



“Having been a freeman, and for more than 30 years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery, where I remained, until happily rescued in the month of January, 1853, after a bondage of 12 years – it has been suggested that an account of my life and fortunes would not be uninteresting to the public.”

-- Solomon Northup

About the Production

Based on the unforgettable memoir that exposed the inner workings of slavery to the American public in the 19th Century, comes 12 YEARS A SLAVE, director Steve McQueen’s mesmerizing and moving account of New York family man Solomon Northup’s (Chiwetel Ejiofor) unexpected kidnapping, his dizzying journey into Louisiana’s slave plantations . . . and his unbreakable quest to get home to those he loves.

The true story of Northup’s sudden loss of liberty is equally touched by transcendent moments of beauty, kindness and reminders of the connections we have to one another. From an accomplished musician and craftsman with a wife and children in Saratoga Springs, New York, Northup finds himself in a staggering situation: drugged, stripped of his papers, shackled, and sold to an unflinching slave trader named Freeman (Paul Giamatti). He is shipped to Louisiana where his fate lies at the mercy of a series of plantation owners including William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), both of whom change Solomon in very different ways. While Solomon takes comfort in his friendships with Eliza (Adepero Oduye) and Patsey (Lupita Nyong’o), his mind and body are forced to the limits of human capacity at the whims of his captors. But at every turn, he refuses to succumb to hopelessness or the surreal oppression into which he has fallen, holding fast to his innate belief that he was, is and will one day again be a free man. When Solomon is finally introduced to a charitable carpenter called Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt), his path to freedom is paved by a letter declaring his captivity and leading to his triumphant return to his family and subsequent publication of his revolutionary memoir.

McQueen, no stranger to intense yet breathtaking filmmaking in his first two films HUNGER and SHAME, began to envision 12 YEARS A SLAVE before he had even read the book. He knew that he

wanted to explore American slavery in a way that hadn't yet been seen: from the point of view of a man who had known both the elation of a free life and the injustice of human bondage. McQueen was aware that historically some Southern slaves had been kidnapped from Northern states, but only later would he learn that a memoir of the precise experience he was imagining already existed.

"I wanted to tell a story about slavery, and it was just one of those subject matters where I thought to myself, well, how do I approach this? I liked the idea of it starting with someone who is a free man, a man who is much like everyone watching the movie in the cinema -- just a regular family guy," McQueen recalls, "who is then dragged into slavery through a kidnapping. I thought of him as someone who could take the audience through the ghastly conveyor belt of slavery's history."

At the time, McQueen mentioned his idea to his wife, Bianca, and it was she who found Solomon Northup's memoir, a book that had once rocked American society but was no longer well known or widely read. "My wife found the book and as soon as I opened it, I couldn't stop. I was stunned and amazed by this incredible true story. It read like Pinocchio or a Brother's Grimm tale, with a man pulled from life with his family into a dark, twisted tunnel, yet one that has a light at the end of it," he says.

McQueen found, as many had, that Northup was a shrewd observer of people, one of the few able at that time to bring to the world the vital news of what slavery actually looked and felt like from the inside. Shocking as his story was, Northup's tale also had a contemporary feel to it, an enlivening journey of both physical and moral courage. It was a profound act of bearing witness, and at the same time, asked a question that the greatest literature asks – not just what happened but, *what would you have done?*

With 2013 marking the 160th anniversary of Northup's freedom, McQueen felt his story was especially urgent to tell right now. "This story has far more reach than anything else I've seen or read lately," he says. "I couldn't believe that I hadn't known about this book. How was it possible? Most Americans I mentioned the book to hadn't heard of it either. For me it is as important to American history as The Diary of Anne Frank is to European history– a remarkable account of man's journey into astonishing inhumanity. Everyone thinks they know about this period in American history. But I think a lot of things in this film will surprise people the way they surprised me. I felt it would be an honor and a privilege to turn the book into a film and bring this story to audiences."

Known for juxtaposing intensely emotional and sometimes provocative scenes against frames with the lush, formal beauty of paintings, the story would give McQueen a chance to take his distinctive visual style farther than ever before – and at the same time to hone his skills as a storyteller.

And, ultimately, it was the story of 12 YEARS A SLAVE that inspired McQueen – a story at once shattering yet told with poignant dignity and inspirational determination. "At its core, this is a story about family and the hope of coming home to your loved ones," he summarizes.

"It's such an extraordinary story, and it's so moving. It instantly gave us the perspective we

wanted, a period of time long enough to really understand or investigate what slavery was, what it meant on a day in and day out basis and what it meant on so many levels,” says producer Dede Gardner.

THE BOOK

In 1853, the book 12 Years a Slave, an account by Solomon Northup (as told to David Wilson) of his 12 years held captive on several Louisiana plantations became a best seller of its day. The book spoke to readers on multiple levels. It opened a previously closed window on daily slave life, uncovering what it was really like to “belong” to a master, whether ruthless or seemingly gracious and benevolent. At the same time, it painted a complex picture of the moral, emotional and spiritual impact that slavery – the so-called “Peculiar Institution” -- had on all kinds of people, from slaves of diverse backgrounds to the plantation owners themselves. Most enduringly, the book spoke to the indestructible human spirit.

Written just a year after Northup regained his freedom, and nine years before the Civil War, the book became a vital part of the national debate over slavery’s future and countered claims of idyllic situations made by slaveholders. Northup himself said that, by sharing his tale, and revealing the broad range of personalities and attitudes inside the plantation system, he was “determined to portray the institution of slavery as I have seen and known it.”

Many were moved by his courage to not only explain what happened to him, but also to give detailed specifics. The great American statesman Frederick Douglass, who also in 1845 published a seminal autobiography of his life having been born as a slave, said of Northup: “Think of it! For thirty years a man with all a man’s hopes, fears and aspirations -- with a wife and children to call him by endearing names of husband and father -- with a home, humble it may be, but still a home...then for 12 years a thing, a chattel person, classed with mules and horses and treated with less consideration than they . . . Oh it is horrible! It chills the blood to think that such things are.”

Despite the book’s powerful influence, and its importance as a historic document, 12 Years a Slave nearly disappeared. It went out of print throughout much of the 20th Century. Indeed, it may have been lost completely if it hadn’t been for historian Sue Eakin who in 1968 restored Northup’s memoir and brought it hurtling back into the public conversation about civil rights. Eakin validated the book by carefully documenting that Northup was a real person who had undergone everything accounted for in the memoir. Since then, the book has become one of the most highly regarded of slave narratives, but it has never fully entered contemporary cultural consciousness.

Director Steve McQueen wanted to make the story accessible to the 21st Century and give Northup his full due as an inspirational figure. “This is a universal story yet it’s also very timely, I think,”

M^cQueen says. “Look around and you still see the repercussions of slavery every day. It’s something that hasn’t fully gone away. But one can look at this story now, examine it and refresh our memories about how and why things that happen today reflect the past. What makes this journey so meaningful and relevant is that every one of us is Solomon Northup. As you move through the story, you see yourself in Solomon and wonder if you would have his courage and dignity.”

ADAPTING AND DEVELOPING THE SCREENPLAY

To create that sense of immediacy and relevance on the screen, M^cQueen teamed up with novelist and screenwriter John Ridley for the adaptation. Ridley was instantly drawn to what he saw not just as a daring account of inhuman circumstances but a story firmly in the tradition of a timeless odyssey – a long, life-altering voyage full of changes of fortune, yet focused on a man’s perseverance to return to his loved ones.

“I always saw the story as a man’s odyssey home. Today, anyone could jump on a plane from New York to Louisiana and back again. But when you think of that time period and someone trying to get back home – not just get back home but also get back his rights and get back his human dignity – it’s such an incredibly huge physical and emotional distance. This is the story of an immense journey, and one in which Solomon Northup truly comes to understand what many of us take for granted: the privilege of being a free American.” says Ridley.

Despite being set in a past century, Ridley felt the story was acutely alive. “Great stories are always immediate,” he says. “Then and now Solomon is just an amazing human character.”

Ridley and M^cQueen began by steeping themselves in research. They explored the architecture of an American slavery system that was, in many ways, a harbinger of the global economy and that over time developed its own massive and brutal infrastructure. They learned about the economics of cotton – which shifted after Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, allowing for mass production and making slavery a lynchpin of Southern business. They looked at the remarkable degree to which enslaved labor helped to build America’s wealth. And they learned how slave plantations became increasingly violent and repressive, how families were broken and destroyed, in order to sustain the practice, the abject immorality of which divided the nation and became deeply rooted in its psyche.

“There were so many things we discovered about the system of slavery,” Ridley explains. “When we look at slavery now, centuries on, we assume it was just one thing; that blacks worked in the field and that was essentially it. But when you have a system that suppresses the will, that is designed to dehumanize, it has to become more and more elaborate. Stories were sold to white people about why blacks should be slaves, why they were inferior and why no one should care about their rights. And then it grew at an exponential rate year by year.”

There could be no flinching from what Northup went through physically and spiritually, but Ridley says the momentum of the story became how harshness keeps giving way to hope.

“The easiest thing with a story like this would be to back off and turn away from what happened,” he acknowledges. “But the more challenging thing is for us to look at where we came from and know that we as a nation have come so far and have done so much. I think that gives us hope for the future. To me, this movie is all about hope, about not giving in and always believing you can overcome. That’s the truth of this story for Solomon as an individual and for all of us as a nation.”

Ridley hopes that the film keeps people from forgetting a past he feels must be integrated into any vision of the American future. “In some ways it’s a travesty that schoolchildren are not brought up reading this book. Steve and I would like to think we are two well-read individuals, and we stumbled on this book. I would hope that after this film comes out no one has to stumble on this story.”

The story’s fate was helped early on when Brad Pitt and his Plan B productions came aboard. “My feeling is that without Brad Pitt, this film would not have been made,” states McQueen. “He made a real contribution as a producer because he is so full-on, direct and supportive to the filmmaker. And as an actor, even in a smaller role, he is able to do more in a few minutes of screen time that most people ever could. I’m very grateful to him, Dede Gardner and Plan B.”

Producer Dede Gardner says the company was excited to head into fresh cinematic territory. “There’s never been an all-encompassing movie like this that spans enough time to really understand slavery as a primary source of commerce for decades in the American South,” she notes. “The book lays out an extraordinary story, one that is deeply moving and also gives a real perspective on what slavery was like on a daily basis and what it meant on so many different levels.”

Adds River Road’s Bill Pohlad: “The picture many of us have of slavery is somewhat one-dimensional. But this story gives that history a personal texture that really allows you to explore it in a different way. And then you add to that, Steve’s voice, which is something special and amazing. He makes the experience intimate, which is what makes it so powerful.”

They were determined to see the movie made as McQueen envisioned it. “We came onto this project because we so believed in it,” Gardner says. “If you sign on to make a movie with Steve McQueen you know he won’t pull any punches, and I really admire that. The slavery system was vicious and deeply violent. It’s hard to even talk about it, but it was important to show it. We knew Steve wanted to be profoundly honest. And I think it’s very respectful to the audience to render these situations truthfully.”

From the start, the producers saw that McQueen’s approach was going to be very specific. “Steve immediately had a very clear vision of the film’s emotional elements,” explains producer Jeremy Kleiner. “For example, he wanted to put the audience in a place where they understood that the very act of writing

a letter could be life or death. Today, we write emails, but in Solomon's world just getting the materials together to write one letter had very high stakes. That was something important for Steve to get across – and his need to communicate became the opening scene of the film.”

For Kleiner, part of the film's universality is the way it reveals so many different sides to human behavior. “Every character that Solomon comes in contact with embodies something about the spectrum of the human condition. There is benevolence. There is inner turmoil and ruthlessness. And there is love,” he concludes. “And within Solomon, there is always this refusal to give into adversity.”

CHIWETEL EJIOFOR: BECOMING SOLOMON NORTHUP

12 YEARS A SLAVE belongs to Solomon Northup, whose journey is harrowing, but who never becomes a tragic figure. On the contrary, he comes to forge an identity that cannot be erased or undone, even by the most contemptible human behavior. Chiwetel Ejiofor took on the daunting challenges of the role with total commitment and submersed himself into the sheer power of Northup's resolute determination.

While Ejiofor has been known for a wide range of characters --- from his breakout as a British immigrant in DIRTY PRETTY THINGS and a future revolutionary in CHILDREN OF MEN to a drag queen in KINKY BOOTS and a CIA agent in SALT – he had never carried an epic film on his shoulders in the way he would have to for 12 YEARS A SLAVE. But as soon Ejiofor's name came up, Steve M^cQueen was certain he had all that it would take.

“From the get go, I knew it was Chiwetel. There simply was no other choice,” says the director. “I've been watching him for a long time and I knew he was going to be able to reach the kind of performance we needed. He has the nobility to hold the camera and to hold the whole film together. There is so much integrity and decorum to him as a person and an actor -- and that's what he brings to Solomon.”

Even with all his belief in the actor, Ejiofor surprised M^cQueen with how far he took the character, how truly alive he made Northup seem in the here and now. “Chiwetel went in so deep it was amazing to see,” M^cQueen says. “It took a lot of courage and a lot of strength.”

Ejiofor says he felt the character's beating heart from the minute he started reading about him. That became his inspiration and he never let go of it as he began to work his way into the depths of Solomon's mind as he finds himself in one unimaginable circumstance after another.

“When I first read the script and then the book, I found it devastating,” Ejiofor recalls. “It was heartbreaking to look behind the curtain of that period in history. I'd never read or seen anything like it in my life. Of course I knew about slavery but mostly in a general context. This story really does put you in Solomon's mindset, so that you start to understand what he is going through and what he is witnessing.

I really began to feel what this kind of emotional journey would mean to someone. After that, it was impossible to lose it. It penetrated me to the point that I still feel it. It's quite a thing."

He goes on: "It's a story about how hard it is to break a man's spirit, about what tremendous reserves a man has. Solomon witnessed one of the harshest structures in the history of the world, and survived with his mind intact. For me, it was an extraordinary experience to be part of telling this story and one of the most challenging roles of my career."

Much as Ejiofor was compelled at the outset, he admits he was awed enough by the enormity of the part that he gave careful thought to the task ahead. "I knew it was going to be physically, emotionally and psychologically difficult," he recalls. "I told Steve I needed to think about it. But the impact the story had on me was unshakable. If I was honest with myself I knew that there was no way that I wasn't going to be involved with it."

As soon as he took the role, Ejiofor began his transformation. He started with research that took him into the American South as it existed in Solomon's times. "The book was my template," he explains. "But going to Louisiana and seeing the real plantations where everything has been preserved, from the main house to the slave huts, and where all of these events really occurred, I got a further sense of things. I was able to talk with people about stories from that time and got a sense of all these ghosts sort of being conjured up."

While grappling with those ghosts, Ejiofor also began to explore Northup's life as a well-educated, New York musician who never could have imagined himself as a slave, despite slavery's continued prevalence in the United States. "Music was his way of feeling connected to the community and he was considered talented and special," Ejiofor notes. "At the beginning of the story, he's a charming man very much in his ascendancy. He is respected in his community, but I feel that perhaps he had developed a kind of distance from the reality of what was happening in other places in America. And that's part of what he is confronted by when he ends up in Louisiana, where he has to come to terms with all he has ignored and tried to avoid."

The instant uprooting of his life and identity – which comes in one single night when he is drugged and deprived of his former identity -- leaves Northup in a state of reeling shock. Ejiofor was able to tap directly into Northup's disorientation and his delusions that this mistake will quickly be righted.

"I think he really didn't have any concept that being kidnapped was possible, that there was even the kind of infrastructure to support that. I mean it was reported in the news," notes Ejiofor, "but it's likely he thought 'that could never happen to me.' So as he begins his journey, I think he still believes he's going to get out of this. Even when he's on a boat to New Orleans, he thinks there will be a way out."

But Northup finds no immediate way out. He is sold like merchandise, becoming the “property” of three different plantation owners who treat him in very different ways. First he encounters William Ford, who, while still a participant in the slavery system, approaches Solomon with a mix of fascination and respect. Yet Ford transfers him to the plantation of Edward Epps, a man famed for “breaking slaves,” who has dehumanized them to the point that he can relate to them only as a cross between property and tormenters in the anguished recesses of his mind. When Epps loans his slaves to Judge Turner for a season, Northup has yet another experience.

Yet, no matter whom his purported master might be, Northup is constantly reminded he is not free. For Ejiofor this cut to the heart of what makes Solomon such a riveting character. “I think the one thing that all the slave owners share in common is that they all see there is something in Solomon that must be destroyed,” he notes, “something dangerous. It’s nothing he explicitly says or does -- it’s an attitude that he cannot bury.”

That attitude is also what he grasps onto when things get dire, and gives him enough steel to keep surviving. “He holds onto a belief that slavery is so out of tilt with the moral world, it’s impossible it could continue forever,” comments Ejiofor.

Working with M^cQueen to get to every minute nuance of Northup – from his fear of appearing educated (at a time when a literate slave was seen as a grave threat to the orthodoxy) to his complicated bonds with his owners to his attempts to escape -- was both invigorating and demanding. “Steve is direct, precise and he requires everything you can possibly give at every moment,” says Ejiofor. “He doesn’t take shortcuts. He’s a filmmaker who engages with the most complicated things – and hones right in on the work you’re doing. It allows you to be naturalistic and very specific.”

From the seeds of Ejiofor and M^cQueen’s collaboration, something remarkable bloomed in the performance that everyone in the production recognized as both bold and unique.

“I admire so much what Chiwetel did,” says Jeremy Kleiner. “It’s a very lonely part but he took that on and created a psychological space for the audience where he is able to take you inside Solomon’s emotional life and inner world.”

“Solomon is an incredibly demanding role,” co-star Paul Dano comments. “And I remember from the first day of shooting just looking at Chiwetel and thinking, ‘wow, man you’re really doing it.’”

Adds Sarah Paulson, “Watching Chiwetel was to me a kind of master class of subtlety and nuance. He takes this character through twelve years of changes, and he had to keep the whole map of his journey in his head to know at which moments Solomon was truly at the end of his rope and which moments he was hanging on to those shreds of hope that things were going to right themselves. The thing about Chiwetel, which I thought was very in line with his character, is that he never really let the hardship of having to play this part show. But I think everybody could feel it and there was an enormous amount

of respect and reverence for that.”

Ejiofor himself says that what served as his North Star throughout all the scenes that took him to the brink was simply the gravity of telling this man’s story in this moment in time. “The story is so impactful and so real,” he says. “The emotional journey was an extraordinary challenge, but it’s the kind of challenge where everything else kind of falls away and the character becomes an obsession.”

That obsession gave way to insight. “I’ve thought a lot about this film in the context of how it applies to our contemporary world,” Ejiofor explains, “and I think there is something about Solomon that stretches across time and place, that touches something very deep inside us all. It’s that sense of our own personal belief in our freedoms and our connections to our families and the people who surround us. That’s the real power of Solomon’s story. It is beautifully rich and deep and tragic and redemptive – but it’s a very human story.”

CHIWETEL EJIOFOR: THE LYNCHING AND THE WHIPPING

In one gripping sequence, Solomon is left to hang from a lynching noose with his feet barely touching the ground. For hours he struggles just to keep from choking, while children frolic nearby in the sun. It became one of Chiwetel Ejiofor’s biggest trials in fully entering the role.

“The scene is very impactful and really about this incredible resolve that Solomon had to survive,” says Ejiofor. “He’s teetering on the brink of death but he holds on. It was a real physical strain to re-enact this with the exact detail with which Solomon described it. It was tough emotionally and physically, but there was a feeling for me of stretching back almost 200 years and connecting to Solomon.”

Steve McQueen explains that he wanted to recreate the profound impression that scene left on him in the book – by coming at it unflinchingly. “When Solomon was hanging there on his tiptoes he was thinking all kinds of thoughts because he was there for a long time – and I wanted to bring that to the audience, to let them fully experience the lynching and the way life continued going on right in front of him,” he explains. “The scene is integral to his story and I didn’t want to shy away from what really happened. It’s not about shocking people; I’m not interested in that. It’s about being responsible to the story. When we shot it, there was a hush on set, a seriousness, but we all knew we needed to get it done.”

Dede Gardner was deeply moved by what she saw Ejiofor go through for that scene. “Chiwetel was very brave. He knew how Steve intended to shoot it, and he knew that Steve wasn’t going to pull any punches. And he was up for it. He really got in the headspace for it,” she explains.

The Louisiana heat alone helped to bring Ejiofor into Northup’s state of mind “I think the first day of shooting was 108, 109 degrees, and we were out in a cotton field,” he recalls. “I didn’t really understand how it was going to be possible to make a film in that kind of heat without any shade at all.

And then I realized this was exactly what Solomon had talked about, and what he went through.”

Northup’s battle to survive reaches its apex in his battle of wills with Edwin Epps, whose cruel mind Ejiofor also tried to contemplate. “I think Epps has no framework for dealing with Solomon as a human being. Yet Solomon, just in his way of being, demands acknowledgment as a human,” says Ejiofor. “It’s a point of confusion for Epps. And I think that’s why he tries to destroy whatever that thing is in Solomon that is so free and alive.”

Meanwhile, Northup grows ever closer to Epps’ slave mistress, Patsey. “Solomon recognizes in Patsey a very deep strength and realizes he needs some of that. He needs to have that aggressive, desperate resolve to survive,” says Ejiofor.

The resolve of both of them is severely tested when Epps forces Northup to whip Patsey for her supposed transgressions – in a scene that plays out in one riveting, continuous shot. Ejiofor says that in his own mind, Patsey had her reasons for asking her friend to comply with this twisted request. “I think Patsey’s had enough of hatred and if you’re going to get whipped to within an inch of your life, she’d rather not have it come from hate. The whole scene is very symbolic of the enmeshment of love and obsession, hatred and gentleness that went on in the plantations. It’s also a moment when Solomon realizes that even if he gets out, he’ll never be the same.”

Ejiofor believes that when Northup finally did make his way full circle back to home, he was a different man inside from the one who was stolen away from his life in mid-step. “He had seen the dark underbelly of the world,” he concludes. “Yet surviving that gives him a new reality, another way of engaging with the world.”

MICHAEL FASSBENDER ON MR. EPPS

In 12 YEARS A SLAVE Michael Fassbender and Steve McQueen continue a collaboration that started with HUNGER and continued with SHAME. This time, Fassbender brings to life a very different shade of character in the form of Edwin Epps, the Louisiana slave owner who receives Solomon as payment on a debt, then reveals himself to be a haunted, drunken man whose fury is set off by Northup’s unbeaten spirit. The real Epps had such a reputation for reprehensible behavior that to this day locals in Louisiana still admonish with the phrase “stop being Epps.” Northup’s memoir describes him as being “repulsive and coarse” and “having never enjoyed the advantages of an education.”

Fassbender took the full measure of the man and did not flinch in portraying him. “The role is played exquisitely by Michael. He embodies Epps fully,” says McQueen. “Once again, he is a tour de force.”

Adds Chiwetel Ejiofor who locks wills with Fassbender throughout the film: “Michael found something so extraordinary and specific in how to embrace this character as a whole. He doesn’t just play

Epps as a mean guy – it would be easy just to be mean -- but he plays him as someone who is suffering within himself, who considers the world to be kind of against him, and tries to right that by lashing out at the things that he thinks he owns, people like Solomon and the other slaves on his plantation. Michael gave Epps a rounded quality that is equal parts engaging and terrifying.”

Fassbender was drawn first to the story. “It’s an important story to tell,” says the actor, “to look at the history of what we human beings are capable of doing to one another.”

As he began to explore what drives Epps, he began to see that at heart, he is both confused and affronted by Northup. In a farming world where little is certain, Epps has come to find a certain personal sense of control in his cruelly paternal, dictatorial relationship with his slaves, but Northup defies that, even if in subtle ways. “I think Solomon is of greater intelligence than Epps, and Epps perhaps doesn’t even have the intelligence to suss that out,” observes Fassbender, “but there is *something* about Solomon he feels threatened by. He feels inadequate when he’s around him, which I think is very much at the root of their relationship. For Solomon, it is a constant dance with an unpredictable and violent man.”

In the middle of that dance comes Patsey, the slave with whom Epps is having an affair, a contradictory appetite he can’t explain to himself, let alone to his intolerant wife. “He is obsessed with Patsey and that’s information he can’t process, can’t live with,” notes the actor. “For Mistress Epps it’s doubly frustrating because everyone on the plantation knows. But for Patsey, it’s horrific because she gets it from Epps and Mistress Epps. Patsey is basically at their mercy and they’re not very merciful people.”

For Fassbender, the key to the performance was digging deep into the layers of that lack of mercy. “It’s always the same sort of process for me,” he says. “I go over the scenes trying to find what parts of the story reveal certain aspects of the character. What’s he searching for? Is there a root to this sort of violence? How do you relate to people if in your mind they are somehow seen as subhuman? When you are bringing pain to people every day how does that then affect you, and your muscle memory, and how do you carry that around? I saw a constant tug of war going on within Epps.”

Working with M^cQueen, with whom he has tacit shorthand at this point, allowed that to emerge. “Steve really understands human behavior, he has a curiosity about it and approaches it in a non-judgmental way,” he observes. “He’s also passionate and he expects that from everyone around him.”

LUPITA NYONG’O ON PATSEY

Taking the role of Patsey -- the enslaved mistress who is at once the most industrious worker on Epps’ cotton plantation and the unfortunate object of Epps’ tormented sexual fascination -- is Lupita Nyong’o, the Mexican-born, Kenyan-raised Yale film school graduate makes her film debut in a role that demanded an enormous emotional commitment.

Steve M^cQueen found her in an extensive auditioning process. “We saw over 1,000 women and

Lupita just shone through,” he recalls. “When I met her, I thought ‘that’s her.’ She has this vulnerability to her, but she is also a tremendous force. She made me feel humble in her presence.”

Nyong’o’s journey to get to know Patsey started with an education in the physical realities of life in slave times. “One of the first things I did was visit the slave ship at the Wax Museum in Baltimore. I went into the ship and it was such a three-dimensional experience that it totally shook me. I had never considered slavery in such a personal way,” she says. “I also read many books. I tried to surround myself with as much information about slave narratives from that time as I could find.”

She even learned skills from the period: “From my research, I discovered that it was historically accurate that Patsey would make cornhusk dolls,” she says of the children’s toy common to Southern plantations. “So I learned how and now it’s a passion of mine. It definitely made her more alive to me.”

Finding Patsey’s voice was also a journey. “There are no recordings from that time period so we don’t really know what people in the 1800’s actually sounded like. Our dialect coach, Michael Buster, found an amazing documentary called *The Quilts of Gees Bend* about an isolated African American community in Alabama and that is what we used as a template,” she says.

The more alive Patsey became to her, the more Nyong’o was devastated by the accelerating violence she experiences at the hands of Epps. At the same time, she looked for insight into him. “Epps is a product of a time when anything interracial was forbidden. His attraction to Patsey is so grotesque in part because he is resisting it with his whole being,” she observes. “He wants her and he hates the fact that he wants her. He’s so abusive because he’s projecting his discomfort with himself onto her.”

It was both thrilling and frightening to watch Fassbender embody those contradictions. “I was very nervous about working with him but he made it so safe. On camera, he’s terrifying. But in real life he’s a very gentle person,” she says. “I think I got through those scenes with him because I didn’t have time to second-guess myself. I just felt honored to be given this responsibility to tell Patsey’s story.”

BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH ON WILLIAM FORD

In contrast to Epps, Solomon Northup’s first “master” is William Ford, a man of more genteel temperament, who admires Northup’s intellect, yet is still a slave owner. Taking the role is Benedict Cumberbatch, seen this year in *THE FIFTH ESTATE* and *STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS*. He dove into the role via historical research.

“It’s been very interesting trying to understand Ford’s point of view,” he explains. “I discovered that Ford was one of the first to get a land grant in Louisiana. He was regarded by many as being a very bright, God-fearing, good man. He was a preacher, who saw his slaves as children of God, and he tried to conduct himself as someone who had great empathy for the human condition and cared for people.”

Yet in his very first scene, Ford purchases the slave Eliza, while egregiously separating from her

young daughter. “You see in that moment that no matter how much he preaches and acts with kindness, Ford was still basically supporting the system,” says Cumberbatch. “To separate a woman from her child is utterly reprehensible and no Christian man could truly levy that as being excusable.”

To Cumberbatch, Ford carries guilt like a heavy stone dragging on his soul, which makes for a complex friendship with Northup, one burdened by open questions of equality. “I think Ford is tortured by his own self-awareness. He completely understands that slavery is antithetical to his Christian morals. In the book, Solomon excuses Ford, saying he was born into this situation and therefore must be forgiven for his actions. Yet, when Ford falls into debt, the ugly truth of slave trading raises its head. I think it breaks his heart to abandon this person he respects to a man he knows is vicious and unprincipled. It tortures his soul, but he still does it.”

That tortured quality is what McQueen says Cumberbatch captured in his portrait. “There is a battle within Ford between his own morality and his need to adapt to the environment that he is in,” says the director. “On the one hand, he has to survive in this environment and on the other he’s complicit in it. Benedict brought that duality, that sense of both being caring and being weak.”

Says Ejiofor of Cumberbatch: “This was a brilliant piece of casting because Benedict has a quality of charisma, ease and charm, which is what engages Solomon about Ford. Solomon really feels he’s not dealing with a monster but with what seems like a decent man – it’s a very interesting juxtaposition for Solomon to face in his first years as a slave.”

THE SUPPORTING CAST

12 YEARS A SLAVE is rife with intense and conflicted characters, each of whom is carefully portrayed by the film’s large and diverse cast. Taking the role of Tibeats, the carpenter who oversees the plantation for William Ford, is Paul Dano, seen last year in RUBY SPARKS and LOOPER, and who received a BAFTA Best Supporting Actor nomination for his role in the oil epic THERE WILL BE BLOOD. He took a chilling journey into the character.

“Tibeats has an irritable, nasty disposition,” Dano describes. Indeed in the book, Tibeats is described as “*ignorant, quick-tempered and spiteful . . . neither esteemed by white men nor respected by slaves.*” He harassed Northup, harangued him and ultimately attempted to lynch him.

Dano goes on: “I think Tibeats is jealous of Solomon, suspecting that he is an educated man and might be smarter than he is. Solomon clearly doesn’t know his place and Tibeats isn’t used to that and feels he needs to show him who is boss.”

Stepping into that authoritarian mindset was a serious challenge. “When I first read the part, it felt daunting,” Dano admits. “Normally you daydream about the parts you play with excitement. But treating a person the way Tibeats does is hard and I had to search for some kind of empathy for the

character and why he is that way.”

To do that, M^cQueen and Dano talked at length about Tibeats’ likely background, coming up with a story for how he came to be so short-tempered and violent in his demeanor. “We didn’t want him to be one-dimensional,” notes M^cQueen. “Paul and I talked about Tibeats as a person who himself had probably been brutalized, whose father beat him, and within that context and environment, when Solomon challenges him, you can see that things are going to erupt, and they do.”

Dano arrived in Louisiana in the middle of a heat wave, which only added to his sense of stepping into another kind of world. “The incredible heat and humidity made it so real,” he says.

Chiwetel Ejiofor says that Dano’s performance was equally real. “Paul created Tibeats as a man who believes he’s entitled to a certain kind of behavior,” he observes. “That’s a difficult mix– to be dangerous, yet engaging and with a sense of your own righteousness in a terrible situation.”

Northup encountered yet another form of slavery’s brutality in the form of Mrs. Epps, a carefully coifed, delicately refined yet intolerant woman who is mortified by her husband’s affair with a slave. Taking the role is Sarah Paulson, most recently seen in Jeff Nichols’ *MUD*, who won over M^cQueen in her audition. “A lot of people went up for that role, but when I saw Sarah, that was Mrs. Epps,” remembers M^cQueen. “She wasn’t afraid. She could be direct and cold at the same time. It’s a very hard role, and most people weren’t able to bring their own selves into it. But Sarah did. She was so powerful.”

Paulson says her guide to the character was the script. “It doesn’t happen all the time, but it was very clear to me on the page who she was,” she says. “There was no way for me to try to soften her or to make her anything other than that, and I felt the story couldn’t be told properly unless I really went there.”

Rather than see her as a pure villain, Paulson instead tried to dissect Mrs. Epps’ narrow-minded mindset. “I believe in her mind she was truly doing things as she believed things should be done. So I didn’t want to overdo it,” she explains. “Also, there is something more horrifying about a person who is so committed to their beliefs that they don’t even notice what it is that they’re putting out into the world.”

Paulson believes that Mrs. Epps is still in love with her husband, much as she is hurt by his infidelity, that love is something that comes out in moments. “Steve did something kind of amazing in the dance scene where I perpetrate a violent act towards Patsey. He said to Michael, ‘I would like you to do something physically loving towards your wife, something sweet that counteracts what you’re saying to her.’ And of course Michael being Michael took that note and decided to put his hand around my throat. Then he took his thumb along my mouth. Which in the moment made me want to kiss him. I think it’s a beautiful example of the way the Epps probably were together and it inspired something in me.”

Part of Mrs. Epps’ persona is her studied poise, which she maintains even under the most heinous

circumstances. At one point, M^cQueen gave Paulson the direction of holding herself like a figure on top of a cake. “She is someone trying to be a woman of a greater elegance than she actually possesses. So Steve wanted me to have an air of someone who thinks she’s really something,” she explains.

But that elegance turns to something darker in the presence of Solomon. Paulson believes that Mrs. Epps feels threatened by him. “He’s scary to her because she doesn’t trust him,” she explains. “And since her husband can be intoxicated at times, she feels it is left to her to be the one to make sure all the I’s are dotted and all the T’s are crossed on the plantation.”

As Mrs. Shaw, Alfre Woodard portrays another type of Southern woman often lost to history: a black woman who, once a slave, is now a white plantation owner’s wife, and a slave owner herself. Mrs. Shaw’s sense of nobility and power makes her a kind of idol and advisor to Patsey.

Says M^cQueen: “There’s something about the scenes with Mrs. Shaw that are very surreal. Out of the thick bayou comes this tranquil plantation where she is sipping her tea with her little biscuits and fine China, and it’s almost like the Mad Hatter’s tea party.”

For Woodard, the project was alluring from the start. “I’ve loved Steve M^cQueen’s work – it’s the kind of work that artists study, because it’s so intelligent and layered. He is making films that people will be talking about and watching 50 years from now,” she says. “I was not disappointed to be down in the swamps in tons of petticoats with sweat rolling down and bugs biting me to be working with Steve.”

Woodard says of Mistress Shaw’s unusual relationship with Patsey: “I think she befriends Patsey because the mistresses from the surrounding plantations aren’t going to come visit with her. She’s in a class all by herself and that’s lonely. But she also sees that Patsey is the object of desire of her slave master, and she can help Patsey figure out how to manage that.”

Rounding out the main cast is Adepero Oduye, recently lauded for her breakout performance in *PARIAH*, as Eliza, who finds herself and her children in the same slave pen with Solomon and ultimately sold with him, alone, to Master Ford. “When she and Solomon meet, they realize they’re similar in that they have lived a completely different life from what they are about to encounter,” she describes.

In a starkly emotional moment, Oduye explores one of the most shocking experiences female slaves commonly went through, as Eliza loses her young children during the sale to Ford. “It happens forcefully and suddenly,” she explains. “One minute she’s with her children and the next she’s in the cart with Solomon. It’s very hard for her because everything that she has endured, every choice that she has made, she did for her children in the hopes her former master would one day free them. The biggest challenge was knowing that these things happened to the real people who lived through this. I couldn’t help but think about how the real Eliza’s children were torn away from her.”

RECREATING LOUISIANA'S SLAVE PLANTATIONS

Steve McQueen brings to life a world that few have experienced in *12 YEARS A SLAVE* – and he does so in his characteristically uncompromising and visceral way. As he says, “I don’t pull punches. I just wanted the depiction of everything Solomon witnessed to be as realistic as possible.”

That realism takes audiences into the every sensory aspect of Louisiana plantations – the sights, sounds and smells, the relentless heat, the swarming insects, the wild, fetid swamps and the long, dark nights in slaves’ quarters. As Northup’s memoir did, McQueen sheds light not only on the brutality of slave life but on the patchwork communities it created – communities built on survival and the tenuous bonds forged between friends. McQueen immersed cast and crew as much as possible into this world.

“We were shooting on real plantations. We were dancing with ghosts, there’s no two ways about it,” says the director. “I mean, I don’t know if Solomon was around, or if Eliza was around or Patsey, but we knew we were breathing the same air they did.”

A lean, fast-moving 35-day shoot began at Felicity Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, right next door to where Northup actually spent his years in bondage. Here, McQueen assembled a devoted team including cinematographer Sean Bobbitt who has worked on both of McQueen’s previous films, production designer Adam Stockhausen, who mostly recently created the imaginative childhood realm of *MOONRISE KINGDOM*, and five-time Academy Award® nominated costume designer Patricia Norris.

Bobbitt keeps the audience tightly aligned with Solomon and his experiences, whether through close-in camerawork or long, continuous shots that allow the audience to be a kind of fly on the wall in shocking situations. “The film is fast cutting, but at certain points we used the camera to hold the tension. There are scenes in this film where you don’t want take the air out of the room,” notes McQueen.

Says Dede Gardner of the way McQueen and Bobbitt use the camera: “Steve has such faith in the characters, in human behavior and in the fireworks that come out of real life that he doesn’t feel the need to add visual trickery to it. The camera gives the audience a chance to bear witness.”

For his part, Bobbitt knew he and McQueen would be stepping into loaded visual territory – and they both wanted to break out of the traditional molds to tell this story. “I think what most people know about slavery has been very conditioned by what we’ve seen in movies and shows like ‘Roots’ – but what is different about Solomon Northup is that this is a truly first-hand account of a man witnessing all the degradation and dehumanization of the whole slavery process,” says the cinematographer. “We didn’t want to romanticize the period; we wanted to bring out that element of truth.”

To that end, Bobbitt says that most of the influences on the film came from paintings rather than cinema. “We didn’t look at any other films about slavery, because we felt we were trying to do something different and unique,” he explains. “But we did do what Steve and I always do, which is to immerse ourselves deeply into the subject. We were also helped greatly by Adam Stockhausen who came up with

loads of amazing early photography that were very helpful for setting the tone of the look.”

Like the cast, Bobbitt faced the looming challenges of the near-lynching of Northup and the whipping of Patsey, and to do so in honest and impactful ways. “I always saw the lynching as the pivotal scene of the movie,” he says, “because that is the moment the audience is forced to accept that Solomon has become simply a good that can be sold and used like property. It was important for the camera to stay as close in as possible to an event that is really quite shocking, but from which Solomon cannot escape. From the beginning, Steve and I spent hours talking about the scene and how we could build the sense of passing time and the idea that his life is hanging in the balance for agonizing hours. It’s done in a number of shots, each of which was created to add to that sense -- but the camera gives no release.”

By contrast, the whipping of Patsey was shot in a single, long take – all by Bobbitt, who as a former broadcast and war journalist, always operates the camera himself – which keeps the audience captive much like the participants in the terrible event. “It’s a major scene that really gets to the heart of Epps’ cruelty, barbarity and heartlessness. Michael was just terrifying in the scene and Lupita was astounding,” Bobbitt recalls. “We made the decision to do it with no cuts, so that at no point are you allowed to think ‘well, this is the end of it’ or ‘this is only a film.’ You’re forced to live with the characters in real time and that hopefully adds to the madness of what is happening.”

In the midst of shooting such intense moments, Bobbitt was awed by the work of the actors. “It was electric to be the one person in such close proximity to the action and see these performances unfold, to see these characters transform and transcend,” he says. “It was an incredible privilege.”

Bobbitt also worked closely with production designer Stockhausen to bring to life Louisiana’s lush and moody natural environment. “Louisiana is such a beautiful state with a stunning and original landscape – but we also didn’t want it to feel too idyllic or bucolic,” he notes. “Even so, there are moments when the beauty and spaciousness of the natural world gives the audience a chance to breathe.”

Stockhausen was equally invested in bringing 1840s Louisiana to life. “It was very important to Steve to be faithful to all the details of the time period,” he says. “So we really took our time looking at how things were made, how they worked, what something like a ‘gin house’ would really be like in operation. We looked at endless paintings, drawings and etchings – and did enormous amounts of historical research.”

The film would shoot at four Louisiana plantations. Felicite Plantation in Vacherie stands in for Epps’ place. Built in 1846 by real estate investor and farmer Gabriel Valcour Aimé – who is credited with perfecting the vacuum pan method for refining sugar – the property offered a roughhewn quality that echoed Northup’s tough passage there. “Everything felt gray and coarse,” says Stockhausen. “There’s a majestic revival house but it has a starker, grittier feeling than the lush green at Ford’s plantation.”

Standing in for Ford’s more pastoral place is the Magnolia Plantation in Schriever, Louisiana,

with its 1858 home surrounded by oak and magnolia trees dripping with Spanish moss. “What’s unique about the Magnolia Plantation,” says Stockhausen, “is that it is lived in by a family that still farms and grows sugar cane. It hasn’t undergone too much change so it retains the feel of 1840s farm life.”

Shaw Farm, where Patsey heads on Sundays to visit with Mistress Shaw, is portrayed by Bocage Plantation in Darrow, Louisiana. Built in 1837 it is considered one of the most original examples of American Greek Revival architecture in the nation. “The Shaw plantation is different from the others,” notes Stockhausen. “It’s Patsey’s refuge, where she’s treated like a human being. There’s a dichotomy between the two plantations, so that Patsey going from tea with Mistress Shaw to Epps is a radical shift. We were fortunate to be able to use Bocage for these scenes, because the building looks a bit like a wedding cake. We wanted it to be a shiny, spiffy plantation that’s a source of envy and jealousy for Epps.”

The final plantation used in the film is Destrahan, which dates to 1787, making it is the oldest documented plantation in the lower Mississippi. Epps’ “gin house,” where the cotton bales are counted, was recreated in an outbuilding here. Stockhausen was further challenged to build a replica of the bustling 1840s Port of New Orleans; and to recreate Saratoga, New York, when it was a resort town lined with horse-and-carriages. Perhaps the most unpleasant location— though visually stunning -- was the Sarpy Swamp, where the production shot for three humid, insect-ridden days as the bayou path to Ford’s lumber mill. Essentially untamed wilderness, the location required snake and alligator handlers to join the crew.

Two well-known New Orleans locations were also taken back into time: the iconic Columns Hotel in the Garden District became Washington D.C.’s Gadsby Hotel where Solomon’s fate is sealed; and Madam John’s Legacy House in the French Quarter became the slave trader Freeman’s domain and the “slave pen” where Solomon and his shipmates join those headed for “sale.”

“During the Civil War Union soldiers photographed a specific slave pen which was invaluable to us when we were doing research,” says Stockhausen. “We had beautiful detailed photographs of the exact doors and gate leading out into the yard and were able to bring those details into our set. Some of the items seen on the slave ship are authentic. For example, we had real shackles and chains borrowed from different museums. It was very powerful for us as well as for the actors to know that they were the real thing. It helped everybody become part of that world,” concludes Stockhausen.

Jeremy Kleiner notes that Stockhausen’s work on *12 YEARS A SLAVE* was indispensable. “In 35 days, Adam created a period road movie with epic locations,” he says. “He was so inventive and rigorous in his research. The boat, the slave shacks, the plantations, the cotton – all the elements make you feel like you’re there in that time.”

Patricia Norris’ costumes played an equally important role bringing Northup’s world dynamically to life. From the beginning she was an unusual choice for such a challenging film, since she is in her 80s

with Oscar®-nominated work that spans several decades, but Norris, a life-long history buff, took on the task with determination. “She’s just very unique,” muses M^cQueen. “She brought a tremendous amount of detail to the costumes and the littlest things became so important. First and foremost, she’s an artist.”

Norris’s level of detail went literally right down to the dirt. Recalls Gardner: “At one point, Patty sent someone out to get a handful of earth from each of the plantations – and then that same earth was sprinkled on the bottom of the dresses for each location. She works in that incredibly intuitive way.”

Norris notes that she faced an uphill battle from the outset because so little information is available about what slaves really wore, but she did as much research as possible, extrapolating from all that she learned and her own rich knowledge of period dress. “There were no photos, and the few etchings from the period were mostly by whites in the North who had never even been to the South,” she explains. “Even the slave museums didn’t have a lot of authentic clothing. Most of the research came from reading and more reading and my own understanding of what kind of fabrics would have been used.”

Throughout, M^cQueen trusted Norris to fill in the gaps with her own creative and historical instincts. She goes on: “This is a period and a place so unfamiliar to people that you start with what research you can but then you have to really explore. Steve gave me the freedom to do that.”

One thing that was clear to Norris is that slave clothing would be largely cast-offs. “Most slaves arrived in the New World naked. So where did they get their clothes? Their owners would have provided them,” she explains. “They would have been left-overs, hand-me-downs and off-period dresses for women. Once I got that into my head, it started me on the path.”

Despite the stripping away of slaves’ former identities, Norris felt that there would be a subtle African influence. “The slave traders tried to deprive people of their culture but in time, African things started creeping back in, a little fabric here and a little color there. Alfre’s Mistress Shaw has more stature as a woman married to a white man, so for her, I used colors that look a bit more African.”

Norris worked closely with Chiwetel Ejiofor to have his clothing reflect the changes Northrup goes through. She started with the more refined look of a 19th Century New Yorker, with modest, hand-made but citified outfits of the era. His clothing shifts when he’s taken captive and sent to Louisiana and, over the next 12 years, the few items he wears day in and day out age and become embedded with literal blood, sweat and tears. “Chiwetel and I spent hours at a time discussing what really happens to clothing over 12 years. His clothing probably caused him suffering on most days but it also helped him because he could experience just how miserable it must have been for Solomon,” says Norris.

With Mr. and Mrs. Epps, Norris went for a more genteel look that belies their conflicted natures. “Mrs. Epps’ dresses were either imported from England or we hand made them,” she notes. “They give us a sense of who she wants to be. Sarah wore them so beautifully and she just has this marvelous

carriage that helps to create the character,” Norris observes. “For Mr. Epps, there is almost a bit of romance to his outfits, with their poofy sleeves. Steve and I talked about the idea of making him attractive in a way that contrasts his behavior.”

For the actors, the clothing was transformative – if physically challenging. Sarah Paulson recalls that her outfits involved “wool and layers of crinolines and petticoats and bloomers and a corset. It couldn’t have been more hot! But it also couldn’t have felt more authentic.”

JOE WALKER ON THE EDITING

Immersing the audience into Northup’s journey was also the goal of editor Joe Walker, who reunites again with M^cQueen. “Joe is an amazing editor and he’s a musician as well, so he has that sense of rhythm and flow, and he knows how to work with equally well with sound,” says the director. “I’m very grateful for our relationship.”

Walker in turn says of what makes M^cQueen’s style so exciting for an editor: “It all about inviting the audience inside the scenes to invest and investigate, without pushing them towards any one conclusion. And I don’t know many other filmmakers who do that.”

Right away, Walker realized 12 YEARS A SLAVE would take what he and M^cQueen have done before to a new level. “This felt like a big step up in terms of scale. The story involves such a huge cast of characters and has such vast historical scope,” he says. “At the same time, it has a brilliant vantage point that feels very modern because it’s about a man pulled out of his own free life into this extraordinary situation.”

In the editing room, Walker and M^cQueen played with the film’s chronology, ultimately deciding to start the film deep into Northup’s journey before going back to his life as a free man in New York. “At some critical stage we decided we ought to start the film in the middle of Solomon’s journey,” says Walker. “So we give a glimpse into Northup’s life as a slave -- and then go back and investigate how he arrived at this point. And from that flowed a lot of the narrative structure.”

Much as he enjoyed the intensive creative process with M^cQueen, Walker says his favorite part of working on 12 YEARS A SLAVE has been watching audiences experience it in early screenings. “The real satisfaction is seeing the film play well with so many different people, with rich audiences, poor audiences, white audiences, black audiences, all audiences. It’s incredibly comforting to me as an editor because it means it is a successfully told story and people are engaging with it.”

HANS ZIMMER ON THE SCORE

For the score of 12 YEARS A SLAVE, Academy Award®-winning composer Hans Zimmer

attuned himself to the natural world that surrounds Solomon Northup in the bayous and fields of Louisiana. “This is a world full of nature, full of cicadas and water, and a complete contrast to the city where Solomon always lived. The sounds of the film reflect the world he is thrown into,” Zimmer elucidates. “Sound is so important throughout, and I worked very much in sync with the sound design.”

Steve McQueen always had an intuition that Zimmer was the right man for the project. Although the composer has become best known for his many popular, award-winning scores for action and animated blockbusters, Zimmer made his first breakthrough with Chris Menges’ apartheid film *A WORLD APART*, and went on to score the Oscar®-winning *DRIVING MISS DAISY*, *RAIN MAN* and *THELMA AND LOUISE*, and is equally attuned to strong drama.

The two began with long conversations. “We talked for hours before a finger was put on the piano,” says McQueen. “It was quite a relief because I could talk about ideas with him, and from those ideas, emerged the music. Hans created something that is both simple and beautifully complex. I love that his score has modesty to it but is also big, emotional and sensitive. His music perfumes the film.”

As he began thinking about the music, Zimmer focused as much on Northup’s inner experiences as on the period. “I felt it was most important to keep the timelessness of the story alive, yet to never sentimentalize it,” he says. “Often, my work is based on some radical sound, on inventing new electronics and things like this; but on this movie, I thought it was important to use more traditional instruments. The whole thing is based on strings, woodwinds and a bit of percussion here and there. It’s not tied to any one particular culture – a more humanistic score is what I was after.”

Zimmer created a theme for Solomon that, like the character, keeps evolving throughout the film. “The theme runs all the way through the movie, and everything that happens in one way or the other is felt, seen, perceived by Solomon and his theme,” he says. “It takes on different colors and different moods, just as he does. And, like the story, the score has a cyclical nature.”

Most of all, Zimmer wanted to stay in tune with the film’s intimate humanity. “What I think Steve and all the actors managed to do in *12 YEARS A SLAVE* is to figure out a way of telling a vast story in a humble way,” he concludes. “I use ‘humble’ as the greatest compliment I can give, because the humility of this film is what makes it so personal. The quieter the story gets, the more you lean in to be part of it.”