

# ABFF INSIDER

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**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

*SURVIVOR'S REMORSE* star

## JESSIE T. USHER

Sits down with us at the  
2017 American Black Film Festival

June/July 2017 • Issue III



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# Feature Story

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PHOTO CREDITS: STARZ

## Meet Jessie T. Usher

The ABFF Insider caught up with Jessie T. Usher during the festival in Miami. We got to know more about him, his journey to Cam Calloway and his future aspirations.

### You have an impressive list of credits for a 25-year old. What initially sparked your interest in acting?

I was influenced by my older sister's involvement in the industry. She was modeling and doing commercials when we were both very young and I was interested in doing what she did. I didn't necessarily know what I was getting myself into but it looked like fun.

### Talk a little bit about the process of securing the role of Cam Calloway.

Oh, they put me through the ringer for Cam Calloway! It was a three and a half month process, seven auditions--probably the longest auditioning process of my entire career. It was partly because the direction of the character changed in the middle of casting. As they were piecing other characters together they weren't exactly sure what they were going to do with Cam, so the initial read ended up being entirely different by the end of the process. I first read for the part in December, and about a month and a half later I got a call from Kim Coleman in casting saying they wanted me to come back in for the project. Everything had changed. But from there I read for the network, did a lot of chemistry reads with Erica, RonReaco and Tichina, and after a while I got the call to say the part was mine.

### You seem like a real family on screen. What is the vibe really like on the *Survivor's Remorse* set?

We've been very close from the first season. RonReaco and I clicked immediately, even in our chemistry reads. That vibe that you see on camera now, and particularly what you'll see in this fourth season, is what we had years ago, and everything else builds around that. Erica and I had a good read too, but it wasn't quite what I had with RonReaco. We just played off each other in a way that I have yet to do with any other performer that quickly. The dynamic on set is a lot like a real family. It's loud. It's playful. Everyone is having a crazy fun time. We love playing around and being in each other's company.

### In your opinion, what was the role that made the industry, and audiences, really take notice of you?

Hmmm... okay. So there are two separate roles. The industry noticed me in a pilot I did called *Summer Camp*, that I thought nobody saw since it didn't get picked

up. But for the year and half following that pilot, every time I would go into an audition people would say they knew me from *Summer Camp*. I kept wondering "How? Who showed you the tape?" Casting directors, producers and directors all over the place knew who I was and what I was doing, which blew my mind because not only did I feel like no one saw it, I also didn't think it was a standout role. I played a camp counselor, just having fun with the kids on the set. But the next thing I knew, I was on the radar.

For audiences, it was definitely *Survivor's Remorse* that made the biggest wave. Things started changing the day after the press release. I walked into the gym to play basketball that evening and all of a sudden everyone wanted me on their team. I was like "Come on, I've known you guys for years!" (Laughs). But that's when everything changed.

### When you learned that you landed the lead role in *Independence Day: Resurgence*, what went through your mind and did you get any advice from Will Smith?

I was so excited when I learned that I got that role. It was somewhat of an out-of-body experience that didn't seem real for a while. But I was also relieved because, until you actually get the role, you're waiting on pins and needles since anything can happen. I hadn't slept in a while but I got some sleep that night! I didn't get advice from Will Smith prior to taking the role but I got his blessing via word of mouth. Somebody that has a close relationship with him told Will that "this guy Jessie" was cast in the role. He checked out some stuff from *Survivor's Remorse* and said, "Yeah, I could see that!" And when I heard, I was like, "Oh snap!"

### You are listed as a producer on some upcoming projects. Do you want to do more directing and producing; will you take a stab at Broadway? What is the next challenge in your career?

I'm definitely branching out into the production side of things. My production partner and I are developing a TV show right now. I also executive produced a movie I just did called *Ride*, so I am very interested in the creative side of things. I like having a voice prior to showing up on set so I'm able to lock down on my own character. I want to be involved in the creative process before things really get going. That's something I've been interested in for a long time, as well as directing and a lot of other things behind camera--just all inclusive. And definitely Broadway! I did a lot of stage acting when I was younger and I've been dying to go back. There are some select things I really want to do, like play Scar in *The Lion King*.

### We're really glad you came to ABFF. Did you enjoy the 29 Below event?

I did! I talked to just about everybody who showed up and got a chance to see what they're doing. It's great to see people who are basically the same age and demographic as me, doing the same things that I do. I was explaining how important it is for them to get to know each other, work together and get their projects out. It's easier these days to get content out for people to see, and you can create a platform for yourself without waiting around for anyone. The game has changed drastically.

It's a beautiful thing to see all these projects revolving around us.

### Will we see you at ABFF next year?

I hope so! If I'm not working on a project, I am definitely here. I hope to be back.

### Jessie's Five Favorites:

**Favorite basketball team:** The Wizards. But my favorite player is Kyrie Irving.

**Favorite thing about ABFF:** At the 29 Below event, I was saying that there were a lot of people I came up with in L.A. and we always talked about the day that we would have our own projects. A lot of us are on TV shows now and many of us are here at ABFF. It's a beautiful thing to see all these projects revolving around us. Being here and seeing everybody, seeing all these projects and feeling everyone's happiness and passion about what they are doing and what we've accomplished in the last 10-15 years is such an incredible feeling.

**Favorite car that you never owned:** The Audi R8. But soon to own, I hope!

**Favorite childhood book:** Ohhh... It must have been the very first "Harry Potter" book. It was a big one, but that's my favorite.

**Favorite city:** Los Angeles! That's where I spent my adulthood. It's where all my friends of the last 12 years live. My family is still in PG County and I have a lot of love for Maryland. But, I need to look out and see sun, mountains and ocean all at the same time. I just love L.A.

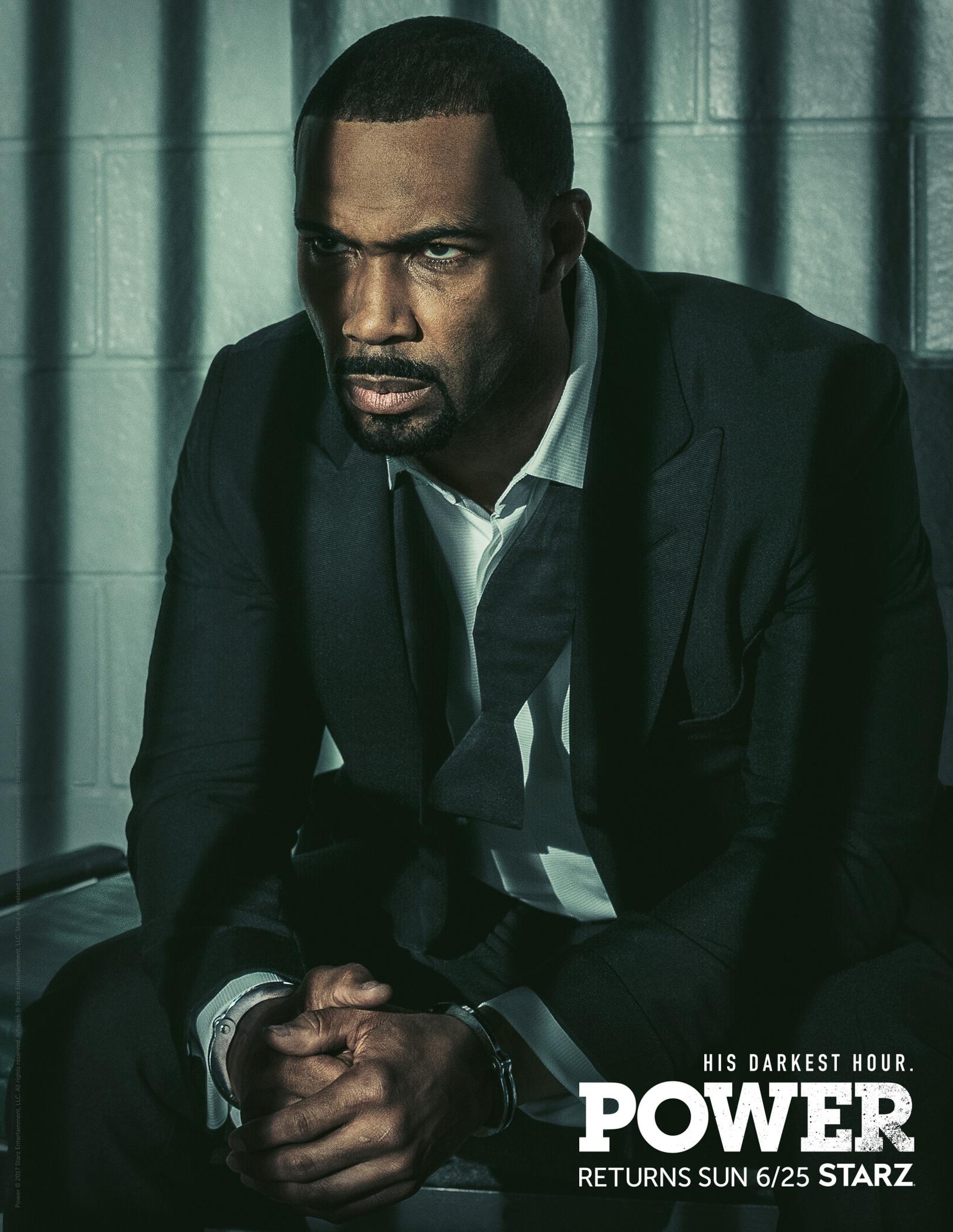
-Story by Lamonia Deanne Brown

## UP NEXT



Catch Jessie in Season 4 of *Survivor's Remorse*—Aug.20 at 10PM on STARZ





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HIS DARKEST HOUR.

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# New On Screen

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**TALES: A HIP HOP ANTHOLOGY**  
BET  
Tuesdays at 8:00 PM

In Irv “Gotti” Lorenzo’s new show on BET, *Tales*, he takes an array of different hip hop songs, and makes a movie out of them attempting to convey the record’s message on screen.



**SNOWFALL**  
FX Networks  
July 5 at 10:00 PM

Los Angeles. 1983. A storm is coming and its name is CRACK. Directed by John Singleton, *Snowfall* is a one-hour drama set against the infancy of the crack cocaine epidemic and its ultimate radical impact on the culture as we know it.



**BOSSIP**  
WE Tv  
Premieres July 6 at 10:00 PM

WE tv is bringing the heat this summer with a new weekly series from pop culture website, Bossip. *Bossip* on WE tv will have a six-week summer run on Thursday nights. Filmed at the Bossip headquarters in Atlanta, the show features writers and staff dishing the latest breaking news, gossip and up-to-the-minute exclusives in black entertainment that will only be available on *Bossip* on WE tv.



**THE DEFIANT ONES**  
HBO  
July 9 at 9:00 PM

*The Defiant Ones* is a four-part documentary that tells the stories of Jimmy Iovine and Dr. Dre—one the son of a long-shoreman, the other straight out of Compton—their improbable partnership and surprising leading roles in a series of transformative events in contemporary culture.



**INSECURE**  
HBO  
Season 2 premiere July 23 at 10:30 PM

Will she choose Lawrence or Daniel? Find out if Issa can clean up her mess when Season 2 of *Insecure* comes back on Sunday, July 23 immediately following the Season 3 premiere of *Ballers*.

# #WorkGoals

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**Johanna Fuentes**  
EVP, Corporate Communications  
Showtime Networks

Showtime Networks has named Johanna Fuentes Executive VP, Corporate Communications, the top PR post at the pay cable outfit. Fuentes will report directly to CEO David Nevins and parent CBS Corp. communications chief Gil Schwartz. She will oversee programming

publicity, media and talent relations, events, photography, sports and corporate branding for the Showtime suite and cable sibling Smithsonian Channel.

Fuentes' promotion comes after seven years at the network, where she most recently served as SVP, Corporate Communications. Her purview now expands to strategic planning and execution of all global public and media relations initiatives.

Prior to Showtime, Fuentes held high communications posts at Bravo and CBS.



**Denise Young Smith**  
VP, Inclusion and Diversity  
Apple, Inc.

Denise Young Smith is Apple's vice president of Inclusion and Diversity reporting to CEO Tim Cook. Denise leads Apple's efforts globally to ensure an inclusive culture that's representative and embracing of all diversities.

Since joining Apple in 1997, Denise has served in a number of key roles at the company, most recently leading Human Resources for the company. Prior to that, she was part of the leadership team that built Apple's retail business worldwide, which now welcomes more than one million people every day. Before retail, Denise ran HR for Apple's Worldwide Operations and Corporate Employee Relations teams.

Denise has a master's degree in Organizational Management from Grambling State University in Louisiana.

## #ABFF



**20TH ANNUAL HBO SHORT  
FILM COMPETITION**

This year marked the 20th year of HBO's Short Film Competition at the ABFF. Jeff Friday invited Mayor Phillip Levine to help us commemorate this occasion by presenting an official proclamation during the event to Dennis Williams, HBO's SVP of Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Affairs.



**ABFF COMEDY WINGS  
COMPETITION WINNER**

Congratulations to comedian TuRae Gordon, who took home the winning trophy at this year's ABFF Comedy Wings Competition. TuRae competed against his four fellow semi-finalists to win \$5000 in cash.



**VR  
EXPERIENCE**

ABFF Alum Alton Glass returned to the festival this year to break new ground in our VR Experience with his virtual reality movie, *A Little Love*, which premiered Saturday, June 17.

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