

# Hollywood Unscripted Ep 009 - Clemency

**Announcer:** From Curtco Media, there's no place like Hollywood.

**Scott Tallal:** Welcome to Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. I'm your host, Scott Tallal of the Malibu Film Society. Today, we're talking about Clemency, the new movie which deals with the death penalty in a way that I don't think any film has ever done before. We're going to be talking a little bit later with the writer and the director. But right now, we're going to be talking with the star of the film, Alfre Woodard. Welcome.

**Alfre Woodard:** Thank you. I was one of the cast of the film.

**Scott Tallal:** True.

**Alfre Woodard:** Great cast.

**Scott Tallal:** Yeah. And I mean, it really is. And so many of the roles, everybody plays such a key role in fleshing out the story, which is about the emotional toll that putting people to death takes on the people who have to do that. In your case, 120 acting credits, you've played everything from a slave to the President of the United States. You have 1984 Oscar nomination for Cross Creek. You have more Emmy awards than any other African-American actors. And that doesn't count your work on stage. What leads you to choose roles these days?

**Alfre Woodard:** You know, it's not these days. I've always chosen what I wanted to sign on to the same all the way through. It is when the script, when the writer, this time writer, filmmaker has to be on the page for me and it has to be I don't go to work just to go to work with a person or to be associated with another actor, especially for money. Because you see, I do a lot of Indie indie work, but it is the story and I especially go to work when it's something that I don't know how to do. I like to have to figure out how to do how to bring the thing off, and especially when it is a point of view that we never see. And if I think I can think of something that somebody else might not think of in that portrayal, because I love to see a good portrayal, but I feel like sometimes it doesn't need me. So all of those things with this, when Bronwyn Cornelius, our producer, talk to me about Chinonya Chukwu, who you will meet, who she was. I said, yes, let's take this

meeting. She said, we want you to play a prison warden. Well, that immediately pricks up your ears because I didn't know there were prison wardens and thought about it. I've always been on the other side with the candles outside the prison or signing onto petitions to help people get a stay of execution. So there was all learning to do. I knew nothing about it. You could take a good script, even act it well. But, you know, I'm not that kind of person. I'm not that kind of actor. The more I have to learn, the more interested I am. One of the great pluses about being an actor is that you're required to keep learning. So it's great to be 70, 80 years old and said, OK, I have to find out how the calculus teacher, what that means. I got to learn calculus. I have to figure out all of those things. And so she took me on a tour of Ohio prisons. Chinonya did. We went to medium security, women's, maximum and medium men's. I met three wardens, a deputy warden. I met the director of corrections. And not just meet, have meals with these people, sat in on their meetings with the major and the whole staff went to the row where the condemned men are and had the privilege of spending time with two condemned men. And I say privileged because if, you know, you have a certain amount of time to talk to two women from, quote unquote, Hollywood, that's a privilege. They agreed to talk. All of them, all of these people, because of Chinonya's history there in her commitment, her eight year commitment of change in her life, to go there and work on clemency cases and to teach women screenwriting and filmmaking in the prisons there. So that's why we had that entre, I have never gone further a far from my life than I did going there. And I have spent time in informal settlements in the Third World and the Kakuma refugee camp. Nowhere was as far from my life as going into those prisons from that point of view to the incarcerator's point of view.

**Scott Tallal:** When you look at taking on a role like this, do you ever get scared?

**Alfre Woodard:** No. How do you mean scared.

**Scott Tallal:** Of where that performance is going to take you?

**Alfre Woodard:** No

**Scott Tallal:** emotionally.

**Alfre Woodard:** Emotion is my business. That's what you trained for. Your body is an instrument, your emotions, your psyche, everything about you. And we play our instrument. That's what we do when we train. And I won't go into all the things where people look through a door and see actors working and preparing and train and what the hell is going on? Why are they doing that? You use all of that. So your instrument has to be as honored, cared for, oiled and in tune as a Strad. And you know how to play that. Bend those notes and you've got Dudamel there and you want to be able to bring everything that he needs in sustaining a note. It's like saying "put me in Coach". That's what you want, because that's the place that you are most comfortable playing the complex music.

**Scott Tallal:** One of the interesting things in this movie was how the emotional toll was affecting your marriage to the character played by Wendell Pierce. If you can talk to us about that.

**Alfre Woodard:** Well, Wendell was - Every actor in this was the big draw. Every character, every human being that stood up, it had to be with a person that first of all came with a depth of understanding about human beings, as well as their ability to not be afraid of sustaining moments, not be afraid of the quiet, the silence, the loud silence that Chinonyia intended to put into the film. And Wendell. He brought in a few scenes, so much history about the plight of high school teachers and his character, Jonathan. He's teaching the Invisible Man to his class. We see him really at a crossroads. He wants Bernardine to come to that crossroads and make that cross with him. But she is so committed to what she is doing, and it is a different time line than they agreed on. So we see that marital struggle that we all if you're married and you're not a coward, you stay in there and you fight and you figure it out. But one of the things that we know is that the people that work the world, they have a high as high a PTSD rate as people that we sent into multiple deployments. If people are married, a lot of them on their third marriage. It is a wrecker of lives. So we needed to go and see, to be able to look in on what it does in the person's personal life as well.

**Scott Tallal:** The reason maybe why it resonated so much with me as a viewer is that it seemed obvious that your character had to have so much emotional distance. This is a warden who has to wall herself off her own feelings it seems like and then that results in not being able to be in the marriage as much.

**Alfre Woodard:** Chinonye will have a different way of saying probably the same thing, but I can't help but speak to you out of my understanding of Bernadine. And it is not so much that you wall yourself off from your emotions, but one of the things that throws a relationship off is when you can't talk about things. So sharing and honesty. But some people are in the types of professions that they can't talk about it. How do you talk about something that you can't quite put your finger on? Wrap your mind around. What if it's so devastating? If you said it out loud, you'd come apart. How would that loved one receive it when you talk about having to ask Anthony what he wants for his last meal. And he didn't say anything. Well, that might be what I want to bitch about. But that person here is like, my god, bringing up the warrior analogy. You can't talk about what it was like in Afghanistan. You can't talk about a decision you had to make in a village when you see a kid coming towards you and you don't know what to do. That's what throws the marriage off is you can't share that. People tend to compartmentalize. The other thing is, I don't think she walls off her emotions. There are people unlike me and my fellow artists, whether they're singing, painting, whatever. That's what we do is we let emotion flow. It comes out in that we are the emotional muscle for society because everybody doesn't get to act out like us. You might be an accountant. You can't just suddenly fly off the handle to get up and spin around and sing a little ditty and sit back down at your desk. So we do all that. That's why you guys come to us to let us tell you stories. So then you can experience. But all we're giving you is a place to observe, to have human emotions. But it's your emotions that we're bringing to the song, to the screen. But people like Bernardine and others, like the woman I met, the wardens. They're emotional, but they control their emotion. Their compassion comes out instead of stroking the condemned and saying all, I'm so sorry, you're condemned. Who is that going to help? Their compassion is I'm going to keep order right now. I'm keep everything calm now. I will see you all the way through this with dignity and every one of them I met and the man who choreographed our execution scenes, he's put more people through the process than any person in the world because he worked in four states that have been active putting people to death. He at a certain point became a fervent campaigner against the penalty. But they say they'd never put anybody through the process that didn't thank them right before the final action. And so that is compassion. They are not the State. They are not the taxpayer. They're doing our work. And so until they change the law, the person you would like to be in charge of you, you would hope it is a warden that has come from mental health like Bernadine, that has

come from the mental health field or from social work in the prisons that I visited in Ohio. Everybody's different, just like Every journalist is different, but a lot of times we've seen on screen historically kind of these ogre's, these people that you imagine were pulling the wings off live birds when they were young. But the reality is different. Yes, the culture inside a lot of prisons is brutal, is awful. It is where you become a criminal if you weren't before. But this is a story about a particular prison, particular staff. And we wanted to, first of all, bring forward the missing element of, before you decide whether you're pro or con, definitely, which we've debated for decades. And thank God it's tipped over where the majority of Americans are against the penalty for any number of reasons. But it's just an atmosphere right now where let's put in a very vital thing that has been missing. What does it do to those people? It's a very intimate relationship. The warden to the condemned and also the major, the three guards that might be there with that condemned person, like we had a big row here in California and all this could speak to about that. But there were nine, maybe 10 people on the row in Ohio. And the men's maximum, the one woman on death row in Ohio was housed at a women's prison, a medium security prison. She lived in a room above a garage on the prison ground by herself. But that's the person that you see every day. That's your co-worker. There's usually 10, 15, sometimes 20 years before you've exhausted all your appeals. So that's the person you see every day. And it's like turning suddenly one day and go, OK, Jim, we're going to have to take you out. That takes an emotional toll because that's somebody you just met. You know, that person is a human being because you have given them respect all this time, they have become their calmed down, better selves then whatever being drove them into a frenzy. And we are finding sometimes they didn't do it at all. So they are living with the injustice of knowing that not only will they be put to death, but their name, they will never again regain their reputation. And their family inherits that.

**Scott Tallal:** You talk about the relationship that develops between the incarcerators and the incarcerated. That really came through, I think in your scenes with all this. Talk to us about that if you will.

**Alfre Woodard:** Aldis went to San Quentin and he met with people there, he did pre-work with Chinonye. I know he told me he read Troy Davis's book. So he came already fully loaded with everything he needed to do to settle in to being Anthony Woods. I

came back from Ohio. We didn't shoot for a month. I was a witness there. And when you witness is not that you look, you inhale, you absorb,.

**Scott Tallal:** You internalize.

**Alfre Woodard:** Well, no, don't internalize because that gets in your head. This is all sensory. And so I just know for like the month after I would spontaneously burst into tears at the farmer's market, I have a joyful life. And then just weeping uncontrollably for about a minute or two. And I wasn't thinking anything. It wasn't like, oh, there's whatever sadness and all that. And I'm not a method actor. My private joy and pain is the only thing that I get to have that I own. And then I realized what it was, was I was weeping other people's tears. I was coming undone because they couldn't whether they were incarcerated or the incarcerator, protocol. It's the currency of it. So by the time Aldis and I and Richard, Michael O'Neill and Daniele and all of us, by the time we got to camera and you know, the plot, you sit two actors together who not only are not afraid but that the language we speak is that complete trust in a give and take. You've got your relationship right there and you can sit in it all day. You don't have to say cut to Bernadine. So Alfre's not waiting for cut because Alfre's not present. Bernadine never gets to stop in her life and not be Bernadine. And neither does Anthony. There's no pain there. There's just this sustained note until Dudamel drops his baton.

**Scott Tallal:** You do touch on what was one of my original questions, which is possibly being scared of a role because it does affect you when you're at the farmer's market. You burst into tears. How can this not stay with you as a human being when you're performing these roles?

**Alfre Woodard:** But that's not scary. Bursting into tears. I burst into tears. I will see a beautiful baby. I will see you touch your lover. It brings me to tears. Tears are cleansing. Tears are an affirmation. If when you got ready to work and you thought of devastating things from your life to bring up emotion in yourself, then you probably are doing damage yourself. I mean, you go there. It's just like if you've got a scene where they're terrible and they're harder to do than weeping is where you have to laugh constantly. Oh, my God. Trying to keep that stuff fresh. But you use the breath. You use the breath to get emotions you don't recall or I don't know, we could sit in here, all of us, and I could get you to squat with our legs open, on the ground, and we could start breathing

together and they would come up a lot of tears. Sometimes it goes into hysterical laughter, all of that. So one of the keys is you use your breath.

**Scott Tallal:** Mm hmm. What's your take away from this project?

**Alfre Woodard:** It's yet another time. One time was when I met Anita Hill. After all of the awfulness that the Senate put her through during that confirmation of Clarence Thomas, I met her and I wanted to meet her because we grew up an hour apart, drinking the same water, the same time period. And she was a conservative and I was way left of a liberal. I just wanted to meet her. I like having those conversations where it's a revelation. I want to be able to see the other person's point of view. Refining our own positions by hearing each other. That happened to me because as I said early, I couldn't imagine the point of view of a warden just because I'd never been exposed to it. I know why I could never be a warden. All chaos would break loose because I would let people go to their mother's funeral. I let their people come in and visit them, and I let people wear whatever they wanted to. And then everybody's hurt and damaged and it messes up everything. So I have a respect for and I came to clock compassion in discipline.

**Scott Tallal:** Alfre Woodard, thank you so much for joining us. Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. When we come back, we're going to be talking with the writer and director of Clemency, Chinonye Chukwu. Stay tuned.

**Promo - Vices Reserve:** Hi, this is Chris and Jenny from When Last I Left. We were just talking about how the holidays are over and we're a little bummed, but you know what? I think we can keep the holidays going. How? By buying gifts for ourselves. OK. I like where you're thinking. If you go to [Vicesreserve.com](https://vicesreserve.com) and you use the code [podcastvip](https://vicesreserve.com), you get fifteen percent off everything in the store. So it's like Vice's is still giving us Christmas presents. That's amazing. [Podcastvipp](https://vicesreserve.com). [Vicesreserve.com](https://vicesreserve.com) 15 percent off everything. What are we waiting for? Well, let's go. Let's go. [Vicesreserve.com](https://vicesreserve.com). I'm going.

**Scott Tallal:** Welcome back to Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. Joining us now is the writer and director of Clemency, Chinonye Chukwu.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Hello.

**Scott Tallal:** You have had what has to be the most remarkable journey of any filmmaker I've ever met in bringing this film to the screen. Just take us from that process when you were among the hundreds of thousands protesting the imminent execution of Troy Davis. And what took you to this?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** I was living in Philadelphia at the time when people were protesting against Troy's execution. And I remember coming across a petition and that piqued my interest. And I was really galvanized and impacted by seeing so many people around the world advocate for him, including a handful of retired wardens and directors of corrections. And so the morning after he was executed, I was really obsessed with the question, what must it be like for your livelihood to be tied to the taking of human life? And I knew that I needed to tell the story of clemency like I knew was going to be called Clemency. And I knew it was going to be from the perspective of a warden. But it wasn't until 2013 when I was living in New York City that I decided, you know what, I'm going to write this. Now I'm ready to research and I'm ready to write. And I spent almost a year doing secondary research. I'm interviewing several of the wardens who had protested against Troy's execution and talking with many more people, reading a lot of books. And I realized I need to move to a death penalty state. I need to do the work in advocating for the very community that I'm representing on screen. So I decided that I'm going to move to Ohio. It was great timing because I also was able to secure a teaching position that paid the bills as I volunteered on about 14 clemency cases. And that led me to creating a film program in a women's prison where I taught incarcerated women to make their own short films. And so all of that informed the writing and revising of Clemency.

**Scott Tallal:** We're talking about uprooting your life, moving to a different state, taking a job to sustain you through this whole process. This is serious commitment.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** It is, but it needed to be done. I wanted to tell this story with as much integrity and authenticity as possible, because when I decided to write it, I knew nothing about prison. I'd never been in a prison. I didn't know the process of capital punishment. The first thing I Googled was what does a warden do you know? So I was really starting from scratch. So it was really important to me that I get this right.



**Scott Tallal:** What surprised you when you started digging into this for real?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** How incredibly difficult it is to get someone out of prison once they've been convicted.

**Scott Tallal:** There have been other movies that have obviously dealt with this issue of putting condemned prisoners to death. But what your film does that I've never seen before is dealing with the emotional toll that it takes on the people involved.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yeah, absolutely. I've never seen that perspective before at all. And I thought that it's such a human way of navigating and interrogating the system of capital punishment by doing so through the eyes of a perpetrator of the system.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Now, you were supporting yourself at this time by teaching filmmaking rights in university. Talk to us about how that migrated into teaching it to inmates.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** I've been a film professor for over 10 years. And so I started teaching when I was in graduate school. And teaching is the single most transformative thing I've ever done in my life. And I will always consider myself to be an educator as well in some capacity. But my teaching has largely been confined to the privilege walls of a college classroom. And I have helped hundreds of students over the course of 10 years tell their own stories. So when I was volunteering on my first clemency case, I would go to the prison in which the defendant was incarcerated and I would just look around at all of the many women whose stories would never leave prison walls. And I just had the idea to just bring the curriculum that I've spent many years designing and kind of quote unquote perfecting into this space. Because what I do as an educator is help people tell their own stories. And that shouldn't just be limited to who can pay tuition.

**Scott Tallal:** Obviously, some of the women who graduated and have been released from prison.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** All of them have. And it was interesting because the first clemency case I volunteered for is for a woman named Tyree Patterson, and she received

clemency around the same time we got greenlit for the film. So I just felt like all the universe was working,.

**Scott Tallal:** When Bronwyn, the producer, contacted you and said, I think we've got Alfre on the hook here. Talk to us about that moment.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Ok. So two years before pre-production, Bronwyn, our amazing producer and I were having a conversation about who the hell is going to play Bernadine because we knew that not a lot of people would be able to execute this. No pun intended. But will be able to carry this kind of role because so much is in the eyes and there's such a subtle, precise performance. Then Bronwyn's said, What about Alfre Woodard? And both of us had goose bumps. I think the world made sense. And I was like, Yeah. So then Bronwyn worked her producer magic, and got the script in Alfre's hands and her rep's hands, and Alfre immediately read it. And then she called me and she asked about my directorial vision. And what was great is that she called me when I was just finished teaching and I had one of my students and mentees with me and I totally got cool points there. But I was geeking out. Like O my God, oh my God, what am I going to say? But it was great for my student to see that moment. But yeah, Alfre, I talked for I think for like almost an hour and she said she's in, that was it!.

**Scott Tallal:** So you're having a normal phone call, but inside your head,.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Inside my head, it's like two things. One reminding myself of my worth, because at first I was like, oh, my God, this is the Alfre Woodard. So I was feeling a little insecure. But then I was like, wait a minute, I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm talking about. So it's like this constant dialogue in my head. And we were focusing on the art of it and the craft of it. And once we got into our rhythm of the conversation and once she kind of shared with me why she was so connected to the material, then we just got comfortable with each other.

**Scott Tallal:** For shooting the film. You opted to go with Eric Branco, talk to us about that decision.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Well, Eric Branco is an extraordinary cinematographer who I had worked with years prior on a short film that wrote and directed called A Long Walk. And

that was the first time we worked together. And he did such a stunning job. And when we wrapped, that's when I told him, hey, I'm writing this new project called Clemency. I'd love to work with you again, because I knew that A Long Walk was kind of the testing ground for me, like, OK, I know he's really talented, but do we get along and do we understand each other creatively and personally? And we had a fantastic time on that set. And I sent him the first draft like five years ago or something like that. And he's been a part of every derivative of the script. And he was somebody who understood the intentions behind the material. And I think he lights dark skin, incredibly well, incredibly well, and not everybody can. And so that was also another reason why I was really excited to work with him again.

**Scott Tallal:** And then you had Phyllis Housen editing. Talk to us about that whole process, because so much of this film is reactions.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yes. So Phyllis and I had a ball editing this film. So I was always incredibly clear about the pacing of the film. And I am not precious about anything at all. And I know that surprised Phyllis at first. Listen, I would cut a third of the film if it needed to be cut. And so our first assembly was three hours long. The first day of editing, I came in with like notes of all the many things we can cut and like we can do that and we can do that. And she was shocked. And so it went smoothly and quickly. And there is only one moment where Phyllis and I had to, like, duke it out. It was the three and a half, four minute close up. And that was one of those moments where I was like, no, this is gonna be it. So you just take what time you need to get on board. And so she took her time. And then finally after I don't know, maybe a couple of weeks, she looked at me, said, all right, you're right.

**Scott Tallal:** In this cast beyond Alfre, you have Aldis Hodge as the condemned man. You have Danielle Brooks back in prison, but this time on the other side of the window, not just being one of the inmates

**Chinonye Chukwu:** She's incredible in this, incredible.

**Scott Tallal:** And it's a short scene, but it has so much emotional impact.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** And it's a hard scene. It was one of the hardest scenes to direct. Like Danielle, Aldis and I all got together for the first time on set the day we were supposed to shoot the scene. And we rehearsed for like three, three and a half hours. And that was probably one of the best directing moments for me because we had to get in the scene and figure out the emotional beats in real time. And it was really a massaging of it before and during the shooting and really adjusting in real time and tweaking and tweaking and tweaking. That was probably one of the most invigorating moments I've ever had as a director. And we were all in it and we figured out the arc in real time.

**Scott Tallal:** And you had Richard Schiff as the attorney.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yes, I love Richard. He was great. He's amazing. The subtlety in his performance, it's just it's masterful.

**Scott Tallal:** And Wendell Pierce.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Wendell Pierce.

**Scott Tallal:** The scene where he's pushing so hard to close that gap. And it starts out as this romantic evening and it just descends into acrimony.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yeah. That was one of my favorite scenes to write. It was one of the more challenging scenes to direct because you have to figure out the rhythm, the emotional rhythm and those beats where things shift and take a turn. And that was another one like the scene with Aldis and Danielle, where we had to kind of figure it out and work through it. And once again, it is another invigorating moment as a director. But we just had to figure it out. Wendell and Alfre just had so much great chemistry. You know, Wendell's performance is another one that's just understated brilliance. And he just brings such a natural complexity to the character. And I think about, you know, the scene where he's reciting Invisible Man as he's reciting it publicly. It's actually quite an interior moment. I just think that's genius.

**Scott Tallal:** I have to ask you about Bronwyn, how she came aboard.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Well, Bronwyn has produced several films,.

**Scott Tallal:** Right, at this point,

**Chinonye Chukwu:** But before Clemency. And not only has she produced several films, but she also was probably the producer I've talked with who had the most persistence. And she was the person who I because I talked to several producers to try to figure out who I want to work with. And she was the one person who un-wavered in her support of my vision. And she hustled like I've never seen anyone hustle before. And she's one of the hardest working producers that I know. And that combined with her experience. And that's why I wanted to work with her.

**Scott Tallal:** You talked about how this went through so many iterations. Can you share with us some of what was left behind?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** So it didn't go through too many drastic iterations. The Bernardine character arc was always pretty much the same. I think that figuring out Danielle Brooks's character and how much she was going to be in the story changed significantly from the first draft to where we ended up. I had to really figure out that, oh, this is about Bernadine. This is not about these, you know, it's about all of the people who are part of this ecosystem. But I think that with each draft of each revision, Bernardine's arc came to the surface more clearly And wasn't kind of bogged down by too many other subplots. And then there were protesters who had a more significant kind of part of the narrative. And I just, I ,it became clear to me that I need to stay in the space of the prison as much as possible and kind of create that claustrophobia and that kind of physical containment that Bernadine and, of course, the people who are incarcerated are experiencing.

**Scott Tallal:** What does this feel like to be having wrapped and now promoting a film that's in contention for awards?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** You know, it feels remarkable. I mean, I am actively working on being present to it. You know, this year has been so growth full in that it's been a challenge for me to allow myself to thrive because I am used to climbing up the hill. Right. Like this is the first year that my filmmaking is actually financially viable,

independent of anything else. Right. And so I'm used to rejection. I mean, every single film I've ever made was rejected by Sundance. I never got into any lab, nothing of any kind of institution or whatever. So I'm used to climbing up the hill. But this year has been about still working hard because my work ethic will always remain very high. But allowing myself to enjoy the view a little bit and that has actually been incredibly difficult, but I've been really active about figuring out how to do that so I can enjoy this next stage of my career that I've spent so many years building to this point.

**Scott Tallal:** And that next stage, as I understand it, you're attached to the Black Panther book?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yes. I'm going to write and direct an adaptation of Elaine Brown's phenomenal memoir, *A Taste of Power*. And so Elaine Brown is the first and only female leader, the Black Panther Party. I can't wait. It is completely different than *Clemency* and anything I've done. And one of the things I'm really excited about and thankful for is that all of the different projects that I'm kind of circling around and the opportunities that are coming my way or that I'm able to create for myself are mostly nothing like *Clemency*. And that's exciting.

**Scott Tallal:** *Clemency* has been seven, eight years of your life.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Yeah,

**Scott Tallal:** It's been almost all of your adult life it sounds like.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** How young do you think I am?

**Scott Tallal:** Ehh. It seems like a very good part of your adult life.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Woo! I got some more years beyond that in my adult life.

**Scott Tallal:** You start the movie with basically a botched execution. And that sets up everything else. Was that intentional on your part?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Oh, it's totally intentional. But I didn't figure that beginning until several revisions because I realized, oh, I need to set the stakes. From the beginning, the stakes weren't set high enough. I realized from draft to draft to draft and the first 10 minutes of the film plagues the rest of the movie and plagues Bernardine's arc.

**Scott Tallal:** Let's talk about how you decided to end the movie.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** So I've always known that I wanted to have a moment at the end that evolved in real time, that I wanted us to have some sort of experience of that scene in real time. It wasn't clear to me who or what we were going to see until halfway through shooting and halfway through shooting there was a scene that was taken out that was a long take on Bernadine. It was a really pretty one. But once again, I'm not precious. It didn't work narratively as we were shooting it and Alfre and I were talking about it and it just wasn't working for some reason. And Alfre just simply said it's because we haven't earned this moment yet. We haven't earned the moment of this kind of emotional breakdown or this kind of emotional evolution. Her arc is incomplete. And I said, you know what? You are absolutely right. And so in the middle of shooting, that's when I knew that I was going to have that final moment. And I just told my cinematographer and he's ok cool, and nobody knew how long we were going to go. I will never forget the moment we shot it. It was magical. The power you felt watching it, the magic you felt watching it is what we felt shooting it. And I knew instinctively all of it was going to be in. She channeled something. Richard Schiff was sick during when we were shooting, he was supposed to go home. He was so captivated that he forgot to go home. You know, and usually after I say cut, you know, it's chaos on set, quiet. Just quiet.

**Scott Tallal:** When you are in charge of the shoot, when you are directing a film like this that is so dark and so intense. How do you deal with that on the set?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** I have done a lot of soul work in my adult life to find and embrace my joy. And that work is some of the hardest work I've done. But it's detached from ego and it allows me to connect to a life inside of me that nobody can take away from me. And so I brought that to set that even amid this very intense material that we exude our joy, we could exude our light outside of, you know, when we were shooting. I kept it very light. I mean, my cinematographer and I were dancing on set, you know, in between

takes. I'm also quite compassionate and caring, I think, when it comes to actors and protective of the actors I work with. So I was constantly checking in about their well-being. We had a therapist on set when we were shooting the execution scenes and Bronwyn is also check again constantly. And Eric, my DP and I, we both have the same philosophy that we set the tone because we shot this in 17 days. Right. So you can imagine how intense some moments were. But even in those moments, we made a commitment to each other that we will never let the frustration or the anxiety spread to anybody else. So he would take me aside sometimes when he was starting to see that I was getting tight and he would look me in my face and check me and there'll be times I had to check him. We take a beat and we get back to happy because otherwise how else are we gonna make this movie?

**Scott Tallal:** You've talked about teaching film. As a film instructor what do you want to communicate to aspiring filmmakers?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Detach from the ego of filmmaking. Really root yourself in the craft and continue to keep studying the craft. Most people who pursue filmmaking, it will not be solely financially viable and I hate to say that, but it's just the reality. It's a situation that doesn't mean that you shouldn't continue to pursue it. I also encourage my students and mentees to find joy in something else as well that will fuel them because there's going to be a lot of no's and waiting. And if your happiness or joy is defined by whether or not a project is greenlit or you got a grant or you got the phone call, then you're not going to be living, you're just gonna be existing.

**Scott Tallal:** And what are your hopes for the outcome of this film?

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Well, I hope a lot of people see it. I hope a lot of people see it in theaters. I hope a lot of people see it in general. I hope it instigates conversations around the humanization of people who are incarcerated and the lives that are tied to incarceration. I hope that it really moves the conversation and discourse forward and when it comes to mass incarceration. So it goes beyond just innocence cases. But we are not defining people by their worst possible acts. And I hope that it widens the possible narratives that feature black women so that we can be truly written as human beings.



**Scott Tallal:** Writer director of Clemency, Chinonye Chukwu, thank you so much for joining us on Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. And thanks again to ALfre Woodard for joining us for the first half of the show.

**Chinonye Chukwu:** Thank you.

**Announcer:** Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is created by Curtco Media and presented in cooperation with the Malibu Film Society. This episode was hosted by Scott Tallal with guests ALfre Woodard and Chinonye Chukwu. Produced and edited by Jenny Curtis, Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy. The score from Clemency featured as the music in this episode was composed by Kathryn Bostic and provided courtesy of Neon. The executive producer of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is Stuart Halperin. The Hollywood Unscripted theme song is by Celeste and Erik Dick. Please rate, review and subscribe to this podcast for more conversations with top industry professionals discussing the movies you love.

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