

Writer/director Reginald Hudlin discusses his latest film, *Safety* and looks back at his extensive career...

Words: Mark Searby

**S**hortly before Christmas 2020, with the world in the grip of another wave of that thing, Walt Disney Pictures debuted an uplifting and inspiring film on its Disney+ streaming service. A film that showed those who watched it that anyone, no matter their age, sex or race, can triumph against adversity. It was perfect timing, because who couldn't use a feel-good movie after the last year or two?

*Safety* tells the true story of Ray McElrathbey, a Black student accepted to Clemson University as part of its American Football scholarship programme. While trying to balance his campus life between football and studies, Ray secretly houses his younger brother Fahmarr in his dormitory room. That's because child services is looking to re-home Fahmarr as their mother had entered a rehabilitation clinic.

Ray, while trying to keep Fahmarr a secret, begins to struggle with his college courses and on the field. That is until he meets fellow student Kaycee, who helps him balance his life in ways McElrathbey could never have imagined.

It's a production written for the screen by Nick Santora, a writer and producer mainly known for his work on TV crime shows such as *Law & Order*, *Breakout Kings* and *Prison Break*. The job of directing fell to Reginald Hudlin, a writer/producer/director

whose career has been going strong since appearing on the scene with his breakthrough hit *House Party* in 1990. Since then he's directed films such as *Boomerang*, *The Great White Hype* and *Marshall*. And he explained to me why he wanted to direct the film: "I hadn't made a movie like *Safety* in a while and I liked working with young actors and also making a movie about sports."

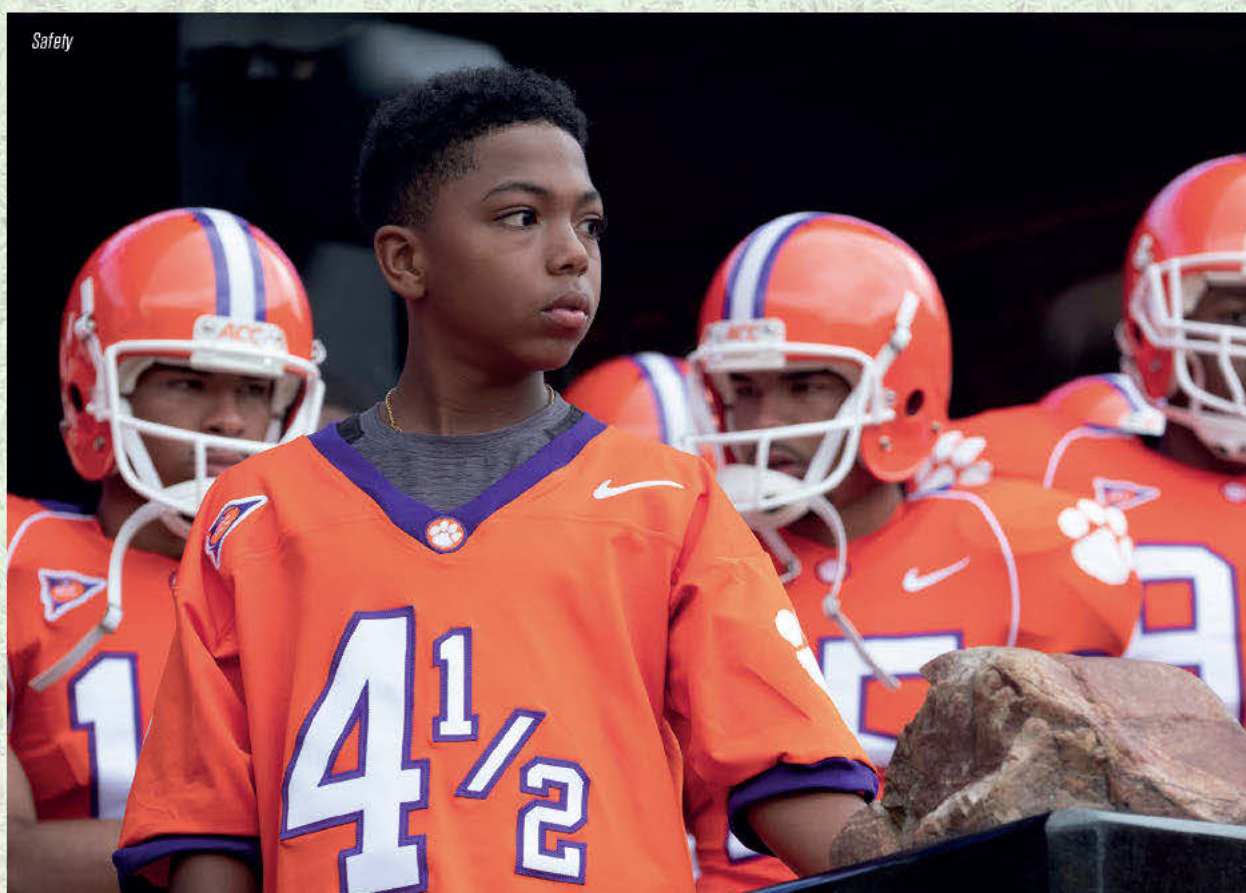
Having spent his formative years watching National Football League films where the sports footage was slowed down to be able to see every move, twist and tackle, it was partially those official NFL videos that inspired Hudlin to try his hand at filmmaking in the first place.

### Close-up

*Safety* features a number of intense American Football scenes including a big finale where the Clemson Tigers take on their bitter rivals the Florida State Seminoles. Many films about the sport have used real footage from the games or restaged it in front of paid extras. Hudlin and his cast and crew chose neither of those, and instead shot during the half-time of one of the Clemson Tigers' real games.

"It was a very intense process," Hudlin admitted. "Usually when people film things during the game they have the whole of half-time. We had half of half-time."





If that wasn't enough pressure for Hudlin and his cast, they only had one attempt at filming four different plays during that half-time break.

"We practised for weeks. After the actors practised, we practised with the cameras to ensure they were all really tight. It was very much like choreographing a dance, and the cameramen and women are also dancers along with the actors on-camera."

So on-point was their half-time filming that they didn't need the full ten minutes as they managed to wrap everything up in seven and a half. "We told the actors 'there is no mess up. There are no do-overs. Don't twist your ankle [laughs].' They just had to nail it."

## Meanings

However, this film is more than just a story about succeeding at sports. *Safety* is a look at people overcoming impossible obstacles. While Ray is very much a good

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student, it's the story of his brother Fahmarr being trapped in an unfair system, where he's basically being removed from his family and thrown into an unfamiliar home. The film really hits hard about kids, and especially those of colour, being swallowed up and spat out by a system that just isn't capable of making decisions based on an individual child. It's a one size fits all type approach, and that's what Ray is afraid of when it's said his little brother will go into the child services system for a short while. He knows that it might well be more than that: it could be his whole childhood. That's when big brother decides to take matters into his own hands.

Requiring someone who could give off the macho football vibe while also capturing a shy, almost introverted feel, Hudlin eventually found that special person to play Ray McElrathbey in the shape of up and coming actor Jay Reeves. "You just have to know when someone has the goods and that is, fortunately, a talent I have," Hudlin says, "I can spot someone even before they manifest it. So I had 100% confidence in Reeves."

This was the first lead role for Reeves, and Hudlin was extremely pleased with the performance he got. "The lead actor has to also be the team leader. He stepped up to the plate and did a fantastic job."





Safety

## Authentic

One of the reasons *Safety* feels much more realistic in terms of its storytelling is because the real Ray McElrathbey was involved heavily in the creative process from start to finish. Hudlin spoke with him constantly, and if something crossed the line in terms of keeping Ray's story real then he had no qualms in telling Hudlin.

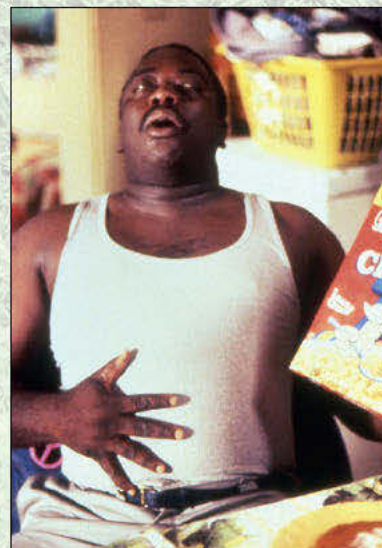
It wasn't just at a script level McElrathbey was involved though. He also helped the actors, especially Reeves who he took under his wing when it came to football training. Initially, Hudlin and his team had brought in separate trainers, but once they had finished their session for the day McElrathbey would pull Reeves aside and give him the real work-out.

"That was a whole new level of hell [laughs]," explains Hudlin, "They became close, and [Reeves] absorbed him and who he was and how he did things."

Over the closing credits of *Safety*, the episode of *Oprah* featuring Ray McElrathbey plays out. "There's something about appearing on *Oprah* that feels like an achievement in itself. It also confirmed that this is a true story for the audience," Hudlin explains.

Disney clearly has enough financial power to license *Oprah* footage to be included in a feature film, but more than that, Hudlin found working with the executives at the mouse-house a positive experience.

"They were very clear about the Disney brand and what they stood for. They were 100% supportive of me as a director. We were probably edgier than your typical Disney movie brand, but they understood what we were doing and we ended up with a product that we are all very proud of."



House Party

## House Party

This was all a world away from Hudlin's independent movie roots. 1990's *House Party* may have been bankrolled by New Line Pictures, but it was Reginald and his older brother Warrington Hudlin's independent spirit that made the film so successful. When they were younger, Reginald kept telling Warrington, who was studying Film at college, all his ideas for movies. Eventually, Warrington gave his younger brother a blank notebook and ordered him to start writing.

"I just started collecting stories of me and my friends, and all of these stories kind of connected and we ended up threading them together."

And so was born *House Party*. A film about two best friends who want to go to a house party, but both sets of parents forbid them. Or, as Hudlin tells it, "you want to go to a party but you're in trouble. Papa says you can't go. You sneak out. You have a series of adventures, then you go home. Then you face the consequences."

*House Party* made movie stars of the hip hop music duo Kid N Play and announced the Hudlin brothers as



## For the record...

### **Hudlin on the rumour that Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince were to play the lead roles in *House Party***

"The studio [New Line] had successfully sued them because they had illegally sampled some music from *Nightmare On Elm Street* and, as part of the settlement package, they had to appear in a film.

I said, "I love them. But I don't want someone in my movie because they lost a lawsuit." It would have been great but we moved on. And Will Smith did okay anyway [laughs]."

### **Hudlin on making *Boomerang* with Eddie Murphy**

"It is hard to find that many funny people all in one place. It was pure joy."

### **Hudlin on directing *Chadwick Boseman in Marshall***

"He was completely focussed on his work. Very serious but at the same time a fun guy. He was a joy to work with. He was the type of person who I looked forward to working with for the rest of my career."

### **Hudlin on if he would direct a *Black Panther* movie**

"I cannot imagine a world in which Ryan [Coogler] isn't doing all the *Black Panther* movies, and I will be happily going to see them."

### **Hudlin on continuing to write comic books**

"When you create characters that you love and have fun with then you kind of want to keep playing with them. It's a fun way to keep it all moving."

### **Hudlin on his next project**

"I'm getting ready to launch a new line of comic books with DC this year."

new talents on the scene when the film pulled in nearly \$27 million off a \$2.5 million budget. But it was a fight to get *House Party* financed.

"We shopped it to ever studio in town. They all passed," Hudlin recalls. "Then we eventually went to New Line, which was the last stop [laughs] and they said 'okay, sure. We'll give you a couple of million bucks and see what happens.'"

What did happen was that *House Party* became one of the most profitable movies of the 90s. It also became a film whose legacy lives on and is constantly being discovered by entirely new generations. Hudlin talks with nothing but love for the fans who saw it upon the original release or have come across it since. "It's great to have success when a movie

comes out. But the true test is to have the children of those original fans embracing the movie, loving it and referencing it. It's great for young people to say they like this movie because that's really hard to do. So I'm very proud that *House Party* does that."

## Follow-up

Since the release of *House Party*, Hudlin's directorial filmography has been diverse to say the least. Working with Samuel L. Jackson and Jamie Foxx on *The Great White Hype*, with Eddie Murphy on *Boomerang*, and then making *The Black Godfather*, a documentary about the influential Black music executive Clarence Avant.

On the small screen, Hudlin has directed episodes of much-

loved TV shows such as *Modern Family*, *Everybody Hates Chris* and *New Girl*. He was a producer on Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, for which he was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe. He's been an executive producer of the NAACP Image Awards, the BET Hip Hop Awards and the Primetime Emmy Awards. In 2016, Hudlin co-produced the Academy Awards.

And if that wasn't exhausting enough of a career, Hudlin also writes comic books for Marvel. "I wrote *Black Panther* for four years and then a year of *Spider-Man*."

Hudlin's work on the *Black Panther* series was, at the time of release, considered quite shocking, including having the title character marry X-Men leader Storm and also beating the crap out of Captain America. This new, more ruthless Black Panther became the definitive version in the comics, and for the Marvel film from director Ryan Coogler. Before the world saw the late Chadwick Boseman become T'Challa, Hudlin had a meeting with the actor where "we just talked about Black Panther all night [laughs]. I knew he would be the perfect choice and I wanted to give him whatever I could to help him kill it."

Boseman, Coogler et al certainly did kill it. *Black Panther* took over a billion dollars at the box office, the first non-sequel superhero movie to achieve that. While Hudlin had no direct involvement with the feature film, he speaks with great delight about it and sees it as a game changer. "It confirmed, on a global basis, that Black superheroes are really big ideas that the whole world embraces. That was the beginning of opening a door that's now on its hinges. You can't un-ring that bell, and the world is better off because of it." 