

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: Setting The Tempo on BET's *The Quad*

By: Kristi Guillory

“I don't answer to you and I never will.”

This was part of my introduction to BET's new series, *The Quad*. When I heard this authoritative statement on the radio, it not only piqued my interest in the show, but also piqued my curiosity in the actor who delivered this statement in such a commanding tone. These powerful words were spoken by Tony award winner, three-time Obie award winner, and Emmy and Golden Globe nominee, Ruben Santiago-Hudson.

With a career spanning over 30 years, Santiago-Hudson did not aspire to be an actor. As a child growing up in Lackawanna, New York, he was surrounded by steel mills and assumed that this would be his vocation, but those close to him knew he could aspire to bigger and better things. Bigger and better is exactly what he did. He began acting in the second grade when his teacher asked him to be in a play. He agreed and due to his love of reading, acting came easily to him.

Ruben Santiago-Hudson's professional acting career began with a small role in *Coming to America* and has skyrocketed ever since. With notable roles in both television and film, he has appeared in *American Gangster*, *The Devil's Advocate*, *Shaft*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Selma*, *ABC's Castle* and has had recurring roles in *Law & Order*, *The West Wing*, and currently in *HBO's Billions*.

He made his Broadway acting debut in *Jelly's Last Jam*. He originated the role of Canewell in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, which earned him Broadway's top accolade, the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award for Featured Actor in a Play in 1996. Ruben is also the 2009 recipient of the NAACP Lifetime Achievement Award.

Santiago-Hudson has not only made an indelible mark as an actor, but is also a noted playwright and director. He made his directorial debut with August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. He has also directed the world premiere of *Paradise Blue* and his own *Your Blues Ain't Sweet Like Mine*.

Ruben received critical acclaim for his 2001 screenplay debut, *Lackawanna Blues*. In this one-man show, Ruben portrayed over two dozen characters, both male and female, in which he brought to life memories and testimonials of "Miss Rachel" or Nanny, who was his caregiver as well as the backbone of the Lackawanna community in the 1950's and 1960's. This performance earned Ruben his first Obie award. In 2005, *Lackawanna Blues* was adapted as a television movie and appeared on HBO, which earned Santiago-Hudson both an Emmy and a Golden Globe award nomination.

In 2013, he won another Obie award for Best Direction for August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* and won another Obie award in 2016 for Special Citations: Collaboration of the play *Skeleton Crew* with playwright Dominique Morriseau.

Storytelling has always been at the heart of Ruben Santiago-Hudson's career as well as the impetus for him to continue his artistic pursuits. He said, "I just wanted to tell my stories depicting Black people as whole human beings, not just characters, facsimiles."

We can see Ruben weave a new part of his storytelling tapestry each week on BET's *The Quad*. His latest role is that of band director, Cecil Diamond. *The Quad* is set in the world of a fictitious HBCU, Georgia A&M University.

The series follows Dr. Eva Fletcher, portrayed by fellow Tony award winner Anika Noni Rose, as she assumes the role of president at the university. The university's finances are in dire straits which require the president to make some tough decisions which quickly put her at odds with Santiago-Hudson's character, who leads the wildly popular and lucrative band. Acting veterans, Jasmine Guy and E. Roger Mitchell, will also be featured in the series.

Ruben has described the *The Quad* as "human" and noted that it will touch upon many elements of life that are common to all of us – love and loss. The series will also illustrate workplace gender issues as the series will depict the experiences of a female university president as she works with her male colleagues to get this university back on sound financial ground as well as works to gain their respect. If the statement, "I don't answer to you and I never will" is any indication of how things will unfold, Cecil Diamond will prove to be a formidable foe for Dr. Fletcher.

The Quad has received critical praise from *The New York Times* as one of the fifteen new shows to watch this season. Santiago-Hudson said that this show is not like "anything seen before" and that this is an exciting place for him to be as an actor. He credits *The Quad*'s showrunner and head writer, Felicia D. Henderson, as one of the primary factors that led him to take this role. Henderson told Ruben that various aspects of his personality would be explored in the Cecil Diamond character – the good, the bad, and even the ugly. While viewers may be quick to think of Cecil as a villain or even hostile due to the explosive exchanges between his character and Rose's character, Ruben wants Cecil to be seen as someone simply protecting his interests.





PIVOT recently caught up with Ruben Santiago-Hudson to learn more about his new role on *The Quad* as well as his upcoming projects.

PIVOT:

HBCU's are a large part of the African American culture. Why do you think people are so fascinated with these institutions?

SANTIAGO-HUDSON:

Because these are the institutions where African American students are the center as opposed to being pushed off to the side and not a main focus. At HBCUs, they make sure you know who you are. It is important to know exactly who you are in order to thrive in America.

PIVOT:

The Quad is the first look into the black college and university experience since "A Different World." How is this series different and how would you respond to any comparisons between the two?

SANTIAGO-HUDSON:

The best comparison between the two shows is that they both are high quality shows dealing with real drama. In *The Quad* we talk about peer pressure and dealing with important issues.

PIVOT:

Marching bands play a large part of the HBCU experience, and they often overshadow athletics and academics at these schools. How did you prepare for the role of band director and what insight can you provide into why these marching bands are so popular?

SANTIAGO-HUDSON:

The way I prepared for the role is like any other role, by research. I read, watched documentaries and studied actual band directors. To watch and learn how the band directors took over their band by leadership. I wanted to execute. I admire the way they nurtured and love their students. Marching bands are so popular because of the comraderie and the discipline.

PIVOT:

What do you hope viewers take away from this series?

SANTIAGO-HUDSON:

I hope viewers experience an hour of entertaining television. BET has changed the way they approach the series. The quality of writing and acting and the quality of *The Quad* staff.

PIVOT:

You have an extensive portfolio in theatre, television, and film. What do you attribute to your longevity and success in entertainment?

SANTIAGO-HUDSON:

I am prepared for the opportunities that come my way. I do not take for granted the opportunities that are presented to me. I also try to be nice to everyone. It sounds funny to hear but it is true. I have been doing this for a long time and that is not always the case with people you interact with. Being nice goes a long way.

When asked what's on the horizon, Santiago-Hudson noted the many different projects on this plate. There is one labor of love that Ruben intends to continue to devote his time to. In 2014, Global Concepts Charter School in Ruben's home town named its learning center in his honor, The Ruben Santiago-Hudson Fine Arts Learning Center.

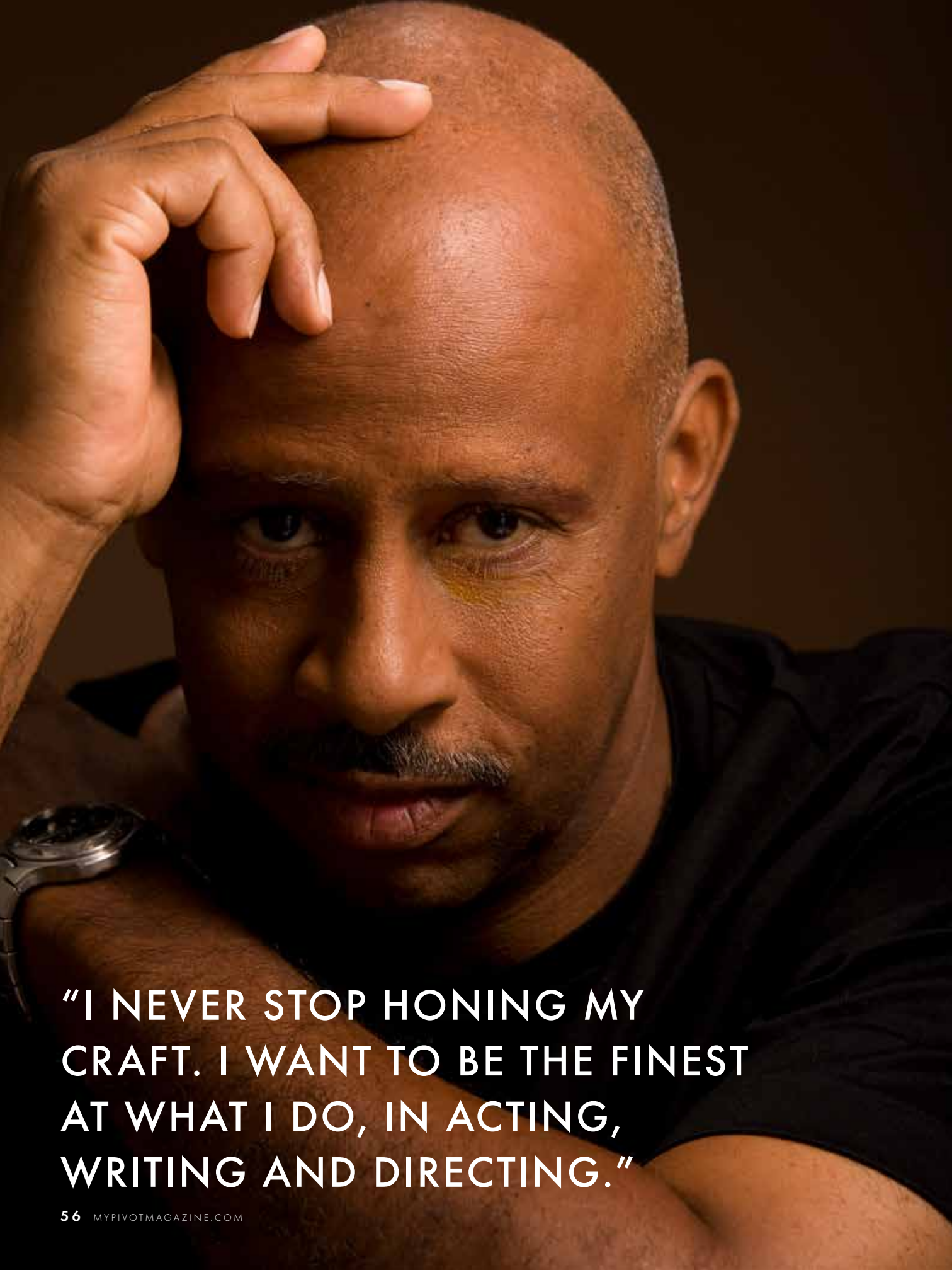
At the center's opening, he credited his role models, boyhood friends, and others who helped him to become a success. Ruben was praised for putting his "heart and soul" into the center and didn't just allow school officials to name a building in his honor, but also helped to secure donations and provided input regarding the design of the center. The Ruben Santiago-Hudson Fine Arts Center Learning Center features a small theatre where actors, singers and dancers can hone their craft as well as art and music studios.

In January, Ruben returned to his Broadway roots by directing August Wilson's play, *Jitney*. *Jitney* tells the story of a group of gypsy cab drivers as well as explores the broken relationship between a father, who owns the cab company, and his son, who has just been released from prison.

This project has special importance to Santiago-Hudson. He promised August Wilson, prior to his death, that he would do all he could to see that this play was brought to Broadway. *Jitney* was the only play in Wilson's 10-play repertoire, which is referred to as "The American Century Cycle" since each play represents a specific decade, that had not been performed on Broadway. Additionally, Ruben plans to begin work on a film that will be produced by Denzel Washington. He will also be in the film, "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks."

At a time when we can often read about the exploits of many entertainers on websites or see it on television, this married, father of four, stays grounded. Ruben has said, "You can't find me on TMZ or the Enquirer. "You'll find me at home with my family."

The sky is the limit for Ruben Santiago-Hudson. We can see him each Wednesday night on *The Quad*. Whether on the stage or on the screen, Ruben continues to bring us depictions of Black people as whole, complex, fully imagined human beings. Let's stay tuned.



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