the first group. Nothing like the Turner I had imagined—I didn't see him being tall, lanky. But whatever Brandon has in terms of his aura just feels so authentic. Brandon can play any role; you can put him in anything. You just have to allow yourself to see him as that, and then he's that. He chose to be turning in the casting process, because that's what the task was, and immediately: This is Turner, isn't it? That was quite easy.

Ethan was later in the game. It was really late in the process, down to the wire. We went through hundreds of guys. They did the things that we needed to push back against, but what's always asked of them, because that's what gets you jobs. To me, that's the opposite of what we needed. It's the opposite of what Brandon did. We had one guy come in with a straw in his mouth and a hat on and doing the thing.

Ellis-Taylor: Oh, really?

Ross: Well, you come across it and it's like, who knows what Hollywood wants. But then we came across Ethan, and Ethan wasn't as porous as Brandon in terms of flexibility, but he was equally real and wide-eyed and open and innocent. Ethan has something about him, an optimism, that he exudes through all conversations. The way he drinks or he laughs, it's fucking infectious. We knew it right away. Then all of a sudden he started to read and we were like, Done. It was just a matter of whether or not you guys had chemistry. We were afraid they wouldn't, and then we would have to

choose and find another person. We had the cameras on, and they weren't even acting yet—just talking. We were like, Do they know each other? Are they friends? They were just meeting, but it was like they'd known each other forever.

Herisse: We found out we both moved to the same city from our respective other places—Brandon's from Georgia, I'm from Massachusetts. But we lived in Burbank and went to rival high schools. And that carried on into the room. Being able to lock into a space and not be myself, to play with words and be free with them, it's just a real joy. Coming out of COVID, there were not many opportunities to get into a room in general, let alone with another person and do a scene with them. To actually look at that person and feed into each other—I hadn't had many of those opportunities.

Brandon Wilson: Whenever I meet anyone, I hopefully am just open and vulnerable. It's in reaction to how open and vulnerable they are willing to be. How you met me in that room with ease and joy—it felt easy. It was like, OK, I can meet you here. We can do this.

Herisse: When I read the script and saw the POV thing, I honestly ignored it until we got to New Orleans. I just didn't think about it. I wanted to know what the story was saying and what Elwood was about. Then the first day: "Ethan, you're going to be putting this rig on your body, and it's going to be looking at your hands."

Wilson: It first hit me when RaMell asked me to look at the camera. Like, Oh, okay.
[Laughs]



Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor with director RaMell Ross on the set of *Nickel Boys*.
L. Kasimu Harris

So RaMell, how did you set up the filming between the actors to create this visual approach?

Ross: The film is conceived as all one-ers. In one scene, we shot everything from Elwood's perspective, and then everything from Turner's—one from the first hour, and then the other for the second. Very rarely did we shoot both perspectives on a scene, though, because of the way it was written and scripted. We don't always go back and forth. So it's shot like a traditional film, except the other character is not there. They're just asked to look at a specific point in the camera.

Typically, the other actor is behind the camera, reading the lines and being the support to make the other person feel like they're actually engaged with something relatively real. Because they're all one-ers, though, the choreography is quite difficult. The challenging part was nailing the movement of the camera to feign what it would be like for a person to look, but not to overemphasize the concept of looking. If you try too hard to be POV, it's impossible. That becomes the focus of interest to the audience, then you lose their connection. It's why we shot entirely on long-lenses, 50mm and 80mm; this is not a GoPro thing.

Herisse: We're being asked to do something that you've always been told not to do.

Ellis-Taylor: "Don't look at the camera!" [*Group laughs*]

Herisse: And it is intrusive, so to kind of unlearn that and make it become the person that you are talking to—Turner, usually—was new and a challenge. But I found it exciting because of that. With time, it got easier. You can still be free in that, it just looks a little different.

Wilson: It felt physically restrictive. I didn't realize until I was allowed to move—like when I was walking on the beds—like, I haven't been moving!

Ellis-Taylor: RaMell was really good about saying it, but not saying it. I think about the scene where young Elwood is looking in a storefront, and it took us forever to get that, because the shot had to align. I can only say you have to lean into it and be like, Okay, this is going to take a long time, but I'm going to trust the process. In the scene where I visit Elwood, we were talking about where she was at that point. I was a little more disheveled and RaMell, you're like, I don't feel it. It felt like a technical thing, but I never felt inhibited by it, oddly. I should have felt, like, What the fuck? [*Group laughs*] Oddly I didn't.

You continue the approach you'd introduced in *Hale County* in a lot of ways, this time by also visually honoring the book's POV structure. How did it come to you with *Nickel Boys*?

Ross: It is the way I shot *Hale County*. There are three scenes in that movie where the camera is used the same way, and that was unconscious proof-of-concept to myself....

I've long had a POV film in mind, an art film, and then Dede [Gardner] comes along with this book. I thought, "At one point did Elwood realize that he was Black?" That's a visual thing to me: Looking around the world, people are this; something isn't weird then, but it's weird in hindsight. That was the first mode of making the movie that I thought of. But I didn't think that anyone would make the movie. I conceived the approach and wrote the premise, and Joslyn [Barnes] and I created a detailed treatment. I then asked her to co-write. We built it out. When we finished the script, we weren't like, "We're going to make this movie!" We were like, Yo, I really love this script. What do you want to do next? Because there's no way that MGM/Amazon are going to make a POV film with these archival images built out. And it was greenlit.

What did you make of them saying yes, since you weren't expecting it?

Ross: Maybe this is too personal, but my mom died unexpectedly when I was in college. I had a basketball thing going on that ended because of injuries. I have my expectations always capped. I can no longer think obliviously and be excited about everything. I speak excitedly because I'm enthusiastic about art, but in my head I'm like, They're going to shut this thing down any week. Seriously. Everything happened so fast. It's not like any producer gave me signs it was shutting down, but I know it's a big risk. The reason why I thought it was possible was because Dede made *Tree of Life*. I was like, No one in the world makes this movie. Movies like this don't get made. So I gave it my all. Let's see how far it will go. It was surreal through the entire process.

Ellis-Taylor: Do you know [Arthur Jafa's work](#)? He redid the end of *Taxi Driver* recently and I count him as a friend. I saw that in New York a few months ago. AJ is interested in completely disrupting narrative, and it is done through repetition: He makes the folks involved Black, and he repeats it. It goes on for 45 minutes. I think about that and I compare it to what you have done, RaMell. With AJ, with that piece, the act of doing it is the work. You have expanded that into something not separate or discrete from an emotional experience, and not discrete from exploring this idea of what narrative does. Joslyn said that what the film does is it *undoes* narrative, at least the expectation of narrative. That can come off as gimmicky or indulgent, but when there's heart in it? That is what I felt in *Hale County*, and that is what I feel at least in the experience—because I haven't seen it yet—of making *Nickel Boys*.

You haven't seen it?

Ellis-Taylor: It's hard for me to have had such a special experience on something and then it belongs to somebody else. I'm vulnerable to opinions, mainly my own, honestly.

Herisse: This is my second time seeing it, and I told Aunjanue how moved I was by her work. What you did in this movie is freaking stunning.

Wilson: A lot of films approach this topic—race, Blackness—as an answer. As their own reality that they are presenting to you: This is who I am, now this is how you should see me. In *Hale County* and with films like *Moonlight* and now this film, Black is a question.

I'm still just allowing myself to be a question and explore life. It's just people allowed to be people, and not presenting a concept.

Ellis-Taylor: RaMell, what you did with *Hale County*—you went and lived in Alabama for a little while, didn't you?

Ross: I still have a house there. I'm still shooting. I went there and lived there for three years hardcore, I made thousands of images, and then I was like, "Oh, I see the problem: Everyone leaves." I was like, What if I never left? I'll just never take photos outside of here. That became my thesis: This is it. This is home now. I'll just make work from this place.

Aunjanue, I imagine you can connect to that. At the end of the *King Richard* campaign, you told me you were getting on the road and back to your life, well outside of LA. I think about that as we sit here in Telluride.

Again, you're the person who knows that side of this business the most of anyone here.

Ellis-Taylor: Yeah, because you become a product of something. I have to refuse that on a whole lot of levels. For my own personal sanity, for one, but also, there is an expectation of femininity, of heterosexuality, *in* that product. All of that flies in the face of everything that I am. What I've had to do is be constantly reminded of what made me.

Not how I am being made.

This interview has been edited and condensed.