

SAM'S JOURNEY FROM NEW YORK TO HOLLYWOOD

“When Ozzie shoots Gator and he dies there in the house on the floor—realistically in the movie, Gator’s dead. Cathartically, the ad-dict that was in me died on that floor. And it changed everything for me.”

—Samuel L. Jackson

SUBCHAPTERS

- Finding a Nurturing Environment
- A Hollywood Disappointment
- Getting Sober
- Playing Gator in *Jungle Fever*
- Artistic and Box Office Success

CHAPTER REVIEW

Sam didn’t build his career in a day. Before getting plucked to go to Hollywood, he had a robust theater career in New York, where he was a member of the Negro Ensemble Company alongside Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman. Although he loved performing on stage, Sam had higher ambitions. He says it took him getting sober to gain success and longevity as a screen actor.

Ironically, his breakout role that caught the attention of Hollywood casting agents was his performance as the crack-addicted character Gator in Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever*. After winning a special prize from the Cannes Film Festival jury for his performance, Sam’s film career took off. He earned an Oscar nomination for his performance as Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, cementing his reputation as an artist, and enjoyed worldwide recognition for his performance as Zeus in *Die Hard With a Vengeance*, proving that he was a box office goldmine.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- When it premiered in 1981, audiences praised *A Soldier’s Play* for its deft portrait of racism. It went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Sam played Private Louis Henson, part of an African-American unit of soldiers being investigated for a murder. Read *A Soldier’s Play*.
- Gator was the first role Sam played completely sober, and he recounts the powerful catharsis he experienced with the character. Watch *Jungle Fever* and observe how Sam’s personal experience helped him embody Gator. Can you draw from your personal experience as you create your audition piece character? Make a list of some specific things that you’ve experienced that you could write into your character’s biography.

