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Charlie Cattrall (c) Sukey Parnell

The Southbank Centre is buzzing with excitement. It's a pleasant Saturday afternoon in mid-November and the second day of the annual London Jazz Festival. Hundreds of revellers float around the Royal Festival Hall, taking advantage of the free live performances in the foyer. I am here to meet and chat with Actor/Director Charlie Cattrall about his feature-length directorial debut 'Titus'. I find him standing outside the RFH's Riverside Café, staring abstractedly at the friendly chaos within. We seek refuge from the crowd at the BFI café across the road. Within the few minutes it takes us to find a little nook in which to embed ourselves our discussion has already covered amongst other things my family background, Charlie's dad's formative years spent in Nigeria, his life-long love of Arsenal (Thierry Henry in particular), scepticism about the new Lily Allen video and the special place he has in his heart for D'Angelo's 'Voodoo'. All this before the dictaphone has even been switched on.

Tap Cattrall's name into a search engine and, 'Titus' promotion aside, precious little comes up. But if you are not yet familiar with him, chances are this is about to change. 'Titus'- the story of a prodigious but embittered saxophonist who never attained the level of success he felt was his due- has already garnered quite a bit of attention. It debuted at the Raindance Festival earlier this autumn and has been nominated for two British Independent Film Awards (BIFA [<http://www.bifa.org.uk/releases/2013-nominations-announced-for-the-16th-annual-british-independent-film-awards%20>]) including one for Best Debut Director. A special Jazz Festival screening of the film at the Barbican sells out days before the event.

'Titus' might be Charlie's first full-length feature but it has been twenty-odd years in the making. It was on the cusp of adolescence that Kent-born, London-raised Charlie David Cattrall first tried his hand at directing.

'I was 13' he recounts 'We had Drama/English class with a teacher called Miss Jennings. She was great. We were devising performance stuff. I came up with an idea and directed it. She really commended me on it'.

His inchoate acting/directing skills as well as his mellifluous speaking voice would suggest Cattrall was destined to tread the boards (and maybe do some voiceover work too). Nonetheless, Miss Jennings was more supportive of his thespian aspirations than other members of staff. His sporting prowess threatened to overshadow his acting.

'I had teachers who would tell me that if you were really sporty, performing isn't the kind of thing you do. That's the story that ran through my schooling life. I really wanted to act as a kid. I had done some school plays but I never had big parts in them. I longingly watched people doing it. I would bunk off practice to go and do rehearsals and some people didn't like that.'

Experience, nevertheless, proved his teachers right.

'I have a lot of ideas and I can probably be quite abrasive with directors if I don't agree with them. Some directors love that, most of them don't because they want to control you...maybe. I guess the empowering thing about directing is that it's your vision and your idea which you're helped with by the [cast and crew]. Definitely with 'Titus' that's true. But still you're taking on the responsibility for something.'



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Cattrall with friend, collaborator and star of 'Titus' Ron Cephas-Jones (c) Christian McLaughlin

Cattrall is a self-taught auteur as it were.

'I grew up watching films. I didn't have a family who took me to the theatre very much, that came through school. And then I studied Drama and English at University and so I really got into theatre. I didn't go to film school but I was educating myself in the history of cinema, watching loads of films.'

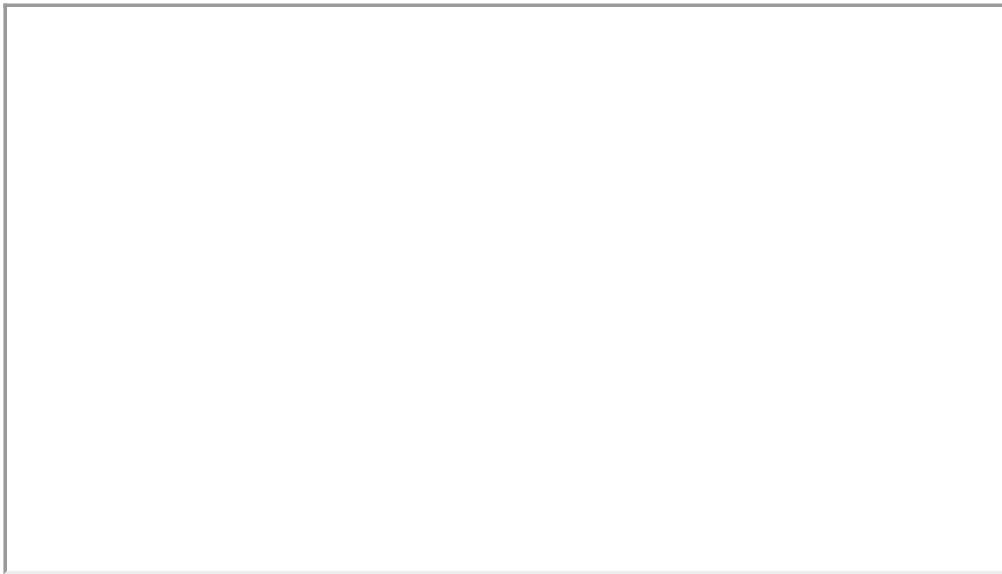
In addition to theatre and film Charlie has made forays into directing music videos. His screen debut was in fact a 2007 promo for which he won an award. He most recently directed a video for rising Jazz/Soul star Ayanna Witter-Johnson (more on that later). Ironically despite his early success, he's least passionate about the music video format. 'I can appreciate it but it doesn't really offer the artistic challenges that I enjoy' he confesses 'I guess if people ask me to do it I don't mind but I want to make long film narrative or experimental film. I feel with that constraint of time, I want to make big statements.'

The conversation turns to how Charlie became acquainted with 'Titus' leading man Ron Cephas Jones twelve years ago.

'I'd seen him do this play 'Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train' in the Edinburgh Festival. That evening I was going

ten most seminal jazz albums were...John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cannonball Adderley, Dizzy, some Duke Ellington... I bought them all and started listening to them.

'Five years later when I met Ron I was listening to Herbie Hancock quite a lot. I was getting into the later Miles and then more Jazz Fusion stuff. He put me onto Roland Kirk and then Sun-Ra. I was also really into P-Funk and George Clinton at that point...'



According to the 'Titus [<http://www.titusthemovie.com/>] ' website on first meeting Charlie and Ron's mutual talking points extended beyond Jazz to African-American history in general. I'm curious about the provenance of this particular passion.

He explains 'I remember a very specific moment as a kid. My mum and dad had bought the Live Aid single for Christmas on vinyl. It sounds like a cliché but I remember seeing a starving Ethiopian child on the TV screen emaciated, same age as me and thinking "I don't understand. How can that be possible and I'm here?"

'Maybe this is not how it actually happened but the way I remember it was almost like an epiphany, even at that age; "How can this be true?" '

Other experiences closer to home also awakened Cattrall's social consciousness.

'My best friend when I was a kid, Dan, was black but adopted by two white British parents. His brother was also adopted but they weren't biological brothers. We used to listen to Hendrix together and people would play Public Enemy. I guess I was starting to be exposed to-without really knowing it-polemical black music. I was going to Dulwich College and we were hanging out in Brixton, Herne Hill, Streatham, Lewisham...There were kids who were racist there and my best friend was black.'

There was more soul-searching to come.

'It's really difficult to pick apart. There were certain people in my family who were racist, for want of a better word. At the time I'd get f**king angry about it but now I can understand it was their upbringing. Still, it frustrated me. My dad would have grown up in Nigeria around people with black skin who were working in that house because [dad's family] had white skin and that was the hierarchy. And that made me feel ashamed as a teenager.'

The guilt triggered a desire in Cattrall to atone for the colonial transgressions of his forefathers. He thus embarked on a lengthy excursion around Southern Africa covering Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia and South Africa.

of the colour of my skin. Then slowly these people opened up to me. So I guess I've been privileged, being allowed into those kind of environments and being made to feel like family. When I went to New Jersey Ron's mother cooked me the classic [soul food] meal; grits and cornbread...They treated me like family. My people in America are all African-Americans.'



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(c) Christian McLaughlin

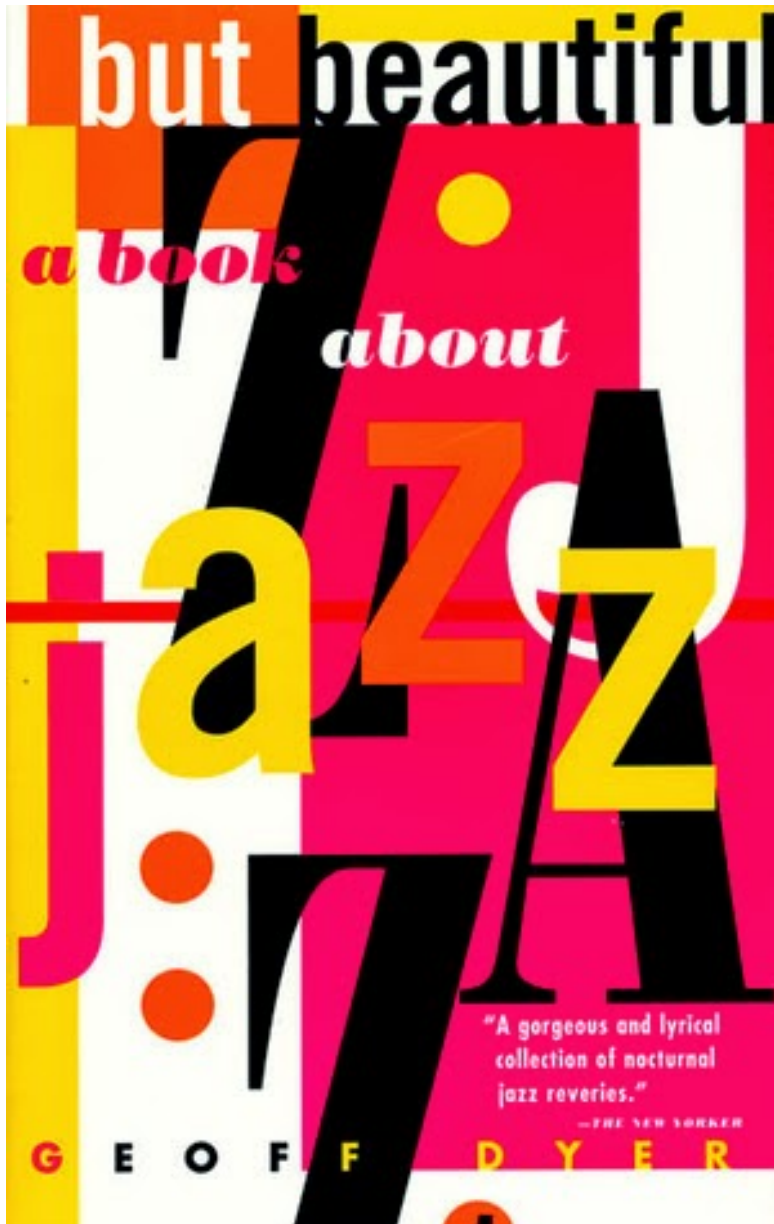
Charlie's looking distinctly hippy-fied compared to his groomed clean-shaven, starring role in the short film 'Watching [\[http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi288031769/2010\]](http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi288031769/2010)'. Is he growing dreadlocks as a sign of solidarity with his adopted African-American family?

'No I've been through all that s**t. This is for an acting role. It's good to be a chameleon as an actor. I don't think I have paid to have my haircut for years. I can let myself go. I had a beard the night before we did the shooting of 'Watching'. If you see me with short hair it's because I've been acting in something recently'.

I admit, when middle-class Caucasian males claim an enduring affinity with an oppressed people- especially those belonging to the African diaspora- the instinct is to be chary of their motives (the criticism levied at Paul Simon post-'Gracelands' comes to mind). But Charlie seems genuine enough. His interest in African-American culture could very well be an extension of his natural curiosity and wanderlust. He is truly a world citizen. He travels frequently and extensively. He speaks fluent French with an authentic-sounding accent thanks to several sojourns in France. He is also familiar with Haitian Creole. Cattrall's international outlook has evidently impacted his output thus far. Another big influence is the time he spent studying at Guildhall.

'I remember walking out of class every night and [clarinettist/saxophonist] Shabaka Hutchings would be rehearsing. That level of dedication impelled me to do that myself. At the end of my time at Guildhall I did a one man show. I then moved into a house with the electronic jazz musician who helped with it. Shabaka, [saxophonist] Tom Challenger, George Fogel-he's a keys player-all used to live there. Those guys are all in 'Titus' so I guess they definitely had an effect on me. Maybe it's no surprise that with the influence of Ron and my granddad I was destined to make a film about this subject at some point.'

then he tries to play again. It's describing him about to go on stage, experientially what's happening while he's playing and then him falling apart. I thought it would be interesting to have this character who is a genius but who never really made it because of -I don't know what at that point-and he's about to play again.'



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'Titus' went through several stages of evolution before Charlie, Nico and co settled on the final draft.

'Money is a limiting factor but also you can be quite creative. So in the end it came down to this story about a man dying, living with a patron and then a daughter he abandoned coming to find him which is the film you see'

In my review of 'Titus' [<http://tolitasmusings.blogspot.com/2013/10/raindance-film-festival-2013-special.html>] ' I point out the link between the name of the titular character and the mythical Titans. My theory, as it turns out, wasn't far off. But was it a conscious choice?

'Well yeah...I wanted to give him a name that sounded magisterial. When you hear about these greats, it's like Monk, Mingus, 'Trane, Miles, Dizzy...'

Plus there was a generation of fêted African-Americans who had very classical, Greco-Roman sounding

way I wouldn't feel as if I was treading on dangerous territory. For example, 'Brother can you spare a dime?' wasn't the initial song [we chose]; it was the Mahalia Jackson version of 'Nobody Knows'. I talked to Ron about it and he said that for his generation of black Americans that song didn't sing to them. They felt it was for their parents' generation. And some of them had acquiesced; they wanted to maintain the status quo. He said that some people will be offended by the [song choice] in terms of it being about black consciousness. It has to be a song that resonates. I'd research things like that he said to me. I just wouldn't take it at face value. But then he was always right.'

Perhaps because he thrives on having great responsibility, Charlie likes to be thorough.

'If I know that I don't know, then I'll always ask. I think if you start preaching when you don't have an idea then you get in trouble. Thank God Ron has great knowledge of that and that's his lived experience. I could always give over to him.'

Funding for 'Titus' came courtesy of producer Christian McLaughlin. A personal tragedy he had suffered shortly before had an eerie, inadvertent resonance with the resolution of the film. This was an added incentive for him to financially back his friends' vision. He was very hands on.

'Christian was there every step of the way.' Charlie enthuses 'He's not a classic producer in that sense. He had a vested interest in the project.'



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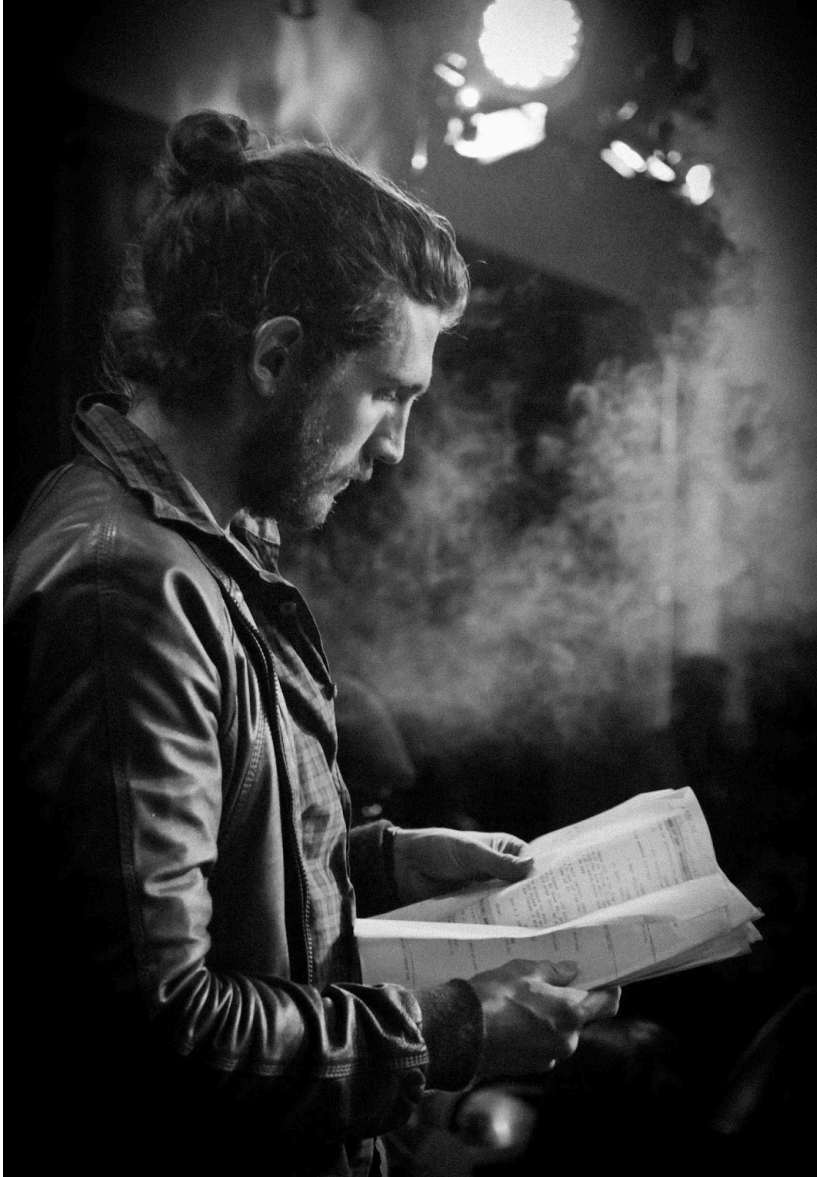
Jazz solo: Ron Cephas-Jones as Titus

Titus is shot entirely in black and white. Cattrall chose this aesthetic because he feels it reflects 'the classic iconography of Jazz music'. Wasn't he worried that it was too much of a cliché?

'That was the thing...I wanted to play with that. On one hand it is cliché but on the other hand we're shooting a man who's *not* a great Jazz musician. The story is about a loser -for want of a better word -so you have that tension. In another context there's the polarisation of black and white in the terms of the racial issues. In the texture of the image you're playing with this notion of blackness and whiteness.

'There's the poetry too of this man who is quite extreme. The nature of the saturated shooting is that without colour it means you're polarised between two [extremes]. I think Ron looks iconic as well. There's something absolutely beautiful about black and white photography. Because it's the original way film was shot something about it feels timeless. Unconsciously we think it has weight somehow.'

There's a lot of very potent imagery throughout the film especially involving water. This can be attributed more to Charlie's artistic vision than what was in the original script. He explains why, to him, water is the most important element in the film.



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(c) Christian McLaughlin

Some might argue that complaining about rampant materialism is the preserve of those who already have a lot. But Charlie believes the problem is pervasive and not just limited to a certain demographic.

'Everybody is vulnerable to it because we've all grown up inside that kind of reality. We're being faced not only with austerity in the short term but we're having the Prime Minister this week talking about how it is going to be a permanent fixture. Underneath that should be the question: what are the necessities of living? What provides meaning? You're a Christian, I'm a Buddhist. We both have a belief that there's greater meaning to life, that's never spoken about. So what is the aspiration?'

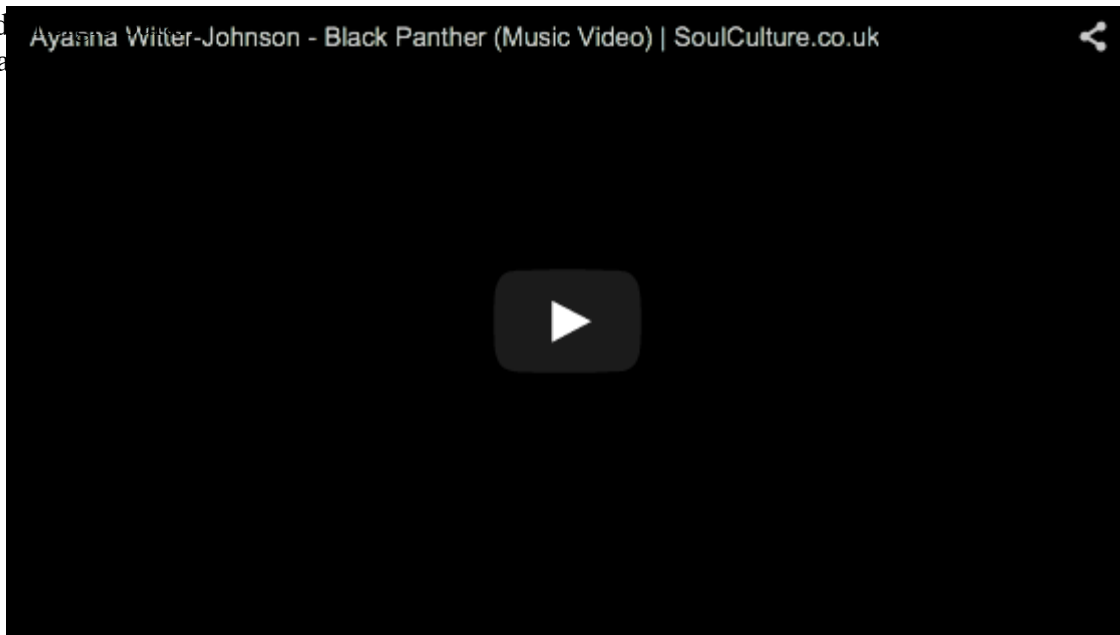
Cattrall sees parallels in the creative industries.

'When we have the desire for success as an artist-as a musician anyway-the overarching narrative is still 'The X-Factor', the charts, misogynistic imagery of women or limiting ideas of race. It's lowest common denominator. But "hey I can go to a nightclub and really get off to that music". Christian and I were listening to a song today that had a sick beat. The lyrics were horrific but we said to each other, could we get off to this music if the lyrics were really conscious?'

'[It's about] questioning why we do things. Not to the extent you get total inertia and no-one does anything but for me it's important to have that in your mind before you start a creative project. Otherwise potentially you're just being used.'

ceremony. The original plan was to do an ambitious trans-generational video for another song on Ayanna's forthcoming album [<http://www.ayannamusic.com/>] but time and budget constraints wouldn't allow. 'Black Panther' on the other hand was relatively simple to shoot. Once again Catrall opted for the monochrome look. Ayanna herself was an inspiration for this.

Économiseur d'écran
Cliquez pour la



'There's something about her that's timeless I think; she has this classic feel. She's conscious, man. And she's this hybrid; classically trained cellist and she also plays keys and sings like a soul singer. She won this competition in Harlem [*Ayanna was the first Brit to win 'Showtime At the Apollo'*] and that venue has such resonance of a bygone era. She stands out as being a bit of an anomaly. Her skin tone works beautifully in black and white-it works beautifully in colour as well...' he chuckles 'And there's 'black' in the song title too. All those elements together...'

Discussing Ayanna's video gets Charlie thinking about a great cultural oversight that in his own way - through his art- he seeks to redress.

'This might sound weird coming from a white, middle class British male-but I really feel there's not enough representation of the poetry of blackness. [It's limited] to musical biopics and slaves. Langston Hughes isn't spoken about that much, his poetry. What do we talk about culturally with blackness? We talk about Hip-Hop. It's almost elitist; artistically people can dismiss it relative to classical music say. It's like you're allowed to be in this area if you're black but why can't we discuss it in the context of William Shakespeare? There's a poetry of black artistry but often that's not spoken about.

'That's the thing I wanted to do with 'Titus' as well. It's like a celebration of that but also a love song to my friend Ron who I think is a poet. He started off in the Nuyorican Poetry Café in the East Village where people like Mos Def started. Malcolm X was a poet...these deep people with big ideas...I feel it's still not celebrated as this poetic [tradition]'

The problem, I point out, is that the Western perspective on history is very Eurocentric. Catrall agrees

'That's sad isn't it? It shouldn't matter what colour your skin is but it does which is unfortunate. I believe in Utopia where we don't need to even worry about these things but that is not the reality...'

'One idea is to do with a guy called Larry LeVan who was a big DJ in New York in the 1970s. Someone has asked me to do visuals for a dance show in February and a band just got in touch with me about a quite poetic music video; three music videos in one. I'm developing a film idea with a dancer in Portugal. I'm going to go and see him in the New Year. I'm at the exploratory stage with lots of stuff at the moment.'

For now whilst the news of the just-announced BIFA nominations settles in, an obviously chuffed Cattrall continues to busy himself with promoting 'Titus'.

'I just submitted it to the BAFTAs. I need to get a run in the cinema for seven days before the end of January and then we can be considered for the Best Newcomer Award. I'm meeting with sales agents and distributors at the moment. I'm trying to get it out to festivals and to get as many people to see it as possible...'

So has 'Titus' allowed Charlie to fully exorcise his Jazz obsession -on screen in any case...?

' I think so, yeah. Musically it might come back in terms of the soundtrack for a film. I don't know. We'll see...'

Posted 29th November 2013 by Tolita

Labels: [African-American](#), [Ayanna Witter-Johnson](#), [British Film](#), [Charlie Cattrall](#), [Christian McLaughlin](#), [Colonialism](#), [Director](#), [Jazz](#), [London Jazz Festival](#), [Nico Mensinga](#), [Racism](#), [Ron Cephas-Jones](#), [Slavery](#), [Titus](#), [Watching](#)

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