

Washington, Denzel (1954-)

Encyclopedia Article

Washington, Denzel (1954-)

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Washington, Denzel (1954—)

A handsome, intelligent, and stylish actor, Denzel Washington is the natural heir, with a modern edge, to Sidney Poitier, the first film star to have demonstrated that an African American could become a heartthrob and a top box-office draw in the United States. Born in Mount Vernon, New York, Washington holds a B.A. in journalism from Fordham, studied acting at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, and worked on stage and in television (he was an ongoing character in the popular hospital series, *St. Elsewhere*) before Hollywood beckoned. He made his screen debut as white George Segal's black illegitimate son in *Carbon Copy* (1982). Five years later, his portrayal of South African political activist Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* (1987) brought him stardom and an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He won that award, and a Golden Globe, for his embittered but courageous runaway slave in *Glory* (1989). He has made several other films dealing with the issue of race; from the comedic (*Heart Condition*, 1990) through the romantic (*Mississippi Masala*, 1991) to the overtly political, as the title character in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1993). He has, however, established his versatility in a broad range of work, notably including Shakespeare—on screen in Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), and as *Richard III* on stage in New York's Central Park in 1990.

Denzel Washington

Further Reading:

Brode, Douglas. *Denzel Washington: His Films and Career*. Secaucus, New Jersey, Carol Publishing Group, 1997.

Simmons, Alex. *Denzel Washington*. Austin, Texas, Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1997.

Simon, Leslie. "Why Denzel Washington (not Tom Cruise) is the New Paul Newman." *Film Comment*. Vol. 34, March/April 1998, 72-75.