

# MARKING



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# TRACKS

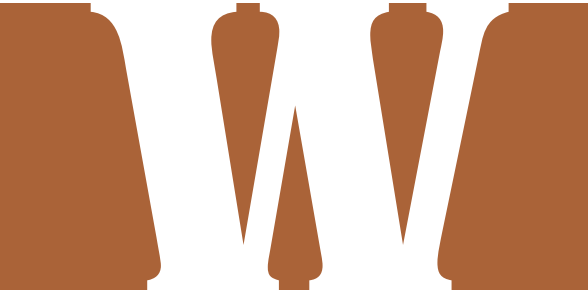
BARRY JENKINS' ADAPTATION OF PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING NOVEL **THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD** PROVIDES AN ILLUMINATING NEW PERSPECTIVE ON A HARROWING PART OF US HISTORY. TOTAL FILM SPEAKS TO DIRECTOR JENKINS AND STARS THUSO MBEDU AND JOEL EDGERTON ABOUT THE YEAR'S MOST REVOLUTIONARY TV SERIES.

WORDS LEILA LATIF





# MAKING OF



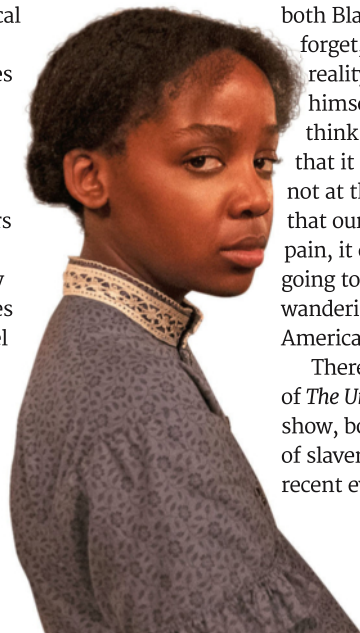
When *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins first heard about the Underground Railroad he imagined an actual train. “Yeah,” Jenkins laughs, “as a child I felt Black people were capable of anything! That they were capable of building trains beneath the feet of the institutions of white supremacy.”

Of course, the reality was that the “railroad” was a series of routes, safe houses and guides that would help enslaved people escape north to freedom. But when Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad* was published in 2016, and told the story of Cora, a young woman who escapes from a plantation in Georgia on a literal underground railroad, this fantastical element connected with Jenkins.

“By taking the Underground Railroad, giving it a literal representation and trains running underground, Colson opens up this Pandora’s Box,” he says. “We are speaking to something authentic, but it’s not a history report.”

Feeling he couldn’t do Whitehead’s novel justice at feature-film length, Jenkins decided instead to make it into a series, tell Cora’s story over 10 hours, and to direct every single episode. The resulting show is filled with some harrowing scenes grounded in the brutal reality enslaved people faced, but there is also Jenkins’ signature radical beauty and exquisite romance. The light sprinkling of the fantastical ties those two elements together. As Jenkins puts it, “By invoking just a light touch of fantasy, it freed us from the burden of making a show that is entirely about just the horrors of American slavery.”

For Jenkins, depicting the cruelty of slavery is not the goal of the series (“It’s impossible to reflect how cruel it was anyway”) but he doesn’t soften the horror that his ancestors suffered. Jenkins did not want to provide simple answers but to show a system that was as



complicated as it was depraved. “It was about capitalism, about white supremacy, about building a police state. It was about all those things.”

Though making a series that revisits a time in America that many people, both Black and white, would rather forget, for Jenkins confronting that reality was important. Not just for himself, but for wider society. “I think not depicting it almost denies that it happened,” he reasons. “By not at the very least acknowledging that our ancestors had this trauma or pain, it creates a vacuum where you’re going to have four years of people wandering around screaming ‘Make America great again.’”

There is no separating the politics of *The Underground Railroad* from the show, both in its unflinching portrayal of slavery and its relevance to more recent events. For Joel Edgerton, who

plays the main antagonist Ridgeway, its timely urgency is part of what gives it its power. “I find it fascinating that it’s a period show but a lot of strings get tied to the current day,” he says. “It’s not just a museum piece, looking back in time. These old ideas are now seemingly being presumed to be acceptable again in certain circles in America, and as someone who sometimes lives there, it’s terrifying.”

## RAIL AGAINST THE MACHINE

*The Underground Railroad* is very much the story of Cora, played by Thuso Mbedu. She, alongside her best friend Lovey (Zsané Jhé), is led by Caesar (Aaron Pierre) and escapes from a brutal plantation in Georgia where the Black people are enslaved, tortured and “bred like cattle”. Cora is pursued by Ridgeway, a slave catcher who’s



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them nod to more modern tragedies like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Charleston church shooting, the Trail of Tears, Anne Frank and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

When finding the perfect person to play Cora, Jenkins cast the net wide, but once he met South African actress Mbedu he quickly recognised the character in her. “I had a meeting with Barry, who asked me a lot of questions, just getting to know me as a person. At the end of the conversation, he said, ‘I see you in the character,’” Mbedu remembers, grinning. But she didn’t really understand what he was talking about until she read the book, when all of a sudden it clicked. “Not only do I get this girl, I am this girl. Cora is tough. Cora is fragile, but she would never admit she’s fragile. She’s brave,

Though neither the protagonist or antagonist of *The Underground Railroad* were being played by American actors, they both felt still culturally connected to the material. Mbedu being South African meant there were parallels with her country’s infamous recent history. Meanwhile, Edgerton was reminded of the atrocities towards Aboriginal people from his home country of Australia.

“These are issues that have been swirling around constantly with the Aboriginal community,” he says grimly, “With white people coming to Australia and claiming it as their own. Whilst we’re being specific to the Underground Railroad and the United States of America, what happens resonates – unfortunately – with so many communities around the world.”

## ‘WE ARE SPEAKING TO SOMETHING AUTHENTIC, BUT IT’S NOT A HISTORY REPORT’

**BARRY JENKINS**

but she’s also broken. These are things that I can now admit about myself.”

The process was a little different for Joel Edgerton. “I basically stalked him!” he laughs. “I kept happily colliding with Barry during the press tour for *Loving* and he was travelling around for *Moonlight*. And then again when I was with *Boy Erased* and he was doing the *Beale Street* press tour. In Toronto at some function I literally grabbed him and said, ‘Dede Gardner from Plan B [Brad Pitt’s production company] told me about *The Underground Railroad* and I want to work with you.’”

After successfully “stalking” his way to being cast, the greatest challenge for Edgerton was to create a compelling three-dimensional villain, but never to make any excuses for the horrific things he has done. “My great fear when I was reading it was, ‘Oh no, is this guy going to have a redemption arc?!’” [Spoiler alert: he does not.] But the show does go into Ridgeway’s backstory at length, and as Edgerton puts it, “allows us to kind of get into the head of somebody who has the wrong kind of ideas.”

Ridgeway’s fixation with Cora stems from his inability to accept that

caught every person he ever pursued apart from one: Cora’s mother Mabel, who, in escaping, abandoned her only child.

Over the course of the series Cora takes the railroad from Georgia to South Carolina, then to North Carolina, Tennessee and Indiana, all the time relentlessly pursued by Ridgeway. The series has an almost *Gulliver’s Travels*-esque tone, with each place being warped by white supremacy in an entirely different way. For Mbedu, this journey is operating on several different levels. “Each new stage that Cora goes into, we’re seeing another level to her subconscious and we’re seeing another level of the subconscious of America, the history of America, the myth of America,” she says.

Each place has its entirely unique set of problems stemming from the same root of white supremacy and many of

### SMALL SCREEN

Barry Jenkins (above) directs a new 10-part TV series of *The Underground Railroad*.

### ON THE RUN

Thuso Mbedu plays escapee Cora (opposite); she’s pursued by Joel Edgerton’s villainous Ridgeway (right).





# MAKING OF



Q&A

## Thuso Mbedu

The *Railroad* star on prep, grief and love.

### So is working on a big American production different to working in South Africa?

Yes, I think the biggest contrast was the fact that we would shoot four scenes a day at the most, whereas back home, we're shooting about 16 scenes a day. If you get four takes in South Africa, you are the problem!

### How did you prepare for the role?

Barry sent me audio research. I listened to them telling their story, they spoke very broken English, which is an English that if I were to go to South Africa now, I could hear. That made it much closer to home for me - it stopped being a Black American story and became the story of an African who was brought to America.

### How did you cope with the show's more brutal scenes?

We had a counsellor on set when things got really tough but mostly I'll have my earphones on and listen to 'On The Nature Of Daylight' by Max Richter. I lose myself in that song. I would always walk to set with my head down, only to look up to the eyes of Cora because it was too heavy to experience Cora's world twofold.

### Do you think this show is fundamentally about grief and love?

Grief is love with nowhere to go, you know? *The Underground Railroad* wasn't written as a love story, but that's what it became.

### To ride the railroad you have to give testimony. Is that about the importance of telling this story?

Definitely. Especially for the Black body who we have been constantly told to get over our story. So I hope that people will then take away and understand the texture of the lived experience of Black people. It's very important to be able to tell your story, because that also helps you to process and deal and navigate your way forward. **LL**

he didn't catch her mother Mabel. Catching Cora would somehow lessen that failure, but over the course of the series his obsession becomes increasingly twisted. "Ridgeway projects a lot of things onto Cora that actually relate to his relationship with his father, and finds a strange, morbid way of connecting with her through the way that they both feel abandoned by a parent," adds Edgerton.

Much of Ridgeway's back story is unexpected and not at all the sort of villain origin story we are used to seeing, but the combination of his environment, his insecurity and his own skewed logic paints a full portrait of how he is capable of such barbarity, not only towards Cora but to all the people he returns to their "masters" to be tortured and killed. And for Edgerton, that was one of the ways the show speaks directly to the present day. "When I look at this new rise in

white supremacists I do wonder, who were the parents? What was their life like? How did they come to these ideas? Who fed them this information and how could it have gone another way?"

### SAVIOUR COMPLEX

Both Ridgeway and many other white people and institutions along the way put Cora through so much pain, and depicting that was something Jenkins struggled with. In fact, the second episode speaks directly to the ethics around the commodification of Black pain. "It is something I wrestled with coming to the project," Jenkins explains. "To be honest, that's probably the thing I wrestled with the most. I'm a really big fan of the artist Kerry James Marshall and he refuses to depict Black people in states of trauma. Yet I knew I couldn't make this show without it."

But for Jenkins, it is the shame associated with the trauma that he was



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most concerned about. That the images of Black enslaved people might trigger feelings of shame in Black viewers but, as he puts it, “the shame isn’t ours.”

The other element that was key to Jenkins was making sure the story remained centred around Cora. And through the Black gaze rather than the white one, as it has done in so many films and shows that preceded it. Lily Rabe’s character of Ethel symbolises that tension, the white saviour who is determined to make Cora’s story all about her. Both Jenkins and Mbedu can’t help but chuckle when Ethel is brought up.

“Coming off of *Beale Street* – where I made certain choices that I felt like I needed to make for the sake of the audience – in this one, I thought, ‘I’m not going to make those choices,’” says Jenkins. “I felt like there was a way to present Ethel without editorialising her and the audience would get it.”

**STRONG BOND**  
William Jackson Harper plays Cora’s ally Royal (below).



As a result of this unflinching approach, Ethel’s twisted white saviour is one of the many highlights of the show. For Mbedu there was a timely relevance to the way Black people can be treated by their supposed saviours. “We see that every day!” she laughs, “You can literally have a person dying next to you, but you find a way to make it about you.”

Ethel represents a type of white supremacy that we don’t often see on screen, one that seeks to care and almost cure Blackness, not for the sake of the person she’s helping but because it makes her feel pious and holy. “She can’t see herself, you know,” Jenkins says, shaking his head. “She thinks she sees herself, but she can’t see herself at all. She’s so full of shit!”

The other most unconventional supporting character is undoubtedly Homer, Ridgeway’s young Black companion. A child impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit and hat, Homer is just as committed to Ridgeway’s work as he is. Homer was freed by Ridgeway and they clearly have a paternal bond, but Homer chooses to spend each night

particularly with Ridgeway, denied them the ability to experience love and meaningful connection. Cora’s story, conversely, is one that is filled with extraordinary beauty and gentle romance. Despite her hesitation at times, and despite the brutality and loss she endures, Cora’s ability to love is what defines her journey.

## LOVE ON THE TRACKS

One of Jenkins’ most incredible gifts as a filmmaker is his ability to find light and love amidst the most dire of circumstances. In *Moonlight* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, his signature use of light on Black skin gives these moments an almost otherworldly exquisite radiance. Here, watching Cora falling in love is, for him, the most truthful element of the show. “These people were more than just the victims of enslavement. It was just as authentic that there would have been romance.”

And that care and feeling of love and gentle connection extends to all the Black people on the show, who at times almost break the fourth wall to stare directly at us, the audience, in

## ‘THESE PEOPLE WERE MORE THAN JUST THE VICTIMS OF ENSLAVEMENT’

**BARRY JENKINS**

in chains, insisting it’s the only way he can fall asleep.

For Edgerton, Homer represented “the tension that exists between the conscious mind and the subconscious mind, or the conscious choice versus the subconscious drive,” he explains. “It’s Ridgeway’s humanity shining through that one day. An otherwise terrible person saw a young boy being sold and subconsciously is driven to bargain for a small sum of money and set him free. And that this child wouldn’t leave him alone and he let him continue on with him and started to give him an education.” But, as this is Ridgeway, there is also a sadistic, dysfunctional element. “Of course he then employed him in the act of subjugating other people of his race... It’s so fucking weird and yet fascinating.”

The lives of both Ethel and Ridgeway are empty of all but the most withered, corrupted forms of love, and that is central to the core message of *The Underground Railroad*. Their own choices (turning away from the great spirit, as the show puts it), have,

couples, groups of friends, communities and families. These “point of view portraits” – as Jenkins calls them – show off these characters’ full humanity and are, “the space between the pain, between the trauma, between the shame. Each one of these background characters could contain a 10-episode series.”

Even in the terrifying landscape that Cora finds herself in, it is when she falls in love that Jenkins feels he honours his ancestors, and all enslaved people, the most. “There would have been love. There would have been people caring, people caring for their children, people building family units. Out of the detritus of this dislocation, this disembodiment, those were equally as true and authentic. And presenting them in relief from these other things gives them even greater power. That was incredibly important to me. To be honest, it was the whole reason for making the show...”

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THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD LAUNCHES ON AMAZON PRIME VIDEO ON 14 MAY.