

Chameleon Street

runner

Oliver Shaw

March 27, 2023

Wendell B. Harris Jr.'s *Chameleon Street* is the ultimate example of a hidden gem. After a long overdue national tour last year (including a screening and Q&A with writer/director/star Wendell B. Harris at the city's own Cinema Detroit), the film is finally reaching an audience Hollywood hoped it would never find. A landmark of Black American independent cinema, *Chameleon Street* is one of the best films you've (probably) never seen. Though it wears its arthouse flourishes on its sleeve, the film is fairly straightforward and genuinely enjoyable overall.

Based on the true story of Detroit con man William Douglas Street Jr. (the titular chameleon), the movie follows him impersonating everyone from a reporter from *Time* to an attorney with the Detroit Human Rights Commission to a surgeon who performed over thirty successful hysterectomies.



Dr. Doug Street ¹

Blending elements of extreme absurdism found in contemporary American cult films like those of John Waters and Paul Bartel (as well the 1970s' Blaxploitation boom) with a dry, subtle wit more similar to the commentary of someone like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Harris builds an unflinchingly cinematic world that is challenging at times, but almost never not funny. I can see how it could be disagreeable, but I do not think it's dangerous. People are dangerous, films are debatable, so even though the film might appear experimental (it's definitely strange), it is among the most digestible art films I've seen. I guarantee you'll have an easier time with *Chameleon Street* than anything Pasolini has made.

But, despite its lack of formalism, *Chameleon Street* was silenced for more reasons than its aesthetic. And it's not because it wasn't loved by those who did get to see it when it came out. Harris's debut (and still his only film to date), he wrote, directed and starred in the picture, which got its festival premiere at the 1989 Toronto International Film Festival. It was released to widespread acclaim, including incredibly positive reviews from multiple major publications. *The Hollywood Reporter* said: "Nothing this year matches the originality, wit, and literary pizzazz of this weird and wonderfully satisfying comedy". Peter Travers wrote for *Rolling Stone*: "Wendell B. Harris Jr. makes a dynamite debut as writer, director and star". *LA Weekly* called it "One of the ten best films of the decade." And, *The New York Times*' resident pessimist Vincent Canby even acknowledged: "Mr. Harris demonstrates that he's a triple-threat new filmmaker of original and eccentric talent".

At the 1990 edition of the Sundance Institute's annual film festival *Chameleon Street* won the festival's highest honor, the Grand Jury Prize. (Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* won the award the year before and ended up grossing over \$36 million on a \$1.2 million budget. *Chameleon Street*, on the other hand, was never even distributed.)

Soderbergh was on the jury at Sundance that voted for *Chameleon Street*, and later went on TV to promote the film. In a 1991 ABC 20/20 segment on *Chameleon Street*, Soderbergh explained: "*Chameleon Street* is independent in every sense of the word...it is trying to carve out something that hasn't been carved out". Yes. Before I was even halfway through, I remember thinking *I have never seen anything like this*, and it was one of my favorite movies by the time it was over.

Unfortunately, none of the film's strengths seemed to matter to the shamelessly racist white-dominated Hollywood of the Reagan era. The dominant narrative within the industry was that the film's content was too controversial, with every distributor responding to Harris by saying they simply "didn't know how to market the film". But it's so much more than that. Underground art films still thrived in major cities throughout the 80s (*Liquid Sky* played for two years in New York).



William Douglas Street, Esq.²

In the case of *Chameleon Street*, only \$95,000 (just over 6%) of the \$1.5 million budget came from white producers. The film was essentially entirely Black-funded which, of course, presented a problem to the overwhelmingly white film industry. Clearly, it was never really about the movie, it was about sending a message to Black producers. Studio executives just wanted to control the film, and their message was simple — “back off”.

Within a year of its release, Warner Brothers bought the remake rights, though they never had any intention of remaking it. (They did not respond to my requests for a comment regarding this matter.)

It’s a tragically true example of what Robert Townsend and Keenen Ivory Wayans were commenting on just a couple years earlier with *Hollywood Shuffle*, that Black artists are treated differently (worse) by the movie industry. When asked “What was underneath those conversations [with distributors]?”, Harris plainly declared: “an uncomfortable reaction to what they [Hollywood] perceived white America would think when *Chameleon Street* was shown”. In addition to the contemptible main character, the film showed the unbelievable talent of a visionary Black artist working outside the stereotypical “hood films” of the time.

LA Weekly film critic John Powers stated, "To buy *Chameleon Street* for a remake actually really says what the status of most serious Black films are...that they aren't even conceived to be American movies, they're conceived to be these kind of weird movies from afar that you can remake and make into American movies, even though *Chameleon Street* is probably one of the very few movies that's been shot on the streets of Detroit in the last twenty years". In this case, a Black artist playing a Black character based on a real Black con man presented a problem for white America. And, even if it had been remade, it would have undoubtedly been sanitized and censored in the process.

Initially inspired in 1985 after reading an article about Street in the *Detroit Free Press*, Wendell Harris recalled:

"What I immediately saw when I read the first article on Doug was his ability to act, and act convincingly...Part of the addiction that Doug has to the act of impersonation is the moment when he looks into somebody's eyes and he can see that he is pressing the right buttons to make them believe his performance. That's maybe the purest part of the high he gets from impersonating..." (from Michael Boyce Gillespie's book *Film Blackness*, pg. 52).

Early in the film, Harris narrates "I know within the first two minutes what people want me to be" which instantly establishes Street's character and the parallels between the real-life impersonator and the Julliard-trained actor portraying him.

Former supervisor describes impostor as 'brilliant' man

By JULIE WIEN
NEWS HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER
NOV 29 1984

Impostor William Douglas Street, a young man who has posed as a doctor, athlete, student and military officer, is described as "brilliant" and "likable" by a supervisor who worked with Street when he pretended to be a lawyer for the City of Detroit.

Ann Arbor Police say Street got away with posing last year as a University of Michigan law student, a scheme police say Street used to forge a check from one of his peers and bilk the university of an \$800 emergency loan.

"He probably knows the law better than most lawyers," said Philip Smith, a supervisor at the Human Rights Department for the City of Detroit, where Street volunteered as an intern lawyer in 1981.

"He is able not only to cite chapter and verse, but is also able to put together legal documents and legal briefs better than most lawyers," said Smith.

Street, a two-time escapee from Southern Michigan Prison at Jackson, is being held in a New Haven, Conn., jail on charges of larceny, forgery and criminal impersonation.

Connecticut police arrested Street for check forgery in September, and then discovered that he had posed as a Yale University medical student.

Street's most famous stint as an impostor was in 1971, when he won a tryout with the Detroit Tigers by pretending to be Jerry LeVias, at the time a star wide receiver for the Houston Oilers.

The Tigers immediately put out a press release stating that LeVias was at training camp in Lakeland, Fla., and was trying out for the team. Within a few days, team officials became suspicious and Street allegedly confessed he was not LeVias.

Extradition proceedings began this week to bring Street back to Michigan, where he is wanted for parole violations. Once he arrives in Michigan, Street can be arrested by Ann Arbor police and brought to trial in Washtenaw County on charges related to his impersonation of a U-M law student.

Street has spent much of the past 11 years in Southern Michigan Prison in Jackson, serving time for various criminal convictions.

"I don't think that justice is being served by incarcerating this

WILLIAM D. STREET
Undated police photo

See IMPOSTOR, A4

Critical praise for the real Street's performance ³

I have to commend Harris's meticulous, thoughtful, powerhouse of a performance. To me, it makes the movie. Equal parts hilarious and sinister, Wendell B. Harris posits Doug Street not only as the focus on screen, but also as an overdubbed narrator, giving new meaning to the idea of an unreliable narrator. The Chameleon guides us through the whole film, but who really knows if or when he's telling the truth. I believe it's the effectiveness of Wendell's acting that's what truly made distributing the film an insurmountable obstacle. It is a rock solid and watertight leading performance in a multilayered mindfuck of a movie, and it's basically what got me thinking about the intrinsic idiosyncrasy of art made in Detroit.

That's how I initially pitched this piece, and while I know that to be true, I'm still not exactly sure how. I've said it since the summer and have maintained through the winter: Detroit is my favorite place I've ever lived. And, though I've not yet been here even a year, I've found it to be the gem of a city I had no idea I was missing. But Harris and Street knew all along.

I think it's because *Chameleon Street* was one of the first indications that the underground art that comes from here is special. That was when I realized there's an ultra-creative energy in this air. I heard plenty of negative nonsense from ignorant assholes who view this city as exceedingly ripe for failure, but after a few months here, it's proven to be more welcoming and inspiring than anywhere I've lived before. I guess it's no surprise that this film, and the story it's based on, come from a place that's always had more to prove. I think it's a perfect place to succeed.

So, in addition to writing this article, I'm asking you to spread the word. After years of suppression, this film has finally been restored and re-released, now streaming on the Criterion Channel with a physical release due later this year. As the interviewer for Film at Lincoln Center concluded "ultimately, the efforts to suppress *Chameleon Street* have failed." *Chameleon Street* is finally available for the world to see, and I couldn't be more excited. Here's to you, Mr. Harris.

O.M.S.



Cheers ⁴

1. “Dr. Doug Street” — Harris, Wendell. *Chameleon Street*. 1989; Detroit, MI: Arbelos Films, 2021. 4K restoration.
2. “Cheers!” — Harris, Wendell. *Chameleon Street*. 1989; Detroit, MI: Arbelos Films, 2021. 4K restoration.
3. “Critical praise for the real Street’s performance” — Wiernik, Julie. “Former supervisor describes impostor as ‘brilliant’ man.” *Ann Arbor News* (Ann Arbor), November 29, 1984.
4. “William Douglas Street, Esq.” — Harris, Wendell. *Chameleon Street*. 1989; Detroit, MI: Arbelos Films, 2021. 4K restoration.

runner

Some other underappreciated gems (if you like *Chameleon Street*):

Wanda - Barbara Loden, 1970

Two Zone Transfer - Ulysses Jenkins, 1979

Working Girls - Lizzie Borden, 1986

Young Soul Rebels - Isaac Julien, 1991

The Watermelon Woman - Cheryl Dunye, 1996

American Movie - Chris Smith, 1999