

'Snowfall' star: British Black actor finds success on American soil

LOS ANGELES, Jan 4, (AP) — Damson Idris transformed from his real life British-speaking Nigerian persona into a canny drug kingpin character with a West Coast accent on FX's popular crime drama "Snowfall." Idris made his presence felt as Franklin Saint, a young street-minded entrepreneur who was educated in an upper-class neighborhood, but determined to get into the drug game to take care of the people around him. Through the critically acclaimed show, his popularity has grown exponentially over the past four seasons.

Along with serving as a co-producer of season five due next year, Idris' breakthrough role landed him other opportunities on other projects such as television shows "The Twilight Zone" and "Black Mirror" along with films including "Farming" and Netflix's "Outside the Wire," starring him with Anthony Mackie.

"It's the foundation of my career," Idris said of "Snowfall," which was co-created by John Singleton, who died in 2019. The series focuses on the genesis of how crack cocaine became a rampant epidemic in Los Angeles' inner city neighborhoods in the 1980s.

"Sometimes, I talk as if I'm already 90 years old and I've seen my career," he said. "It's so weird. I think in 40, 50, 60 years, people will talk about and refer to (the series) and be like 'Oh man, I remember when he did that and look what he's doing now.' I think that's a remarkable thing. I love the show for that."

For his career-defining work, Idris has been named among The Associated Press' breakthrough entertainers of the year alongside Rachel

Zegler, Simu Liu, Adrienne Warren, Rauw Alejandro and more.

The Nigerian actor grew up in Peckham, south London, but he didn't know anything about the drug epidemic in the United States until he visited Los Angeles for the first time and saw Skid Row — an impoverished area inhabited by the homeless. He auditioned so well for the role that he said Singleton didn't know he was from London until "way later in the process."

Before Idris' rise, he said Singleton gave him advice about humility — a lesson that still sticks with him.

Empowered

"Everyone you meet on the way up, you're going to meet on the way down," he said. "So just be nice to everyone. That's something I'm learning and mastering today. I'm fortunate not only to be the lead of the show, but also to be a young producer. That could come with a lot of ego and a big head. But if anything, I'm even nicer now to everyone. That's something John taught me. He empowered people. That's something I strive to do. I'm learning so much every day."

In preparing for "Snowfall," Idris said his upbringing in Peckham helped him relate to the plight of Black people's struggle in South Central Los Angeles.

"There are so many categories that correlate: From single fathers (and mothers), to poverty, to drugs to crime to police brutality to racism," he said. "I definitely feel in the UK that there are similarities

between Black British culture to African American culture. I feel like my upbringing assisted with me understanding and having empathy towards people of that lifestyle in South Central."

For Idris, doing impersonations has been his calling card since he was a kid. His acting career unknowingly started when his family made him perform in front of them.

"You remember at the beginning of Eddie Murphy's 'Raw' and Samuel Jackson says 'That boy got talent'?" That was literally my upbringing," he recalled. "I didn't know what acting was, but I was impersonating these people from Martin (Lawrence) in 'Bad Boys' to whatever since I was 5 years old."

Idris, 30, is a part of a long line of British Black actors who have found success on American soil including Idris Elba, Daniel Kaluuya, David Oyelowo and John Boyega. He said acting is embedded at an early age for their culture by them going to the theater when "we're babies."

"I think when we see you guys on the screen, we are instantly locked in because we feel a connection," he said. "It's unfortunate that you guys don't get the opportunity to see our stuff, too. Most of the time when we come here, Americans think 'Oh, he's all tea and crumpets.' They think I live next door to the Queen. I don't. But that's changing."

In the future, Idris said he would love to someday portray Eddie Murphy or Sidney Poitier on screen and maybe a musician. He said next year will be a pivotal moment for his career.

Film

Variety



This aerial photo shows the Bonanza Creek Ranch in Santa Fe, N.M., on Oct. 23, 2021. Actor Alec Baldwin fired a prop gun on the set of a Western being filmed at the ranch on Oct. 21, killing the cinematographer, officials said. (AP)

Television

Capitol riot, 'Rust' and Shatner

Notable moments of 2021 on TV

By Lynn Elber and David Bauder

If a year can be accused of bait-and-switch, 2021 is fair game. It was reasonable to believe, or hope, that the pandemic would steadily recede in the rear-view mirror, that a White House transition might mean less political rancor, that America could honorably end its "forever war" in Afghanistan.

Television, which helped shape our expectations, was there to witness them being upended. It also was our window when racism met its match in court; when the "Star Wars" franchise proved its enduring power and Oprah Winfrey did the same; Capt. Kirk soared into space, and a movie production turned deadly.

Here are some of the year's defining TV moments from the perspective of The Associated Press' television and media writers.

Capitol chaos

Every four years, Congress' certification of the presidential electoral vote is so routine it barely merits a footnote in the media. Not this year. Egged on by soon-to-be former President Donald Trump, a crowd of angry demonstrators demanding that the counting be stopped surrounded the US Capitol on Jan. 6 and broke into the building. Lawmakers scattered, police were beaten and a woman was shot as she tried to climb through a window that led to the House floor. At first, images captured the horror largely from a distance. But countless cameras were watching — including those held by rioters — and as the days, weeks and months went by, new video emerged giving a fresh look at what happened.

'Rust' tragedy

Hollywood make-believe has turned deadly before. But on the set of "Rust" in October it was a well-known actor, Alec Baldwin, who held the antique gun that killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounded director Joel Souza. The first wave of frenzied media coverage focused on photos, including one of Baldwin doubled over in anguished reaction to Hutchins' death and another, undated, of armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed striking a pose with two guns in hand. But it was a snapshot posted by Hutchins' husband that conveyed the wrenching loss: In it, a relaxed, sunlit Hutchins stands with one arm wrapped around her young son, the other raised to the brim of a jaunty hat.

War's aftermath

America's two-decade war and reconstruction effort in

Afghanistan, which cost thousands of US and Afghan lives and billions of dollars, ended in chaos and more death in August. As the remaining American troops were evacuated and those who had aided them desperately sought a way out, there were flashbacks to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Then, US military and other helicopters scrambled to airlift Vietnamese allies to safety. Among the indelible images this time: a father in a surging crowd handing his baby to soldiers over a razor-wire fence. Once again, Americans lamented the outcome of US policies.

First-class ticket

In the original space race, astronauts had the right stuff and the USA and USSR were rivals. In this summer's version, passengers had the right bank account or sway to get a seat, and a trio of billionaires — Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Richard Branson — competed for space-tourism supremacy. Observers carped about galactic-sized egos and privilege, but TV couldn't resist the thundering rocket launches or William Shatner, 90, wisecracking his way where no "Star Trek" actor had gone before.

Chauvin on trial

Relief. That was the immediate emotion for many Americans in April when a jury found Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin guilty of murder for kneeling on the neck of George Floyd. For three weeks, television viewers followed the trial more closely than any other proceeding in years. The prosecution's repeated revisit to the disturbing video of Chauvin's refusal to move, despite the pleading of Floyd and bystanders, reopened a wound in the nation's psyche that hadn't really closed. The fear of what a different verdict might bring led to the collective exhale the verdict inspired.

Oprah, Harry and Meghan

An interview with a photogenic young couple who gave up their rarefied royal life in Britain could have been merely a gossipy diversion. But with Oprah Winfrey doing the questioning, and Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, appearing ready and willing to be candid, the conversation proved newsworthy. One bombshell was delivered by Meghan about son Archie, now 2: Someone in the palace had wondered aloud how "dark his skin might be when he's born." Winfrey blurted out, "What? Hold up," reinforcing the power of the exchange between two Black women. At the time of the interview Meghan was pregnant with daughter Lili, who was born in June.

Vaccine's promise

Roll up your sleeve! In the early days of 2021, television screens were filled with images of people across the country getting shots of the COVID-19 vaccine. After the world had been altered by death and fear, it seemed a sign that the pandemic would soon be over and life would return to normal. Millions of people were vaccinated, but many more weren't, out of personal cautiousness or the unexpected view that refusal was a political statement. Between that and the emergence of new variants, hope for a quick end to the coronavirus faded.

'Jeopardy!'

TV's smartest game show was clueless when it mattered: finding a successor for beloved host Alex Trebek. "Jeopardy!" made executive producer Mike Richards the surprise pick in August, then later that month bid him farewell because of unsavory past podcast remarks. Mayim Bialik, set to host prime-time "Jeopardy!" specials, filled in with an assist from an all-time champ, Ken Jennings. Stellar contestants Matt Amodio and Amy Schneider also came to the rescue, reaffirming the late Trebek's mantra that players, not the host, make the show. Trebek died in November 2020, shortly after taping his final shows.

Rittenhouse verdict

"Not guilty." Five times the phrase was repeated in court, and at the last one, Kyle Rittenhouse convulsed into sobs and his legs gave way. The November verdict in a Wisconsin courtroom ended the 18-year-old's murder trial, the jury believing he acted in self-defense in shooting three people during protests over racial injustice. Like so many things today, his trial became a proxy for political warfare, this time over guns and justice. Within days, Rittenhouse was telling his story to Tucker Carlson on Fox News Channel.

We Love Luke

It was a big reveal unequaled by any in reality TV. On "The Mandalorian" season two finale, The Child aka Grogu was in the clutches of Moff Gideon, backed by the Dark Troopers. Then a hooded, lightsaber-wielding Jedi emerged from an X-Wing spacecraft, saved the day and revealed his identity — young Luke Skywalker, as portrayed by a computer age-adjusted Mark Hamill, R2-D2 at his side. There were whoops of joy from "Star Wars" enthusiasts, and the universe smiled. The episode arrived in late December 2020, yes, but it's timeless, as is Hamill's response to fans. (AP)

STAMFORD, Conn: Sky Sports News has been dropped from US television following the shutdown of the NBC Sports Network.

SSN, the leading outlet of British and European soccer news on US television, was broadcast on Fox Soccer Channel for many years, then was dropped when NBC took over US broadcast rights to England's Premier League from Fox. SSN returned on March 1, 2019.

Premier League highlights are often broadcast on SSN, and Fox no longer had the rights to show those clips.

NBC started airing simulcasts for one or two hours on most weekdays at 11 am Eastern time starting March 1, 2019, after Comcast, the parent company of NBCUniversal, took control of Sky. NBCUniversal shut down the NBC Sports Network on Saturday, shifting many Premier League broadcasts to the USA Network.

NBC Sports said Monday that SSN is not currently on its broadcast or streaming schedule. (AP)

OKLAHOMA CITY: A federal judge in Oklahoma on Monday set a Jan 28 date for the resentencing of "Tiger King" Joe Exotic.

US District Judge Scott Palk set the resentencing for 10 am and granted the defendant's request to be transported to Oklahoma City for the hearing.

A federal appeals court in July ruled that Joe Exotic, whose real name is Joseph Maldonado-Passage, should get a shorter sentence. The US Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit in Denver determined the trial court wrongly treated two murder-for-hire convictions separately in calculating his prison term.

Maldonado-Passage was sentenced in January 2020 to 22 years in prison. But the appeals court said the court should have calculated his advisory sentencing range between 17 1/2 years and just under 22 years in prison, rather than between just under 22 years and 27 years in prison.

Maldonado-Passage, who maintains his innocence, also was sentenced for killing five tigers, selling tiger cubs and falsifying wildlife records.

Last month, attorneys for the former Oklahoma zookeeper said he was delaying cancer treatment until after his resentencing. Maldonado-Passage announced in November that he has prostate cancer, and he was transferred from a federal medical center in Fort Worth,

Texas, to a federal medical center in Butner, North Carolina.

In a separate action, a couple who succeeded Maldonado-Passage in operating the Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park and Tiger King Park agreed to surrender their rights to 97 animals of endangered or threatened species and 47 other animals covered by



Lowe

Joe Exotic

the Animal Welfare Act.

Jeffrey and Lauren Lowe, who are former friends of Maldonado-Passage, also agreed in a Dec 23 consent decree filed in federal court in Muskogee, Oklahoma, to never again exhibit animals.

Federal agents seized the 97 endangered animals, including 68 big cats and a jaguar, from

Tiger King Park in Thackerville, Oklahoma, in two seizures last May and August. Federal officials accused the Lowes of harming and harassing the animals.

The series explores the deeply interconnected community of big cat conservationists and collectors in America, and the private zoos and animal sanctuaries they

have set up for the care and public display of these animals.

The series' primary subject in the first season is "Tiger King" Joe Exotic, the eccentric owner of the G.W. Zoo in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, and follows his bitter years-long feud with Carole Baskin, CEO of Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, Florida. (Agencies)