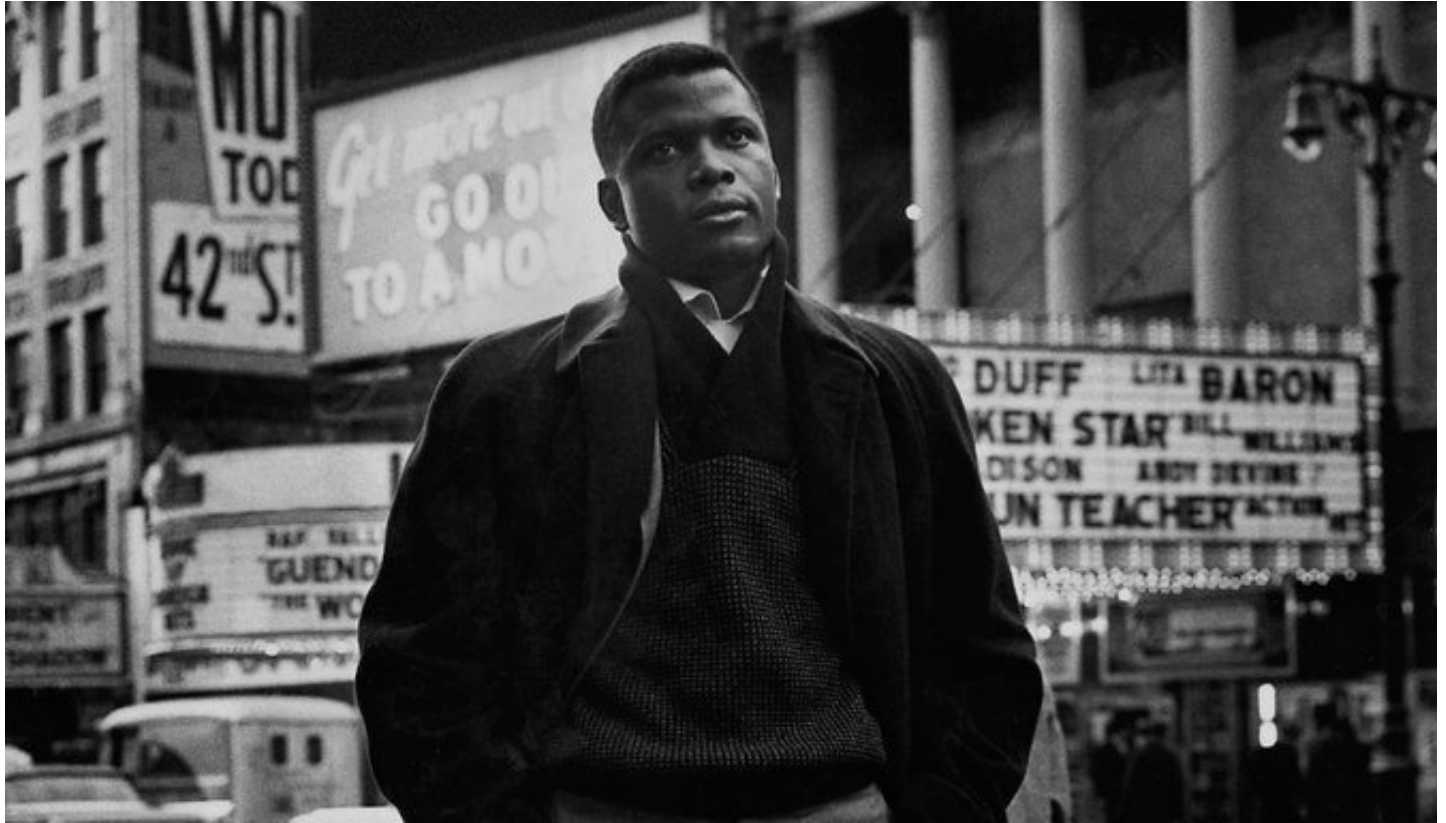


# REVIEW: 'Sidney' on Apple TV+ is a gripping biopic on a black actor's rise during the civil rights movement



CHENNAI: Many years ago, when I interviewed Sidney Poitier at the Montreal International Film Festival, what struck me most was his humility, graciousness and empathy. He addressed those traits in a new documentary “Sidney,” out now on Apple TV+.

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Produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Reginald Hudlin, the nearly two-hour film delves deep into the Hollywood icon's psyche and is an endearing biopic that tells us so much about his struggles to get to where he did.

Poitier died in early 2022, but the film features a telling interview with the star, who speaks about learning humility and empathy from his parents, and also shares the traumatic story of his birth.

He was in his 90s when he died, but he was not supposed to live so long. Born two months premature to tomato farming parents on Cat Island in the Bahamas in the 1920s, his father had brought a shoebox to serve as a makeshift coffin. But his mother would have none of it — she walked around the island weeping when she chanced upon a soothsayer, who predicted that the child would go places and reach the pinnacle of glory.

“I achieved most of it,” Poitier tells us in the documentary, which has been narrated in the form of a lilting story.

Although much of the biography comes from the man himself, there are invaluable inputs from Winfrey, Halle Berry and Morgan Freeman, who says at one point that Sidney never played a subservient part – something so common in Hollywood before race relations became a huge debate in the 1960s. Earlier, Black actors could only be janitors or dishwashers or nannies on the silver screen, but Poitier changed all this. His 1963 film “Lilies of Field” earned him an Oscar and he became the first Black person to win an Academy Award for Best Actor.

What caused even more of a stir was 1967 film “In the Heat of the Night” in which Poitier’s Detective Virgil Tibbs slapped an actor playing a white plantation owner on screen. It was electrifying, especially given the ongoing civil rights movement.

The biopic dives into all this and more, but does not shy away from the actor’s failings in his personal life — his long affair with actress Diahann Carroll triggered a divorce which split his family, for example.

What viewers will undoubtedly take away is a picture of a man who paved the way for actors of color to shine on the big screen and emerge from the shadows of their white contemporaries.