

## Reel Talk with Film DC Interviews MPTD Director Pierre Bagley

**Leslie Green:** Welcome to "Reel Talk with Film DC." This is your host, Leslie Green, Director of Communications for the DC office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC film office.

We're here today to talk with actually our director and also esteemed film maker and producer, Pierre Bagley. Thank you for joining us here today.

**Pierre Bagley:** Well, thank you for having me since I've already been had, I guess.

[laughter]

**Leslie:** Right, exactly. Just to get our listeners familiar with whom you are and how you came to DC, how did you get your start in the industry?

**Pierre:** You mean how I got into the whole business?

**Leslie:** Mm-hmm.

**Pierre:** In a short piece of this, I basically am a good example of Affirmative Action, which basically means a person who's looking for opportunity. So, I understand opportunity.

I was a minimum wage college student who got hired for \$1.65 an hour and this was during the Nixon era. So, I saw how powerful media was. I was actually a pre-med student, so I took this job literally because it was closer than the other job I had which was child development.

I was always a believer in opportunity and also, I saw education as a means to an end, not an end up on itself. When I saw the power of television, I really let my scholarship go and said, "I really want to pursue this because it was exciting as it is today."

**Leslie:** Wow, and you were a pre-med student, right?

**Pierre:** That's correct. I was a full ride pre-med scholarship student who had graduated from high school at 16, so I was really hustling to get to be a doctor because I was about being whatever I could be, as fast as I could be it.

**Leslie:** What made you suspend your film making career and decide to come to DC and be the director of our agency?

**Pierre:** Well, sometimes it's all about what success looks like. I just finished a major motion picture right before I'd gotten this offer and was actually working on my second film.

I'll have to be honest, Leslie, the industry, it was as exciting as I thought it would be when I got to direct and produce my first major motion picture. I felt a little empty. I just thought I'd just deal with it. Maybe I thought maybe I was too hyped up about it.

After I got the call from the mayor, I came to DC, because I really didn't think I'd never had a government job. Frankly, haven't had a job since 1978. I came here and I could feel the energy. For me, it's about energy. I felt the energy of the city. I felt the competence and the passion in the mayor, and I thought I needed to be a part of it. This became the most important job I've ever had.

**Leslie:** Pierre, tell us how you're using the skills and the talents and the unique background that you have as a filmmaker to serve as the director of MPTD.

**Pierre:** I match that to what's available here in DC. When I say to people, "I want to be in the business, that's the only business I know -- is making films and collaborating and making something." This is a town of activism. It's probably the most activist city on the planet. Because that's what democracy is about.

It was fairly easy for me, because ultimately filmmaking or media-making, gaining, it's all about collaboration. Even though people say that doesn't happen in DC, it really does happen, to the nth degree.

People collaborate. They may not agree. But they collaborate to get to that, and they don't fight and they don't kill each other.

I thought that that energy and my natural sense of being a collaborator was quite natural. When I said I wanted to put the film office in the business, what we found is just a gazillion partners out here who want to collaborate with us, who want us to help be the nexus to the industry.

The industry is whatever they need, whether it's writing, producing, funding, ideas. Sometimes it's just people who don't even know each other here in DC that need to know each other.

**Leslie:** What is your vision for the Film Office? After you complete your tenure here, what, in a perfect world, would this agency look like and our local filmmaking community as well?

**Pierre:** Good question. I think that we have to be a partner to the industry. It's really funny, because I think this motion picture agency, from anyone that I've ever worked with -- as you know. I lived in Los Angeles and made my film in New Orleans and did a lot of work in New York.

While they're very robust industries, the Film Office doesn't have the stature that this agency does, because of the unique composition of the District of Columbia government. I want this agency to be a partner to the industry, because it can do things that only it can uniquely do. It is the nexus between all the agencies. It can help in funding. It can help make things happen. So it's a great partner.

When I leave -- number one, when and if I ever leave the agency, I am not leaving DC. Because I want this agency to be the kind of agency that I want to work with, which is how I'm used to working.

That will be like success looks like for me. When we can go into the agency and if we help on a location, if we need help finding an investor, if they can make a call to a distributor for us, or if there's a permitting issue that really needs the attention of this office.

Who can get to anybody a heck of a lot quicker than Spielberg could do frankly? And have more ability to get it done than any producer because we are part of this government? I don't think that's a huge goal, because I can see the industry really wants us to that. Everyone here is really passionate about making that happen.

**Leslie:** I agree, and what do you think is the most rewarding part of your job so far? I know you've only been here for six months. But I'm sure that over those six months, and we've had these conversations that you've felt like you've been here for six years, you've had a great experience so far. What's been the most rewarding part for you?

**Pierre:** Well when I say I'm a collaborator what that means is you want to be a part of something. It doesn't always mean you can be. In LA you could be part of a little, tiny billions of things, but you don't really feel hooked up to the community. So every day it is so exciting to feel a part of something. What happened instantly here is that people want you to be a part of something. It is sort of innate here in DC.

The best part for me is every day, whether it's a big deal, or young filmmaker who's our filmmaker of the month, just seeing how we can make a difference. For me, I'm one of those people that I would do this for free if someone else would pay my bills. This is what gets me going.

Every day those little successes, and feeling significant in filmmaking and the process of making things happen, and also breaking new boundaries, which really isn't about us. It's about the people we collaborate with.

They're the ones who break the boundaries, we just help facilitate that. I see that happening every day, and that keeps me going. I have to tell you, if you see my red eyes every day, I don't sleep.

**Leslie:** Right, right. I can totally tell that, but it's a good not having sleep. You feel like you're making a difference. As any job has, or any career, you're going to have challenges as well. What do you think has been the most challenging part of your time here?

**Pierre:** I'm a private sector guy, which means I've never worked for a government. I really haven't worked for anyone else for over 35 years. I've been the guy to go out and make my own paychecks, and pay my people, and make it happen.

Now is the antithesis of that. I'm now a government employee who has a lot of rules and regulations for a lot of reasons that I agree, not necessarily is it that important that I agree, but I happen to agree because I really am a big fan of this democracy that allowed our people to be where we are today.

I'm really hooked up with that. I'm a '60s kid, so I understand activism and the results of that. The tough part, and it's not so tough because this is a great government, it's a very progressive government. It's a government of the people, so I don't really know any government people to be honest with you. I know the mayor, I know you, I know Tim, I know my staff, and we break it down to a personal level. Having to work by the rules in these rules are sometimes I don't understand can be a little frustrating, but it's the price of admission.

When you're making a film for a client or a commercial, there's always a thousand challenges that you don't necessarily understand or agree with. It's really not different, it's just for me understanding all the pieces when we did something, the consequences of that, was probably the ignorance that I had and still have about the consequences of what we're trying to do. So I'm a little more patient, not much, but a little more patient about the process.

**Leslie:** Right. Again, we know you've only been here for six months, but I do believe that you've started to make a difference so far. In your eyes, what do you see as your biggest accomplishment?

**Pierre:** I see it every day. I must take three or four meetings a week of people who either have left DC or were going to leave DC, or who are coming back because they want to plug into this energy. It's funny, because I'm plugging into the energy that they should have been plugged into.

It's not about me, it's really about helping them find that energy, to say, "Look guys, we don't do anything by ourselves. I need everybody to come and say, 'This is what I'm trying to do.' and let us help be the nexus."

For me, I feel like we're doing that one project at a time. If you think about Hollywood you probably only talk about five people or five projects with all the big Hollywood. One person can make a huge difference.

I'm talking about the kinds of projects, we've got a lot of bright, competent, passionate people in this town, so I am confident we're going to hit more than half a dozen successes, and we only need one or two, and if we have dozens of them, so much the better.

I see that, so it reinforces that we're doing some things right by people who say, "I'm not leaving right now, because this is an exciting time," and we need that positive energy from them.

**Leslie:** I think that the Pigmental deal that we just secured a couple of months ago was also a big accomplishment. We haven't seen anything like that come to the District in a very, very long time, if at all. Just tell our listeners a little bit about that Pigmental deal and how it came to be.

**Pierre:** It's funny, Leslie, Pigmental is an animation company. They're a startup, but in the business everything's a startup, because you tend to start up a project and then when it's over that's over, unless you're a big studio. Pigmental is a vision of a few principle people who lived in LA, but mostly are European, who have pulled together some of the best animators in the world, "Despicable Me," "Frozen," "Iron Man," "Transformers," you name it.

What was really cool about it, was once we were able to introduce them to the energy of DC, as you know we don't have much money and no incentive funding, but they saw what we saw. That's why they're coming to DC, but with about \$240 million of total financing between production and distribution.

It is foundational. It is huge. And the consequences of Pigmental being here will be, it's probably like Warner Brothers coming to Hollywood or MGM back in the start of that, because it's really not just a project. They bring so much synergy with them when they come that it should open the

doors and create opportunity, and also make people aware that DC's more than just a political broadcasting media town.

**Leslie:** Sure. We're going to switch gears a little bit and talk a little bit about your career before you came here. You spoke a little bit about "From the Rough," the movie starring Taraji Henson. What was it like working with her and the other stars? There was a star-studded cast on that film. What was it like working with them?

**Pierre:** It was wonderful. When you're doing good work, I guess because no one sets out to make a bad film, when you start it, it's really about, "Can you really sense how we're working together?" because the truth is none of us really knew each other. It was like, the first day, because what I found out on the set, everyone had bet that this, what they thought was a first time director, was going to go in and muddle up the whole day.

The truth was is that the first day is the horrible day for most films, and the first day we were two pages ahead. That's when people said, "This is fun. This can be exciting," because to me this is not just about the work. It's about the collaboration, and we all get to play act. I'm trying to to be a director. She's being Coach Starks.

We had the wonderful Michael Clarke Duncan. People came to this project for all the right reasons. We all made a little money. It wasn't a big film, an \$8.5 million project. By Hollywood standards that's a fairly small film, but you knew you had something when people were really letting it go, and you would have chills when you say cut. I was moved by the performances. You can't make someone do that. You can't direct someone to do it, but you know it when it happens, and that was happening every day.

**Leslie:** Right.

**Pierre:** We were moving so fast because they were doing their best work, and I was pretty competent. When we had the best take, I was ready to move on.

**Leslie:** Right. Being here in DC, now, you're not just the director of the film office, you come here with a filmmaker's eye, so what do you like most about DC from a filmmaker's perspective, and if you were asked the question, "Why should I come to DC as a filmmaker?" what would you say?

**Pierre:** This is a town that's in a renaissance, and it's, I think, the first renaissance of this country. It all started here, and all the big things, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Gay Rights, all of the big things that happen in the planet happen here, but for some reason entertainment hasn't had its renaissance.

DC is the place for that to happen. The change in this city, everyone whether I talk to natives or not, everyone talks about this new energy, that is the stuff of creative energy.

What you have here is this amazing time that DC is coming to its own, politically, as the world's trying to figure war/no war, how to save the planet. What to do with people and their liberation. That is the stuff of Hemingway and Shakespeare. I'm not trying to be too heavy here, but at the

end of the day, these are great stories, and the people who live here are the catalysts for great execution.

And also as we know, I'm making you DC people have a big head, but they're very smart people here, which means that they're engaged and they care. If I would say what are the stuff of creative fabric, all that's the stuff that's a great canvas to work from.

I'm shocked that DC hasn't been discovered way before I got here. I'm not saying I discovered it, but the things that you look for that you have to try to go and find very desperately in LA and New York, they're just here waiting for their assignment.

Our job and I love it, because I can be agnostic about it. I'm not trying to get paid. I'm not trying to run something. My job is just to be facilitators and to make everyone here understand we can have a huge impact, because like air traffic controllers, we don't have to fly the plane to land the plane. We just have to say, "Stay in your lane, and keep it going."

**Leslie:** The great thing about DC is that it's more than just a monument. It's more than just being a political or a government town. That's one of the things that I know you're committed to making sure that people know that we're a city of more than just that. What advice would you give to someone who's just getting started in the industry, perhaps as a filmmaker, or a producer, or a director, like yourself?

**Pierre:** If you're DC-based, I'd say write what you know. DC is just a canvas, and now it can be any kind of a canvas, "Harry Met Sally." It can be a wonderful drama. It could be a horror film. Anything that exists can happen here. We don't have to necessarily shoot everything here, it just to be conceived here. You don't shoot everything in LA or New York. If it's James Bond you shoot all over the world.

But the intrigue, and the characters, and what motivates them, you think about who our neighbors are. They could work at the NSA. They could work in the Obama Administration. They could work for the EPA. They could work for the streets, and you see these men and women getting up, when we're sleeping on a snow day, and they're out there making it happen, so we can move, and so the city can move, and in this case, the world moves.

I think that is what film making and film makers have to think about in a place like DC, is that it's really the 360 of what the energy of life is about.

**Leslie:** So to close this out, can you tell our listeners about any big projects that the DC film office is working on or would like to work on? I'm sure we have a wish list of activities that you would like to share.

**Pierre:** Well, I've tried to use the same four buckets that were the challenges for this city meaning, making it easier for external production to happen and for people to navigate this city.

We've got some real bread and butter issue that, for me, is just as important is picking up toll. I think we're starting to mitigate that. We're watching all the agencies work together, not that they never did. Somebody's got to be the conductor.

For them, I understand the park services may not be our focus, may not be what they're looking to do but when we engage them and say, it's Tim or it's Ray who says, "We have a plan who's trying to do X."

I think that really matters. They work in concert with the other agencies so that it can just happen. I think that's important. I think building an infrastructure here so that the next film making generation and the current film making generation can get to their dreams without having to leave here.

We just need a few pieces. We will get incentives. We will get it right. We'll get studios here. We need a little bit more post production. Those are two buckets.

The third bucket is I think we need investment here. We need an external private sector source to say, "Make an investment here just like you do in LA." You've got bankers and investors who invest in projects.

The final piece is the distribution which I think is naturally here when you get those other three pieces working. That's the bread and butter.

The big things will happen. Pigmental will help us make that happen. It's just a bigger example of that. I think there's some big special events that I think should be in this town. I don't have to repeat them but if you look at the "Washington Post," article, I think, when I first got here.

I think the producers who do these big events have missed an audience because LA is fun, it's exciting. It's been done so many times.

DC is such a wonderful background for the world because it is a global city. So, if I was producing something, if I was doing "Scandal," or, "House of Cards," I would really want to do feel this. It's like music or food.

You can fake it and people know you're faking it. Even though they may not know that street's in Baltimore or Cleveland, there's an inauthenticity to it.

I think we have to help make that happen. I think that people want to do more here. Anything and everything can happen in this city. I'm really committed the next six months, we're going to really try to get to through all of that.

**Leslie:** Absolutely. So, is there anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners that we have not discussed so far that you think they should know about?

**Pierre:** No, I just would say that we're hearing from a lot of different film makers and want to be film makers and producers, just keep coming to us. We can only be great with their collaboration.

I say, "we," not our office but this marketplace and this destination. We need their creative juices.

It always makes something better. Just because it hadn't happen before, doesn't mean it can't be done.

As you know, my background, any time I see something that hadn't been done before, I see that as opportunity. So, for us, there's a lot of opportunity.

**Leslie:** Absolutely. We're super excited to see what the, however many years, are going to bring to the local film making community and really just the entertainment industry, in general. We're part of the entertainment industry.

Again, this is Leslie Green signing off. Please don't forget to join us on the Web at [film.dc.gov](http://film.dc.gov), like us on Facebook on [facebook.com/filmdc](https://facebook.com/filmdc), and follow us on Twitter at [dcfilmoffice](https://twitter.com/dcfilmoffice). Catch you next time.