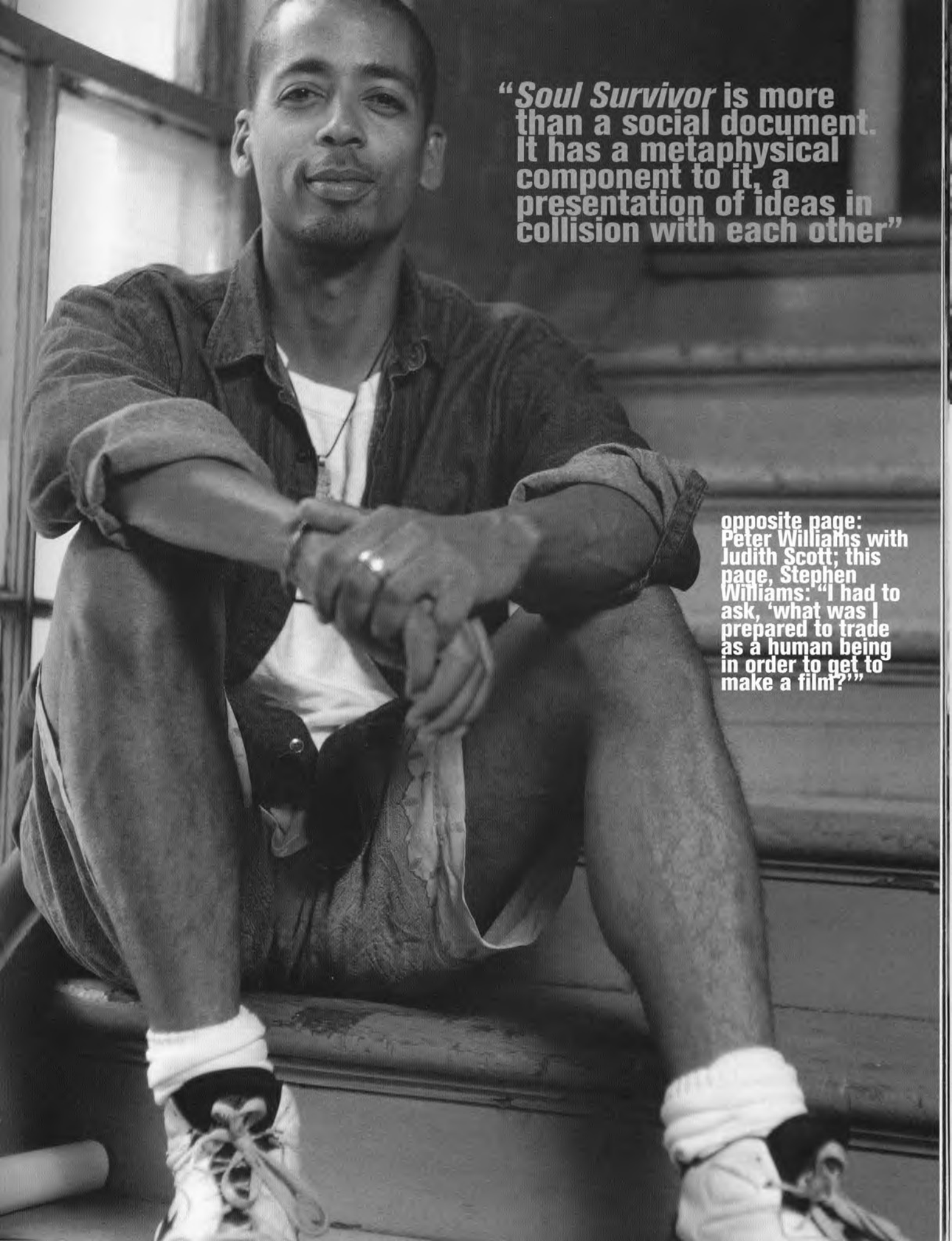




It's a crucial moment in the filming of *Soul Survivor*, and director Stephen Williams finds himself unexpectedly perturbed. The movie's main character, Tyrone, has just discovered his best friend's death and breaks down into anguished tears. The actor (and the director's brother), Peter Williams, seems genuinely distraught, prompting Stephen to stop the take and whisper to him, "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry to put you through that." Although he's insisted since pre-production that working with his brother would be no different than working with any other actor, Williams admits that there were moments when objectivity just, "flies in the face of the wind. It was really hard, it was really painful to watch," says Stephen during the lunch break. "Again, I would have felt that for any actor, but more so because he's my brother. I felt badly that I put him through it but the scene required that kind of emotional response, and we had to do it. That took me by surprise. We shot a love scene, for instance, and it didn't feel any different than shooting a love scene with any actor, but for some reason this one of him crying was painful to witness."

STEPHEN WILLIAMS:  
SOUL SURVIVOR

by Angela Baldassarre



**“*Soul Survivor* is more than a social document. It has a metaphysical component to it, a presentation of ideas in collision with each other”**

**opposite page: Peter Williams with Judith Scott; this page, Stephen Williams: “I had to ask, ‘what was I prepared to trade as a human being in order to get to make a film?’”**

However, Peter's forgiven him, especially since *Soul Survivor* went on to open the prestigious Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival this year (one of seven films selected from an approximate 800 considered). Seeing his first feature film premiered at the world's largest film festival was, in Stephen's words, "a humbling experience."

But even more satisfying, Williams says, was the level of interrogation by the French journalists. "They were very interested in so many other dimensions of the film," explains Stephen over lunch in Toronto a week after returning from Cannes. "We tried to make a multi-layered film, and it's often disheartening to run across journalists whose only preoccupation was how hard it was working with my brother. The French were, for the most part, very interested in all the elements that came together to make *Soul Survivor* what it is. They were intrigued by the way the film challenged their perceived notions of what constituted demographic reality in Canada. They had no idea that there were so many black people and that there was a vibrant Jamaican immigrant culture here. That naturally opened into all kinds of questions I hope the film raises around notions of immigration."

That and much more. Like his stylish Canadian Film Centre short, *A Variation on the Key 2 Life*, which posed the question: "What price art?" Williams tiptoes around the main notion in *Soul Survivor*—that in life we all have a price to pay—to delve deep into the intricate patterns that shape our society: issues of identity and notions of home, struggle and racism.

Set in the heart of Toronto's Jamaican community, *Soul Survivor* revolves around Tyrone Taylor, an ambitious hairdresser who takes a job collecting debts for local money lender Winston (George Harris). Tyrone has just rekindled a relationship with social worker Annie (Judith Scott) but worries about the foolish and dangerous antics of his best friend, Reuben (David Smith).

"The germ of Tyrone and his journey came out of my own experiences when I first came to Toronto and was faced with similar kinds of things," explains Williams who moved to Toronto as a teen-ager from Jamaica via England. "How do I make my way in this culture without losing so much of what I valued about my culture that I brought with me? How do I reconcile those two things? My cultural inheritance from Jamaica involves a very

right: Peter Williams and George Harris; below: Peter Williams and David Smith



healthy spiritual and moral dimension. When I came to North America, those kind of things, because they're intangible and are hard to package and commodify and sell, have very little currency here. The dilemma that I faced was how do I make sense of these two different ways of being in the world? So the germ of the character came from there. Then imagination came into play."

As the movie unfolds, so does Tyrone's growing awareness of his place in the world. It's this attempt to deal with certain archetypal notions of self-awareness that make *Soul Survivor* a mesmerizing and enriching experience to watch. Just as the human drama is heightened by luxurious colours—blood reds, raven blacks—the viewer's attention to detail is also elevated to absorb the subtle and intelligent characterizations which authenticate the events presented.

"What I didn't want to do is present a film where the metaphysical penny has dropped and the character knows exactly what he's going to do," explains Williams. "It doesn't strike me, certainly in terms of my own life, that that's what actually happens. I think we change



through a series of increments rather than all at one fell swoop. Throughout the course of the movie Tyrone attempts to reconcile some really irreconcilable things like loyalty to cousin Reuben and getting ahead materially. In the end, we



**Stephen Williams has displayed an unconditional love and commitment to his craft**



are left with a character who has come to understand that that kind of juggling act is dangerous and untenable in every way. For me, the film is more than a social document. It has a metaphysical component to it, a presentation of ideas in col-

lision with each other. When we leave Tyrone at the end of the movie these ideas have collided in his world in a very real way."

Funded by the Ontario Film Development Corporation and Telefilm Canada, *Soul Survivor* was not an easy project to get off the ground. Unlike his Film Centre pal and fellow Cannes-ter Clement Virgo, whose film, *Rude*, was financed by the Centre's Feature Film Project, Williams had to scramble from bottom up to find the money for his picture. Thanks to the support of influential producer Paul Brown (*I Love a Man in Uniform*), *Soul Survivor* has become the second film to be produced under the Miracle Pictures banner.

While Williams is completely satisfied with the attention his film has received at film festivals worldwide, he confesses that the project's outcome is not as important as the personal catharsis which occurred during its production. "In many ways the making of the movie mirrored the content of the film," he explains. "I had to ask, 'what was I prepared to trade as a human being in order to get to make a film?' In the back

of my mind was the quasi-Faustian pact that Tyrone makes with Winston, his benefactor. For me, this mirrored the kind of process I was going through with *Soul Survivor*. It was at a level of ideas as opposed to reality. It was a journey that I felt an emotional and spiritual kinship with—attempting to examine your life as you go through it—to figure out how you can retain the vestiges of your own spiritual orientation at the same time as being in the world."

For those of us who have followed Williams's career closely for the past several years, this talk of spiritual and emotional awareness is hardly new. Williams has displayed an unconditional love and commitment to his craft like few people this writer has ever encountered. He has often expressed the need to display his unique perspective of reality through visualisation without having to compromise technical or artistic freedom. "For me, reality is a very negotiable item. A collision of subjectivities is what makes reality. I don't really think much about things being objectively real. I'm trying to grapple with a way of giving expression to that."

Asked whether *Soul Survivor* is an extension of that philosophy and whether the experience of watching it has overwhelmed him yet, Williams shrugs. "I can't watch the movie. I've seen it so many times, it's unintelligible to me," he says. "While I'm proud of the movie, I don't dwell on it. My sense of who I am is not inextricably bound up with what the movie is or how well it does. Those are two separate entities which overlap, but are quite distinct in my own psyche. The movie is really about the experience of leveraging the collective energy that we all brought to the making of the movie. One hopes that at the end of it, it's a semi-coherent document that touches other people. That's the real experience. Everything else is gravy. Cannes is gravy. Sundance is gravy. Toronto is gravy."

Would he go through it again? "Yes," he smiles. "Nothing I do satisfies me. Somehow that makes me want to keep doing it, keep making films. To watch the movie, every scene reminds me of how short I have fallen, how uninspired and uninspiring I am. I get bogged down by my inabilities. Then I think that I can do better and I should do better. As you can see, I'm a very cheery guy."

Angela Baldassarre is a Toronto freelance writer.