

TIME

## Lee Daniels on *Empire*: The Show Has Already Changed Homophobes' Minds



Lee Daniels on Dec. 1, 2014 in New York City. Theo Warg—Getty Images / IFP

By LILY ROTHMAN January 7, 2015

*Lee Daniels is best known as the filmmaker behind gritty independent films like Precious, but his new project is the slick primetime drama Empire, premiering Jan. 7 on Fox, which he co-created with Danny Strong. Daniels recently spoke to TIME about the show, and how — despite not being independently made —*

*it's a personal story. The Shakespeare-inflected tale of record mogul Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard), his ex-wife Cookie (Taraji P. Henson) and their sons Andre, Jamal and Hakeem, often draws on stories from his own life. And, he tells TIME, the show is already making a difference toward his larger aim of increasing tolerance among its audience:*

**TIME: You've told a story about trying on your mother's shoes as a child. There's a scene in the *Empire* pilot that sounds very similar to that episode, where Lucious reacts to seeing his young son do just that...**

Lee Daniels: I was terrified of that scene. My sister was an extra — she's in the scene — and when the kid put the shoes on, having him walk in front of his father, I had a meltdown. I was crying at the monitor because it happened, you know. My soul left my body, I was looking down, it was a weird moment, I couldn't direct it, and my sister knew instinctively because she had lived it. She said, 'Okay kid, put the shoes on, put your hands on your hips, and swish like this.' I was terrified and it took me right back to a place of truth, which is what this show's about. There's nothing in it that's fake. Every person who's on that screen is someone I know.

**Is that character, Jamal, the most you?**

I'm a little bit in all of them. I can't tell you what Jamal is going to do but he's pretty bad-ass. He'll end up what I *want* to be.

**How has your experience as a parent influenced the way you create a family story?**

The Hakeem character is based on my relationship with my son. We were having a very difficult time at it. I don't know how not to work, but he doesn't understand that concept. I worry, as with Hakeem's character, whether he'll be able to survive in the workforce, because he doesn't know to be hungry. I don't mean it just as words, but I mean *literally* hungry. That feeling of destitution. I wanted everything for my kids, so that relationship, Hakeem's [to his father], is my son and me, and yet it's also my brother too. My brother and I were very

close. We were so close, and yet once he understood my difference sexually, we were sort of not as close.

**So you the distance between the brothers is like it is in your life.**

There are so many themes, but part of [my goal with *Empire*] was really to address homophobia in the African-American community and in the impoverished community. To educate people. Not that this is a gay show, but it's one of many subject matters we hit on. There's so much homophobia in the hip-hop community. It's the civil rights of our time, and I think I am making a little bit of a contribution, because I've seen people change who were homophobic, after seeing this.

**After seeing the pilot they changed their attitudes? People you know personally?**

Yeah. They see so much of *Lucious* in themselves that they understand.

*Read more about Empire in the Dec. 29, 2014, issue of TIME: **Building an Empire***



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