



Ridley Scott: Building Cinematic Worlds

American Gangster

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Directed by: Ridley Scott; ©: Universal Studios;
Production Company: Brian Grazer Productions; *In association with:* Scott Free; *Presented by:* Universal Pictures, Imagine Entertainment;
Presented in association with: Relativity Media;
Executive Producers: Nicholas Pileggi, Steven Zaillian, Branko Lustig, Jim Whitaker, Michael Costigan; *Produced by:* Brian Grazer, Ridley Scott;
Co-producers: Jonathan Filley, Sarah Bowen;
Production Supervisor: Lyn Pinezich; *Production Co-ordinator:* Angela Quiles; *Unit Production Managers:* Jonathan Filley, Branko Lustig; *Location Manager:* Michael Kriaris; *Post-production Supervisor:* Teresa Kelly; *2nd Unit Director:* Alexander Witt; *1st Assistant Director:* Darin Rivetti; *2nd Assistant Director:* Noreen R. Cheleden; *Script Supervisor:* Mary A. Kelly; *Casting:* Avy Kaufman; *Screenplay:* Steven Zaillian; *Based on the article 'The Return of Superfly' by:* Mark Jacobson;
Director of Photography: Harris Savides; *Camera Operator:* Craig Haagensen; *B Camera Operator:* Larry McConkey; *C Camera Operator:* David M. Dunlap; *Key Grip:* Tom Prate; *Steadicam Operator:* Larry McConkey; *Gaffer:* Bill O'Leary; *Still Photographer:* David Lee; *Visual Effects:* Gray Matter FX, Invisible Effects; *Graphic Artists:* Derrick Kardos, Dawn Masi; *Editor:* Pietro Scalia; *Production Designer:* Arthur Max; *Art Director:* Nicholas Lundy; *Set Decorators:* Beth A. Rubino, Leslie Rollins; *Property Master:* Peter Gelfman; *Construction Co-ordinator:* Rich Hebrank; *Costume Designer:* Janty Yates; *Department Head Make-up:* Bernadette Mazur; *Department Head Hair:* Kenneth Walker; *Music by:* Marc Streitenfeld; *Additional Source Music Written by:* Hank Shocklee; *Orchestra Conducted by:* Mike Nowak; *Music Supervisor:* Kathy Nelson; *Music Editor:* Del Spiva; *Score Recorded/Mixed by:* Peter Cobbin; *Production Sound Mixer:* William Sarokin; *Boom Operator:* George Leong; *Re-recording Mixers:* Michael Minkler, Bob Beemer; *Supervising Sound Editor:* Per Hallberg; *Dialogue Editors:* Kimaree Long, Frederick H. Stahly; *Sound Effects Editors:* Christopher Assells, Dino R. DiMuro; Daniel Hegeman, Peter Staubli, Jon Title; *ADR Recordist:* Rick Canelli; *ADR Mixers:* Thomas J. O'Connell, Howard London, Beauxregard Neylon, Doug Murray; *ADR Supervising Editor:* Chris Jargo; *ADR Editors:* Michelle Pazer, Christopher W. Hogan; *Foley Artists:* John Roesch, Alyson Dee Moore; *Foley Recordist:* Scott Morgan; *Foley Mixer:* Mary Jo Lang; *Supervising Foley Editor:* Craig S. Jaeger; *Stunt Co-ordinator:* George Aguilar
Cast:
Russell Crowe (*Richie Roberts*); Denzel Washington (*Frank Lucas*); Chiwetel Ejiofor (*Huey Lucas*); Cuba Gooding Jr (*Nicky Barnes*); Josh Brolin (*Detective Trupo*); Ted Levine (*Lou Toback*); Armand Assante (*Dominic Cattano*); John Ortiz (*Javier J. Rivera*); John Hawkes (*Freddie Spearman*); Rza (*Moses Jones*); Ruby Dee (*Mama Lucas*); Common (*Turner Lucas*); Lymari Nadal (*Eva*); Roger Guenveur Smith (*Nate*); Yul Vázquez (*Alfonse Abruzzo*); Malcolm Goodwin (*Jimmy Zee*); Ruben Santiago-Hudson (*Doc*); Carla Gugino (*Laurie Roberts*); Skyler Fortgang (*Michael Roberts*); Kathleen Garrett (*Mrs Dominic Cattano*); Joe Morton (*Charlie Williams*); Ritchie Coster (*Joey Sadano*); Bari K. Willerford (*Joe Louis*); Idris Elba (*Tango*); Warner Miller (*Melvin Lucas*); Albert Jones (*Terrence Lucas*); J. Kyle Manzay (*Dexter Lucas*); Tip Harris (*Stevie Lucas*); Melissa Hill (*Redtop*); Quisha Saunders (*Darlynn*);

The legend of heroin smuggler/family man/death dealer/civic leader Frank Lucas was first chronicled in a *New York Magazine* article by journalist Mark Jacobson. In 2000, executive producer Nicholas Pileggi – who co-wrote the screenplays for *Goodfellas* and *Casino* with Martin Scorsese – introduced Jacobson to Lucas, thus beginning a journey in which Lucas recounted his outrageous rise and fall to the journalist. From watching his cousin murdered by the KKK in La Grange, North Carolina, to earning mind-boggling figures in drug sales to facing a lifetime in prison, Lucas had one stunner of a true tale.

Jacobson's subsequent 'The Return of Superfly' unfolded the complex story of a desperately poor sharecropper who moved to Harlem and slowly bypassed the usual suspects of its burgeoning heroin scene to rule a New York City empire. Through selling a purer product at a cheaper price to thousands of addicts in the Vietnam-era streets, Lucas amassed a fortune calculated in the tens of millions – and the eventual attention of the law. Had he not been pushing an illegal, deadly substance new to this country, Lucas would have assuredly been celebrated as one of the keenest businessmen of the decade, if not the century, for his family-run enterprise.

Growing up penniless in a small Southern town, Lucas arrived in New York in 1946 as a self-described 'different sonofabitch'. For two decades, he worked side-by-side with Ellsworth 'Bumpy' Johnson (the inspiration for the Black godfather of the '70s *Shaft* films), serving as the kingpin's right-hand man until Johnson's death in 1968 – tutored in the ways of gangsters like Frank Costello and Lucky Luciano. And upon Johnson's death, Lucas seized the reins. He changed the name of the game to the hot new import heroin and immediately put his stamp on the city – with a gun to the head of anyone who dared challenge him.

Fascinated by Jacobson's article, producer Brian Grazer optioned the project for Imagine Entertainment and met with Pileggi and Lucas to discuss the gangster's exploits. Grazer viewed Lucas' story as a metaphor for the greediness of white-collar capitalism and had, admittedly, never heard anything quite like it.

Grazer was fascinated by the cautionary tale of a man with 'the dream of corporate America who found a way to make a deal with individuals in Southeast Asia that could lead him to the highest grade of heroin.' He continues, 'After he had this heroin, he would make a deal with U.S. military officers to import it in body bags of U.S. soldiers traveling from Vietnam back into America [the so-called Cadaver Connection]. I thought that was a remarkable, inescapable and interesting idea.' The producer would take this option and turn to veteran screenwriter Steven Zaillian to pen a script based on Lucas' life.

Zaillian would spend months with Lucas and his former pursuer (now retained attorney) Richie Roberts to give shape to their improbable tale that spanned decades. Zaillian would also become fascinated with the unlikely relationship between this multimillionaire thug/entrepreneur and this complicated cop-turned-prosecutor. He was certain to weave a shattering parable that didn't just dramatise Lucas' rise and fall but told of the juxtaposed path of his chief tracker and nemesis.

Roberts, who spent the late 1960s to early '70s as an Essex County, New York, detective, was the man ultimately responsible for bringing down the folk hero. Grazer and Zaillian thought that what made this story especially compelling was not just Lucas – who lived by a strict code of family and

Kevin Corrigan (*Campiz*); Robert Funaro (*McCann*); Jon Polito (*Rossi*); Tom O'Rourke (*banker*); Robert C. Kirk (*police captain*); Tom Stearns (*2-star general*); KaDee Strickland (*Richie's attorney*); Jon Devries (*Judge James Racine*); Jim R. Coleman (*bailiff*); Lee Shepard (*Laurie's attorney*); Gavin Grazer (*Mike Sobota*); Linda Powell (*social worker*); Roxanne Amandez (*paramedic*); Norman Reedus (*detective in morgue*); Pierra Francesca (*stewardess*); Eddie Rouse (*detective at party*); Mary Ann Urbano (*real estate broker*); Cedric Sanders, Jason Veasey (*servicemen in café*); Roosevelt Davis (*army captain*); Roger Bart (*U.S. attorney*); Eric Silver (*white kid*); Mitchell Green (*Tango's bodyguard*); Saycon Sengbloh (*Tango's woman*); Conor Romero, Daniel Hilt, Daniel Farcher (*tough teenagers*); David Spearman, Maurice Ballard (*civilian cleaning staff*); Paul Doherty (*TV newscaster*); William Tate (*Baptist minister*); George Lee Miles (*Frank's lawyer*); Jason Furlani (*bailiff*); Chris McKinney (*reporter on TV*); Ric Young (*Chinese general*); David Wayne Britton (*army colonel*); Tommy Guiffre (*medical examiner*); Laurence Lowry (*paramedic*); Dan Moran (*army captain*); Marjorie Johnson (*Charlene*); Larry Mitchell (*FBI agent*); Chuck Cooper (*private doctor*); Kevin Geer (*law school professor*); Chance Kelly (*MP*); Hamilton Clancy (*seller*); Sam Freed (*judge*); Joey Klein (*chemist*); Scotty Dillin (*4th amigo*); Anthony Hamilton (*funk band singer*); Sarah Hudnut (*assistant prosecutor*); Jeff Greene (*metal door worker*); Tyson Hall, Kirt Harding, Bryant Pearson (*drug dealers*); Alfredo Luis Santos (*mechanic*); William Hudson, Christopher A. Sawyer (*dealers*); Dylan Gallagher (*casket loader*); Jehan-Pierre Vassau, Dawn A. Douglas (*narc officers*); Robbie Neigeborn (*cop in narc headquarters*); Clinton Lowe (*man arrested in elevator*); Wilhelm Lewis (*head wedding photographer*); James Hunter, Neville White (*deacons*); Lonnie Gaetano (*prison guard*); Jeff Mantel (*Officer Walsh*); Serena Joan Springle (*the proctor*); Ron Piretti (*judge*); Nino Del Buono (*announcer*); Arthur M. Mercante (*referee*); Panama Redd (*policeman*); Robert Wiggins (*piano player*); Fab 5 Freddy (*Smalls patron*); Jonah Denizard (*store manager*); Steve McAuliff (*mounted policeman*); Fatima Robinson, Karen Adisson, Autavia Bailey, Candyce Barnes, Janelle Cambridge, Cicely Daniels, Andrea Rose Edmead, Ortos J. Gutierrez, Celestina Henry, Luam Keflezghi, Monique Lea, Flavia Tamara Livolsi, Tamara Marrow, Shannon McMillan, Jonathan Medero, Marielys Molina, Kesha Nichols, Nefertiti Robinson, Krista Saab, Luis Salgado, Carlos Sierra-Lopez, LaTonya Tolbert (*dancers*); Sandra Park, Yuri Kamino-Fennell (*singers*)
USA 2007©
157 mins
Digital

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community as he pushed poison into thousands of lives in the very community in which he lived – but also Roberts, who found his own destiny interwoven with that of the drug kingpin.

The officer of Zaillian's screenplay was a purported ladies' man who struggled to keep his personal life in check, while he lived and breathed the strong arm of the law. One of the few lawmen at the time not pulled into the temptation of a life on the take, Roberts (or at least Zaillian's incarnation of this hardened cop) needed to face the exact opposite issues of the writer's Lucas.

First attached to the project was director Antoine Fuqua, who had directed Denzel Washington in *Training Day* (2001). Washington, initially resistant to portray a man whose complex rise to power meant the death of so many, was captivated by the script and came aboard for the lead role. He was intrigued by the intricate story of Lucas' life, and believed the businessman who had hurt so many was, in fact, trying to redeem himself through years of penitence.

The actor would have to wait a few more years to take the role to the screen. Prior to the start of principal photography in 2004, Universal Pictures stopped the development of the project. Remembers producer Grazer: 'Everything just flatlined, and I was devastated for about a week. But I still really believed in this project.'

During several more drafts by other writers and some other flirtations with actors and directors, Grazer kept pursuing Ridley Scott as his ultimate dream director.

Scott believed in the epic trajectory that Zaillian had created – chronicling the life of a man viewed as both martyr and murderer, depending upon the source. It would take the combined power of producer Grazer and Scott to resurrect the project and welcome back Washington.

Grazer offers, 'I charged forward with all my energy and full commitment to get it made. I'd taken the script to Ridley Scott seven or eight times, and he always liked it, but the timing was never right for him. This time – the ninth or tenth time – he said, "Yes".' The British filmmaker was drawn to the muddy ethics and ultimate paradox of the two protagonists in Zaillian's story. But it would be some time before he was ready to step behind the camera to make *American Gangster*.

Indeed, Scott had encouraged Zaillian to flesh out more of Richie Roberts' tale in the previous versions of the script he read. Scott was quite interested in the paradox that, while Lucas was dealing drugs – yet reportedly had a sterling home life – Roberts had a personal life that was 'shot to hell' and 'he became infamous fairly early on in his career within the police department when he found a million dollars in the trunk of a car on a stakeout. After he turned it in, he could no longer be trusted inside the department.'

The director felt the double-helix dynamic was worth investigating, and, that if he were to tackle the project, he would 'explore two universes – hopefully making them both fascinating and gradually bringing them together. They're carefully intercut, because every time you intercut between these two worlds, they're getting closer together.' He would do the picture if his frequent partner joined him in the effort, proposing that Crowe play the part of Richie Roberts and that Washington rejoin.

With Crowe and Scott on board, Washington found he couldn't say no to preparing to play Frank Lucas one more time. The actor states, 'Brian came to me and said, "I've got Ridley." Well, Ridley's one of the great filmmakers of our time, so you can't say no.' He would finally begin playing the man who had grown from chicken thief to the king of Harlem.

Production notes

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at theb.fi/programme-notes

Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk