

Perhaps best known for his portrayal of the no-nonsense, leather-adorned detective of the 1970s *Shaft* films, Richard Roundtree now stars with Brendan Fraser in Walt Disney Pictures' live-action family comedy, *George of the Jungle* (opening nationwide July 18). In the hilarious new movie Richard plays Kwame, the African guide of an ill-fated and inept safari that treads deep into the forest of the legendary *White Ape* (a.k.a. George of the Jungle, played by Fraser).

Over the past twenty years as a leading actor in both feature films and television, Roundtree continues to display his versatility. In this latest role as Kwame in *George of the Jungle*, Roundtree combines his forte for playing strong characters with his wildly creative imagination for making the character his own.

"Kwame's a leader," Roundtree says of his film character. "I gave him an unusual accent that is a cross between Zimbabwean and Jamaican; sounding like Bob Marley meets Desmond Tutu with this unusual Zim-Jam accent. You can't quite figure out where he comes from. But you know that Kwame is not from New York!"

In reality, Roundtree is a gentle man who emanates a quiet wisdom and an unexpected familiarity. His tranquil warmth and easygoing nature makes him seem like a friend in a room full of strangers. He is one-part beloved folk hero, one-part seductive ladies' man, but 100% genuine nice guy.

Born in New Rochelle, New York, Roundtree was raised in a strict family where he knew he was loved despite his parents' firm belief that "if you spare the rod, you spoil the child."

Growing up in what he refers to as "the upper lower middle class," Roundtree had almost everything he wanted materially. His father worked at many jobs, while his mother served as a housekeeper in order to provide the best they possibly could for the family.

During his years at New Rochelle High School, Roundtree was captain of the track team, a member of the equestrian club and he played end on the school's football team. By the time he graduated, he had been voted "The Most Popular," "The Best-Dressed" and "The Best Looking" senior. He reflects by saying, "When you're that popular, you're over-compensating. You don't have a self. I was everybody's good friend. I gave a lot of parties and the kids would always wind up at my house. The door was always open."

During his sophomore year at Southern Illinois University on a football scholarship however, his dreams of becoming a pro ball player ended. "I knew my days were numbered. The writing's on the wall when you get cleat marks on your forehead and in the middle of your eyebrows." Again, Roundtree lets out his signature full-bodied laugh which invites a shared chuckle.

Upon leaving college, Roundtree worked as a chauffeur, a gas station attendant, a mechanic, a Good Humor man, and a cab driver, to name just a few of his short lived careers. It wasn't until he worked as a clothing salesman at the upscale Barney's New York that the seeds of his eventual acting career were planted. "Models and actors used to come into the store and say, 'Why don't you try modeling?'" Eventually I put together a portfolio, did a couple of jobs

and got hired to do the Ebony Fashion Fair.Ó

That annual event took Roundtree on a whirlwind road trip covering 70 cities in 90 days. It was this adventure that re-ignited the same exhilarating feelings he experienced as a "Saturday afternoon hero" on the gridiron. "Coming out in front of a live audience the first couple of nights and hearing that applause—it was very addictive, a throwback to playing football in the stadium," he says. "It was like getting praise for carrying the ball, but I was now relating to people as I had never done before. People were responding to me as an individual, which was an even heavier trip than team recognition. I figured I could further that feeling if I had dialogue.Ó

When the Ebony Fashion Fair arrived in Los Angeles, Roundtree was introduced to Bill Cosby and the producer of the television series "I Spy" who suggested that Roundtree go back to New York and study acting seriously. He took the advice, and joined the prestigious Negro Ensemble Company. "I got to do one play with the company entitled "Man Better Man," a West Indian musical," Roundtree remembers. "I had one word of dialogue in three hours "Right!" Esther Rolle used to tease me about that because the second week into the play, I blanked on my one word! She had to punch me in the rib "Right!"

ÓÓ

After acting in many off-Broadway productions and commercials, Roundtree landed the leading role in "The Great White Hope" at the Society Hill Playhouse in Philadelphia. "It seemed every play I did was more beneficial to me than a whole year's study with a teacher. I grew tremendously while doing those few plays.Ó

Then, in 1971, Roundtree was catapulted from struggling actor to box office superstar when he landed the coveted role of John Shaft in MGM's blockbuster "Shaft.Ó This heavy duty hero was so enormously popular that it inspired two sequels, "Shaft's Big Score" and "Shaft in Africa.Ó

Although Roundtree is grateful for the "Shaft" films and the tremendous exposure it brought him, he now chooses roles that demystify the notion that he is capable of portraying only Shaft-type characters. "People want to see me as the Shaft character. I am that, but a lot of other things too," he says.

To his slight dismay, there was one change he made to the Kwame character in "George of the Jungle" that he sorely wishes he hadn't. With numerous interjections of laughter, he explains about shaving his head for the role. "I will never shave my head again! It has been four months and my hair still hasn't grown back! From now on I will do only so much for my art! No one asked me to do it. It was my choice.Ó

Despite his "bad hair day" lasting months, Roundtree had a great time working on the film. "I had never heard of the original television series from the '70s, but the Disney project was really appealing to me due to the fact that I'd be doing a family film. I love not playing the straight ahead cop that I've played so many times. Being the father of two young daughters (6-year-old Morgan, and 9-year-old Taylor) I can't take my little kids to see a lot of films. I was excited to do this film because it's family oriented. The fact that my kids can see it is just great. It's also a film that adults will really enjoy, too.Ó

Roundtree recalls happily what it was like during the shooting of the film. "I really enjoyed working with Sam Weisman (the director). He is such a great director and able to maintain control of such an immense project. I get tired just thinking of his long days. He did an incredible job. And it was great working with Brendan Fraser (who plays George), Leslie Mann (who plays Ursula Stanhope), and Thomas Haden Church (who plays Lyle Vandergroot)."

These days, Richard is a self-confessed "golf fanatic" and no longer the equestrian he once was. He has passed the reigns of his passion for horses over to his daughters who have become very accomplished English-style riders considering their young ages. "I stopped riding horses when all the bills started coming in for my wife's horses, my daughters' horses, riding lessons, food for the horses, grooming, and so on. And it's not just our five horses! This house is a critter haven—we also have two dogs, three cats, fish, 100s of bird feeders, coyotes, raccoons, oh, you wouldn't believe it here—and when I see the vet truck pull up ..." He stops torturing himself with this accounting as if to say, "Okay, I surrender!" Looking on the bright side he adds, "It seems like the only things that George of the Jungle has that we don't are an eight ton elephant and a capuchin monkey!"

Without a doubt, Richard Roundtree is a man who is absolutely in love with his family. As his own father did with him, Roundtree does everything in his power to provide the best for his wife and children—even if that includes turning his house into a zoo.

With all the mouths that Roundtree has to feed, it is no wonder that he works as hard as he does. In the past years, his credits have included films such as "City Heat," "Man Friday," "An Eye for an Eye," "Once Upon a Time ... When We Were Colored," "Seven," "T. Rex," and several television series. Roundtree can also be seen this summer in the film "Steel," in which he plays a crumudgeonly sculptor who acts as a mentor to Shaquille O'Neal's crime-fighter character. For the small screen, Roundtree recently starred in the Fox Television pilot "413 Hope Street," and in a special episode of "Profiler" which will air this fall.

With all of the success that Richard Roundtree has enjoyed during his career, it seems as if his most fulfilling roles are as a real-life Dr. Dolittle and as a loving and devoted husband and father. The real Richard Roundtree is, without a doubt, quite a character.