

Sidney Poitier

Film Actor, Filmmaker, Director (1927–)

“If I'm remembered for having done a few good things, and if my presence here has sparked some good energies, that's plenty.” —Sidney Poitier

Sidney Poitier became the first black Academy Award winner for Best Actor in 1964, receiving the honor for his performance in 'Lilies of the Field' (1963).

Sidney Poitier was born on February 20, 1927, in Miami, Florida. After a delinquency-filled youth and a short stint in the U.S. Army, Poitier moved to New York to pursue an acting career. He joined the American Negro Theater and later began finding roles in Hollywood. In 1964, he became the first black man to win an Academy Award for best actor. He also directed several films, including *Stir Crazy* and *Ghost Dad*.

Early Life

Actor and director Sidney Poitier was born on February 20, 1927, in Miami, Florida. He arrived two and a half months prematurely while his Bahamian parents were on vacation in Miami. As soon as he was strong enough, Poitier left the United States with his parents for the Bahamas. There Poitier spent his early years on his father's tomato farm on Cat Island. After the farm failed, the family moved to Nassau, when Poitier was around the age of 10.

In Nassau, Poitier seemed to have a knack for getting himself into trouble. As a result, his father decided to send the teenager to the United States for his own good and Poitier went to live with one of his brothers in Miami. At age 16, Poitier left the South for New York City, where he worked menial jobs to support himself, until he found his life's passion.

Acclaimed Actor

Poitier made a deal with the American Negro Theater in New York City to receive acting lessons in exchange for working as a janitor for the theater. He eventually made his way to the ANT stage, filling in for Harry Belafonte in their production of *Days of Our Youth*. In 1946, Poitier appeared in a Broadway production of *Lysistrata* to great acclaim. His success in that role landed him another in the

play *Anna Lucasta*, and for the next few years Poitier toured the country performing in the all-black production.

Moving beyond the stage, in 1950 Poitier made his Hollywood debut in the feature film *No Way Out*. The following year he appeared in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a drama set in South Africa during the time of apartheid.

Cast mainly in supporting roles, Poitier had a career breakthrough with the popular film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), in which he portrayed a student at an inner-city school. His success as an actor reached new heights when he scored his first Academy Award nomination, for the 1958 crime drama *The Defiant Ones*, with Tony Curtis, and the following year, Poitier lit up the screen as a leading man in the musical *Porgy and Bess*, co-starring with Dorothy Dandridge. Both this film and his impressive turn in the 1961 film adaptation of the play *A Raisin in the Sun* helped make Poitier a top star.

In 1964, Poitier won an Academy Award (best actor) for his performance in *Lilies of the Field* (1963)—marking the first Oscar win by an African American actor. This accolade helped make Poitier cinema's first Caribbean-American superstar, one who consciously defied racial stereotyping.

Handsome and unassuming, Poitier brought dignity to the portrayal of noble and intelligent characters. In 1967, he gave three very different yet equally strong performances. He played Philadelphia detective Virgil Tibbs in the Southern crime drama *In the Heat of the Night*. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* he played a black man engaged to a white woman in this groundbreaking look at interracial marriage. Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy played his fiancée's parents in the film. He also starred as inner-city teacher Mark Thackeray in the British film *To Sir, with Love*. The film finds Thackeray navigating racial and socioeconomic friction between rebellious and unruly students and winning their respect in the end.

Later Career

While he helped break down the color barrier in film, Poitier found himself under fire for not being more politically radical in the late 1960s. He was especially upset by a harsh article about him in *The New York Times* and decided to step out of the spotlight, choosing to live in the Bahamas for a time before making his return to Hollywood.

In 1972 Poitier teamed up with friend Harry Belafonte for the western *Buck and the Preacher*, which also marked Poitier's directorial debut. The pair appeared in the comedy *Uptown Saturday Night* with Bill Cosby in 1974. In 1980, Poitier directed the successful Richard Pryor–Gene Wilder comedy *Stir Crazy*.

After a roughly 10-year absence from the big screen as an actor, in 1988 Poitier returned with a pair of dramas—*Shoot to Kill* and *Little Nikita*. Other notable later films include *Sneakers* (1992) and *One Man, One Vote* (1997). On the small screen, Poitier earned accolades for portraying some of history's famous men. He played U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in *Separate but Equal* in 1991 and opposite Michael Caine as South African leader Nelson Mandela in *Mandela and De Klerk* in 1997.

Now retired from acting, Poitier has turned his attention to sharing his many personal experiences. He penned *The Measure of a Man*, which was billed as a spiritual autobiography and published in 2000. That same year, Poitier picked up a Grammy Award for best spoken word album for the audio version of the book. He shared his years of wisdom for future generations with 2008's *Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Great-Granddaughter*.

Poitier has received numerous honors during his legendary career. In 2009, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. Poitier was also feted by the Film Society of Lincoln Center in 2011, earning the organization's Chaplin Lifetime Achievement Award.

Personal Life

Poitier was married to Juanita Hardy from 1950 to 1965, and together they had four children: Beverly Poitier-Henderson, Pamela Poitier, Sherri Poitier and Gina Poitier. He is currently married to Canadian-born actress Joanna Shimkus, and they have two children, Anika Poitier and Sydney Tamiia Poitier.

Poitier was appointed a Knight Commander of the British Empire in 1974, which entitles him to use the title "sir," though he chooses not to do so. He has also served as non-resident Bahamian ambassador to Japan and to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.