



# sterling for all

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON FEAVER



**The trajectory of Sterling K. Brown has us on the edge of our seat, which is right where he wants us**

BY ANITA LITTLE

The first time I meet Sterling K. Brown the smoke is literally clearing around him. Yes, a crew member has just turned off a hazer as production pauses for Brown to swap into another look, but the metaphor is undeniable. The actor, despite almost two decades of well-regarded work on television, has only recently become a household name, thanks to his Emmy-winning performance across four seasons of NBC's

*This Is Us*. Unlike Randall Pearson—the straitlaced, civically engaged and mathematician-smart patriarch he plays on the show—Brown has natural swag and commands the room with a rich, resonant voice trained at Stanford and in regional theater nationwide. Decked out in a visual tribute to casual cool—rolled-up trousers, a gold medallion and a half-buttoned graphic-print shirt—he asks, “Can we get some more Drizzy?” He shifts from posing to dancing as Drake’s “Controlla” fills the studio.

When I ask Brown how success and pop-culture notoriety have changed him, he responds quickly.

“I’m a total dick now,” he tells me. “I have narrowed my peripheral vision.”

Some might say this means he’s more goal-oriented. Others might add that it feels like a moment of profound clarity.

In 2018 Brown launched Indian Meadows Productions, which gave him the power not just to change the narrative but to create it. The production company’s namesake is the St. Louis neighborhood where Brown grew up. His mom still owns a house there, and his brothers and sisters are among the city’s residents. The mission of Indian Meadows Productions is to champion racial inclusion in Hollywood, both in front of the cameras and behind them. Brown has already closed a deal with Hulu for his company to produce an adaptation of Esi Edugyan’s best-selling book *Washington Black*.

“I wanted to have some sort of control over what stories could be put out to the world and take advantage of an opportunity to be one of the storytellers,” Brown says. “If you don’t have enough bells and whistles in terms of the right writers, the right show-runners, the right directors, the best piece of material can fall on deaf ears.”

By owning the means of production, so to speak, Brown will also be able to reshape one of the most formidable barriers for black-led media: marketing. Oftentimes, films and

TV programs featuring predominantly black casts are promoted only to black audiences, which can drastically reduce a project’s impact. (The packaging of works by Tyler Perry, who made history in October as the first black person to independently own a studio lot, comes to mind.) Recent films such as Jordan Peele’s *Us* and Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*—in which Brown plays father to Michael B. Jordan’s Killmonger—have benefited from crossover appeal, both critically and at the box office, but they remain the exception. Nevertheless, the tide is shifting. The 2019 study “Inclusion in the Director’s Chair,” by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, features an “intersectional analysis” of 1,335 directors attached to top-grossing films between 2007 and 2018. The study determined that “16 of the directors of the top 100 movies [in 2018] were black—this historically high figure is nearly three times greater than the six black directors working in 2017 and twice as many as the eight black directors working in 2007.”

Says Brown, “If you have a black movie, we need to stop selling it as if it’s only for a black audience. A movie about black people can appeal to anyone. All human stories have a universal appeal when told well.” One practice he has come up against in Hollywood is the casting of leading men of color opposite non-black actresses in an attempt to end-run the marketing of a film as a “black movie.” Saying he “frowns upon” black actors who have typically worked opposite white or Latina leading ladies, Brown is careful when choosing projects.

“Will Smith has the strength to pair himself with whomever he wants and sell that movie globally,” he says. “He can provide an opportunity to a sister to shine in a way they may not be able to if it weren’t a Will Smith movie.”

When projects with black casts reach





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a broader audience, that of course results in more big breaks for black actors, directors and writers. Brown's success is proof: His command on the mainstream *This Is Us* and the Ryan Murphy-produced *American Crime Story*, both of which feature relatively diverse casts, led to a lot of televised acceptance speeches. In addition to his two Emmy wins, he is the first African American to win a Golden Globe for best actor on a television drama and the first African American male actor to win a Screen Actors Guild Award for a drama series. Outside of *This Is Us* and *Indian Meadows*, Brown added A24's November release *Waves* to his film résumé, nabbed a part in Disney's colossal *Frozen* sequel and will appear on the next season of Amazon Prime's flagship comedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

I ask Brown if, as a leader in an industry that suffers from a scarcity of opportunities for actors of color, he feels pressure to embody the punishing standard of #BlackExcellence. He tents his fingers, leans back and ventures a joke. “We got to keep it together, because they got Mekhi Phifer or Omar Epps on call, waiting to come in and replace your boy,” he says. “You spend so long feeling replaceable that it's hard to shake that feeling.”

His television fame is concurrent with something else, something he's learned to be unabashed about but never expected: his emergence as a sex symbol. Randall Pearson wasn't scripted to be sexy, but thirst isn't predictable. On Google “Sterling K. Brown shirtless” returns more than 1 million results. Some of the most over-the-top headlines include **STERLING K. BROWN'S SEXY ABS SHATTER INSTAGRAM AND GIVE THE PEOPLE STERLING K. BROWN'S BOOTY!**

“Sneaky fit” is the term Brown uses to describe his physique. “I'm not popping out of my clothes per se, but if I ever take my shirt off, you'd be like, Oh snap, I didn't see that one coming.” He quickly adds, “I don't think I've ever gotten a job because of the way I was built. People have seen me as being a good actor, and they hire me for things in which they need a good actor.”

The hypersexuality assigned to black men has some grisly historical underpinnings that are glazed over in horny internet chatter—“It's a slippery slope, and it's one that is dangerous,” he says—but Brown recognizes that “it's nice to have your sexuality celebrated, as long as you're being celebrated in total, as a whole human being and not fetishized as one particular thing.”

In other words, “sex symbol” is not a terrible title when it's your least impressive achievement. After years of laying the groundwork, Brown seems to have found the freedom to transcend being one thing and to embrace many personas: the total dick, the leading man, the producer, the trailblazer, even the sex symbol. No wonder audiences are mesmerized. 

