

## **SORRY TO BOTHER YOU (2018)**

- July 6th, 2018
- 1 hr 51 minutes
- \$3.2 (estimated)
- Directed by Boots Riley
- Written by Boots Riley
- Production company: Significant Productions, MNM Creative, MACRO, Cinereach, The Space Program, Annapurna Pictures
- Rated R for pervasive language, some strong sexual content, graphic nudity, and drug use

## **QUICK THOUGHTS**

- Anthony Becerra
- Phil Svitek

## **DEVELOPMENT**

- Boots Riley describe the film as "an absurdist dark comedy with aspects of magical realism and science fiction inspired by the world of telemarketing"
- In June 2017, it was announced that production would go forward on *Sorry to Bother You*, directed by Riley, and that [Lakeith Stanfield](#), [Tessa Thompson](#) and [Steven Yeun](#) had been cast in the film
- [Nina Yang Bongiovi](#), [Forest Whitaker](#), Jonathan Duffy, Kelly Williams, Charles D. King and George Rush served as producers on the film, under their Significant Productions, MACRO, and [Cinereach](#) banners, respectively
- When Yang Bongiovi came to the script, it had a litany of producers attached with complicated deal structures. Riley had been peddling it for years.
  - "I was a little heartbroken because of what he was going through," said Yang Bongiovi. "I always want to talk to new filmmakers early, to tell them, 'Before you do anything, talk to an attorney. If you can't afford an attorney, call me and let me help you.'"
  - "Nina was the linchpin," said Riley in a phone interview from his home in Oakland. "People really respect her. When she started being involved, actually when she started showing interest in it, other people took it seriously. All of a sudden, it was a real thing."
  - "You run into people who have to do with filmmaking all the time, and rarely are they making principled decisions like Nina," he added. "There are risks she will take, stances she will take that have to do with what is right, as opposed to what will make more money. I've seen her walk away from deals because she felt like due to racism, people weren't valuing the product enough. That's not something people often do in Hollywood."
  - Yang Bongiovi said that her track record gives her a leg up with her investors. They trust her. "Fortunately, it's my fifth movie with them, and I made them money on *Fruitvale*, *Dope*, *Songs*, and *Roxanne*," said Yang Bongiovi. "So now I'm going, 'Listen, we're going to be O.K. You have to trust me. Don't read the script.'"

- Source:  
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/08/sorry-to-bother-you-nina-yang-bon-giovi-forest-whitaker-boots-riley-producer>

### WRITING (Boots Riley)

- The screenplay for *Sorry to Bother You* was inspired by his own time working as a telemarketer and telefundraiser in California, and his need to put on a different voice to find success
- Riley finished the screenplay in 2012, and with no means to produce it, recorded an album of the same title with his band The Coup, inspired by the story
- The screenplay was originally published in full as part of McSweeney's issue 48 in 2014

### STORY/TOPICS

- Communism
  - Boots has maintained that the film is Communist in nature, rather than a specific analysis of America under President Trump, clarifying that he wrote the initial screenplay during the Obama administration, and that the target was never any specific elected official or movement, but rather a broader look at "the puppet masters behind the puppets."
  - While the majority of the final script remained the same, minimal changes were made prior to shooting in order to avoid the film appearing to be a critique of Trump specifically, including removing a line where a character says "Worry Free is making America great again," written before Trump would use the line in his 2016 presidential campaign.
- False consciousness
  - The title of the film has a double meaning, referencing both the phrase's use by telemarketers and its general usage when telling a person something you know they might not like to hear, such as the Communist themes present in the film
  - According to Boots, "...the other side of it is, is that often when you're telling someone something that is different from how they view things, different from how they view the world, it feels like an annoyance or a bother. And that's where that comes from."
  - The theme of the strike was used to reflect the need to "organize people in the workplace" and for workers to recognize their power.
- To its disciples, capitalism seems straightforward and logical. It's only when you take a step back, or see it from the outside, or feel its boot on your neck, that you realize that capitalism is a master impossible to please in the long run—and that its devotees will think up any and all cruel absurdities to feed its growth. It's fitting, then, that *Sorry to Bother You*, one of the sharpest and most invigorating corporate satires in years, keeps escalating in surreality as its protagonist, a salesman named Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield), uncovers nastier and nastier secrets about his company and its client firms. The film's uncanny images build in wit and discomfort until they reach nightmarish proportions—an artful metaphor for unrestrained capitalism's natural endpoint. (Slate.com)

### CAST:

- Lakeith Stanfield as Cassius "Cash" Green
  - Donald Glover originally planned to play the lead role of Cassius Green, but was unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts with Solo: A Star Wars Story. He recommended his Atlanta co-star LaKeith Stanfield for the role instead
  - Lakeith Lee Stanfield is an actor and rapper from Victorville, CA. At the age of 15, Lakeith attended the John Casablancas Modeling & Career Center in Orange County. A few years later, he auditioned for Destin Cretton's then college thesis film Short Term 12 (2008). Later, the newer version of Short Term 12 (2013) would mark Lakeith's debut as a professional actor. Subsequently, he landed a role in the Martin Luther King biopic, Selma(2014)
  - David Cross as Cash's "white voice"
    - David Cross was born on April 4, 1964 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. He is an actor and writer, known for Arrested Development (2003), Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004) and Megamind (2010). He has been married to Amber Tamblyn since October 6, 2012. They have one child
  - Mahari Crown as Fake Cash
- Tessa Thompson as Detroit, Cash's girlfriend
  - The amazing actress Tessa Lynn Thompson was born on October 3, 1983, in Los Angeles, California. She is the daughter of singer-songwriter Marc Anthony Thompson and the granddaughter of actor-musician Bobby Ramos. She was raised in LA, before moving to Brooklyn, New York. Her father is of Afro-Panamanian descent and her mother is of Mexican and British Isles ancestry. Thompson attended Santa Monica High School, where she was featured in numerous theatre productions. After graduation; she enrolled at Santa Monica College, where she obtained a degree in cultural anthropology.
  - After a while, she starred as Juliet in William Shakespeare's drama Romeo and Juliet in a production held at the Boston Court Theatre, Pasadena in California. Her impressive performance from earned her the NAACP Theatre nomination the same year. Away from the theatre stage, Tessa made her first television appearance in 2005, when she starred in the CBS series Cold Case (2003). Talented like her father Marc, Tessa's versatility extends to music, as a member of Electro Band, through which she has produced many songs, including one used in her film 'Dear White People.'
  - Since her acting career began in 2002, her proficient, outstanding and amazing performance have made her famous in the American film industry. Tessa has played remarkable roles in popular TV series and movies including Murder on the 13th Floor(2012) in 2012, Make It Happen (2008) in 2008, Red & Blue Marbles (2011) in 2011, Selma (2014) in 2014, Creed (2015) in 2015, War on Everyone (2016) in 2016, and Thor: Ragnarok (2017) in 2017, just to mention a few
  - Film doesn't pass the Bechdel test, and some have compared Detroit to a Manic Pixie Dream Girl

- Riley, however, wants to make it clear that he sees Detroit as having her own agency, and that “she engages in actions and projects that have nothing to do with Cassius, and the things she does or believes are not the thing that makes Cassius change.” “Detroit is not a prize to be won in this movie,” he insists. “She fucks who she wants because she wants to and when she wants to.” Riley explains that he wanted to expand on Detroit’s intellectual journey, as she wrestles with the efficacy of art under capitalism, but that ultimately the movie was told through Cassius. He concedes that it does fail the Bechdel test, but that the movie tries to represent other aspects of Detroit’s life fully: “I will put Detroit up against most of the movies that do pass the Bechdel test and will confidently say that most of them will not have a character close to as radical or feminist as she is.”
  - Tessa even chimed in herself saying her character did just what every character should: make you want to know more about them. “For me, the hat trick with any supporting character, no matter how well drawn they are—is they should leave an audience wanting to know more about them. @BootsRiley made a film about a lot of big ideas & a question—& Detroit is both.”
- Riley has little respect for the “fake-ass bougie gallery world,” as one character calls it, though the director does display sympathy for Detroit’s creative ambitions, as well as the off-stage performances necessary for black artists to appeal to white buyers
- Lily James as Detroit’s white voice
  - Lily James was born Lily Chloe Ninette Thomson in Esher, Surrey, to Ninette (Mantle), an actress, and Jamie Thomson, an actor and musician. Her grandmother, Helen Horton, was an American actress. She began her education at Arts Educational School in Tring and subsequently went on to study acting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, graduating in 2010
- Jermaine Fowler as Salvador
  - Jermaine Fowler is an actor and producer, known for Friends of the People (2014), Jermaine Fowler: Give Em Hell Kid (2015) and BoJack Horseman (2014)
- Omari Hardwick as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_
  - Omari Latif Hardwick was born in Savannah, Georgia, to Joyce (Johnson) and Clifford Hardwick III, and grew up in Decatur, GA. His parents gave him a name to set a precedent, "Omari" meaning "most high," and "Latif" meaning "gentle." He shares, "I in no way believe that I am the highest or most high, but I feel like my name gives me something to strive for." Growing up, sports were Hardwick's world, but early on he knew he had a passion for the arts. By the age of fourteen, Hardwick was writing poetry on a regular basis, a passion he would carry with him into adulthood. In high school, he excelled at basketball, baseball, and football, and went on to play football at the University of Georgia. Although a star

on the field, Hardwick never gave up his passion for acting, and minored in theatre in college. He shares, "I hugely attribute sports to my success in entertainment business. Being on the field taught me dedication and discipline - I already came from a strict household when I was growing up, sports just took that to another level. Whenever I approach a set, I always feel as though the cast, crew, director, are all part of a team. I have always married athletics and art, two huge parts of my life."

- Patton Oswalt as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s white voice
  - Patton Oswalt has been headlining at comedy clubs all over the United States since 1996, as well as appearing in his own standup specials on Comedy Central and HBO. He was chosen as Entertainment Weekly's "It" comedian in 2002. He is a regular on Late Night with Conan O'Brien (1993). His other television credits include appearances on Seinfeld(1989) and NewsRadio (1995).
  - As a writer, Oswalt spent two seasons on MADtv (1995) and has also written for the MTV Music Video Awards. He is currently writing screenplays and has appeared in the feature films Starsky & Hutch (2004), Man on the Moon (1999) and Magnolia (1999)
- Terry Crews as Sergio Green, Cash's uncle
  - Terry Crews was born in Flint, Michigan, to Patricia and Terry Crews, Sr. He earned an Art Excellence Scholarship to attend Western Michigan University and also earned a full-ride athletic scholarship to play football. Crews was an All-Conference defensive end, and was a major contributor on the 1988 MAC champion WMU Broncos. His college success was rewarded in 1991, when he was drafted by the NFL's Los Angeles Rams.
  - Crews played six years in the NFL, with stints at the L.A. Rams, San Diego Chargers , Rhein Fire (NFL Europe-Germany), Washington Redskins and Philadelphia Eagles. While in the NFL, used his art talent by painting a line of NFL licensed lithographs for Sierra Sun Editions.
  - In 1996, Crews co-wrote and co-produced the independent feature film, "Young Boys Incorporated" (1996).
- Danny Glover as Langston
  - Actor, producer and humanitarian Danny Glover has been a commanding presence on screen, stage and television for more than 35 years.
  - Glover was born in San Francisco, California, to Carrie (Hunley) and James Glover, postal workers who were also active in civil rights. Glover trained at the Black Actors' Workshop of the American Conservatory Theater. It was his Broadway debut in Fugard's Master Harold...and the Boys, which brought him to national recognition and led director Robert Benton to cast Glover in his first leading role in 1984's Oscar®-nominated Best Picture Places in the Heart
  - While it has been rumored that Danny Glover's "white voice" was performed by Steve Buscemi, Riley reported that it was actually done by the film's sound engineer

- Following its premiere at Sundance, producer Megan Ellison gave Riley \$200,000 for reshoots and an additional scene
- Steven Yeun as Squeeze
  - Steven Yeun was born in Seoul, South Korea, to June and Je Yeun. His family first immigrated to Canada and stayed there for one year, and then moved to the U.S. He has a brother named Brian. He began acting while at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, MI, where he studied Psychology as a major (BS in Psychology, 2005). When he realized his love for acting he went to study theatre in college instead of med school. He was a member of Stir Friday Night, a sketch-comedy group made up of Asian-American performers, and was also a member of the Second City comedy troupe in Chicago. He earned roles on The Big Bang Theory (2007) (as Sebastian), in Jerry (2009) (as Chaz) and in different commercials for Best Buy, Apple, and Milky Way. He lives in L.A.
- Armie Hammer as Steve Lift
  - When asked on his choice to cast Armie Hammer as Steve Lift, Boots stated that Armie was a "lovable dude," whose casting reflects the current state of "new capitalism," where the reality of working conditions are hidden, referencing lines such as "I'm not your boss, I'm your friend."
  - Naturally green-eyed Armie Hammer wears a light blue contact lens in one of his eyes
- Kate Berlant as Diana DeBauchery
  - Kate Berlant is an actor, stand-up, and writer who recently was profiled by The New York Times as a "magnetic improvisational comic" at the forefront of experimental comedy. Kate was named a New Face at the 2014 Montreal Comedy Festival and was one of Comedy Central's Top Ten Comics to Watch in 2013. She has performed in festivals such as SXSW, the New York Comedy Festival, Bridgetown Comedy Festival, Moontower, San Francisco Sketchfest, and the Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival. She was recently named by Splitsider as one of the Top 10 Up-And-Coming Comedians and was named by Time Out New York as one of the "Three Comics to Watch" in 2012. Kate was commissioned by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles to create material for their online channel and was a featured performer on IFC's "Comedy Drop." She just wrapped a pilot for Comedy Central and for TruTV. Kate recently finished an international tour opening for musician Father John Misty and a national tour with musician Lo-Fang. She has been featured in Rookie Magazine, Rolling Stone, Esquire, and Los Angeles Magazine
- Michael X. Sommers as Johnny
  - Michael X. Sommers was born as Michael Sommers. He is an actor, known for Sense8(2015), Chance (2016) and Bandits (2001)
- Robert Longstreet as Anderson
  - Robert Longstreet is an actor and producer, known for I Don't Feel at Home in This World Anymore. (2017), Sorry to Bother You (2018) and The Old Man & the Gun (2018)

- Forest Whitaker as First Equisapien/Demarius

#### **DIRECTING:** (Boots Riley)

- Raymond Lawrence Riley (born April 1, 1971), better known by his stage name Boots Riley, is an American rapper, producer, screenwriter, film director, and communist activist
- He is the lead vocalist of The Coup and Street Sweeper Social Club. His feature film directorial debut, Sorry to Bother You
- Boots Riley was born in 1971 into a family of radical organizers in Chicago. By the time he was six, the family moved to Detroit and then to Oakland
- His interest in politics began at a young age, inspiring him to join the International Committee Against Racism at age 14 and the radical Progressive Labor Party at age 15

#### **TRIVIA/EASTER EGGS**

- At one point, Detroit wears a pair of earrings with the phrases BURY THE RAG and DEEP IN YOUR FACE. These are lyrics from "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" by Bob Dylan, which is a protest song about a poor African-American woman murdered by a wealthy white man. ("Bury the rag deep in your face/ Now's the time for your tears".)
- Director Michel Gondry is paid tribute in the director's name for the claymation sequence, Michel Dongy. Gondry's influence is clear in the scenes where the garage transforms into the luxury room
- After sniffing the cocaine, Cassius is splashed by water from a nearby car, causing him to trip. This may mean that his transformation has already begun, as baby horses have weak legs

#### **PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY** (Doug Emmett)

- Known for Edge of Seventeen, Faking It, Paranormal Activity 4, Bachelorette
- Principal photography began on June 22, 2017, in Oakland, California and concluded on July 30, 2017
- Over 60 scenes were shot in 28 days
- Most of the crazy riot scenes were shot in downtown Oakland, California
- The movie was filmed in Oakland, California during the summer of 2017 concurrently with Blindspotting (2018)

#### **EDITING/VFX** (Terel Gibson)

- Known for Kings of Summer, The Fighter, Little Miss Sunshine

#### **SOUND/MUSIC** (Tune-Yards)

- The film score was composed and performed by Tune-Yards. Riley and The Coup recorded an original soundtrack for the film as well, slated to be released later in 2018
- The first single, "OYAHYTT", featuring Lakeith Stanfield, was released July 13, 2018

#### **PROMOTION**

- The film had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival on January 20, 2018
- Shortly after, Annapurna Pictures acquired distribution rights
- It also screened at South by Southwest on March 12, 2018

- The film was initially scheduled to be released on June 29, 2018, but was pushed back a week to July 6, 2018, where it began with a limited release before expanding wider on July 13
- You can purchase a mini version of the man-boffing-horse (<https://boingboing.net/2018/08/07/now-you-can-buy-a-mini-version.html>)

## BOX OFFICE

- *Sorry to Bother You* grossed \$727,266 from 16 theaters in its limited opening weekend, for an average of \$45,452, the fourth-best average of 2018
- It finished 16th at the weekend box office
- It had its wide release, in 805 theaters, on July 13, alongside the openings of *Skyscraper* and *Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation*, and was forecast to gross around \$3.5 million over the weekend
- The film made more on its first day of wide release (\$1.5 million) than it had in its full week of limited (\$1.1 million). It went on to gross \$4.3 million over the weekend, an increase of 485%, finishing 7th at the box office
- The film was added to another 245 theaters in its third week of release and made \$2.8 million, finishing 10th
- To date, it's made 15.3 million
- It is not yet being distributed overseas because "black films don't do well overseas"
  - According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, "One comparison for *Sorry to Bother You* is the 2016 specialty film *Moonlight*, which, buoyed in part by its Oscar win, grossed \$37 million overseas, which was more than half of its total gross."

## RECEPTION

- Rotten Tomatoes: 94% from 162 reviews
  - The website's critical consensus reads, "Fearlessly ambitious, scathingly funny, and thoroughly original, *Sorry to Bother You* loudly heralds the arrival of a fresh filmmaking talent in writer-director Boots Riley."
- Josiah Hughes from *Exclaim!* gave the film a rating of 9/10, saying "*Sorry to Bother You* belongs to a rich tradition of satires, falling in line with everything from *Putney Swope* to *Pootie Tang* to *Idiocracy* to *UHF*. Bright, loud, audacious and endlessly fun, *Sorry to Bother You* is one giant, beautiful middle finger of a debut."