

FROM THE ACTOR, DIRECTOR & PRODUCER CORNER...



Introducing  
*Joe James, Jr.*  
On

# Arthur!

## A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

The Life Story Of Tennis Great  
**ARTHUR ASHE**  
...a spiritual journey

### ***What compelled you to produce this project?***

**Arthur Ashe** was an American hero and personal hero of mine. I've often wondered where might I be if there was never an Arthur Ashe. He had that much of an impact on my life. Even during a time tennis was not a popular sport among blacks, Arthur Ashe was very popular in my hometown. Richmond Virginia, his hometown, was only an hour and a half away.

This is an independent project and I'm glad that I was able to produce and direct it and be featured as my idol. Watching **Halle Berry** produce *The Dorothy Dandridge Story* and **Denzel Washington** stepping out to direct and star in the *Antwone Fisher* story, gave me the motivation and incentive to simply just do it. Yet, above all, I was especially touched and moved by **Mel Gibson's** *The Passion of Christ*.

### ***What do you think about the biopic movies this year?***

I was fortunate to be a part of the SAG nominating committee this year. They sent me over 40 movies to watch. I watched movies until 4 o'clock in the morning. I was highly impressed with all of them. **Jamie Foxx**, **Kevin Spacey**, **Don Cheadle** and **Jim Caviezel** all did incredible jobs in depicting the characters. Each biopic had its own rhythm and style. I certainly feel that *Arthur! A Celebration of Life* has its own unique style and flavor as well.

### ***What impact did Arthur have on your life as a child?***

I believe tennis saved me from being caught in the cross fires of the escalating violence that prevailed in the neighborhood I called home. When I first saw Arthur Ashe walk across the tennis court, so cool, confident and regal, I said to mother, 'Who is he and where did he come from?' He was the first black person that I had ever seen on television in professional tennis. The phenomenal **Althea Gibson** was before my time, so I never got the chance to see her play, except in old tennis clips. Having Arthur as a role model growing up helped me tremendously, to set goals for myself that once seemed unattainable. I was good in basketball, football and baseball and track. But I was great at tennis! I was lanky, fast and strong. I spent my summer months on the tennis courts and at tennis camps and clinics. This project is a tribute to a man that I looked up to and admired. I may not have played pro tennis, but my skills as a tennis player helped make this docu-drama come to life.

### ***Is this project something you felt you had to do?***

Absolutely! And, thankfully, I had all the tools in making this tribute a success. This is truly a “labor of love,” a project in which all the wonderful and talented actors, singers and crew members, donated their special talents to make this tribute come to life, to make it special.

### ***What was one of Arthur's traits that you admired?***

After his success, he came back and gave to the community. Forming the National Junior League and discovering other talented players. Arthur won the first **U.S. Open** in 1968, the **Australian Open** in 1970, and **Wimbledon** in 1975. Thirty-six years later, his record still stands alone as the only African American male to win a grand slam in tennis except for **Yannick Noah**, who was Arthur's protégé. Arthur discovered Yannick in Africa and sent him to Europe for professional training and tutoring. In 1983, Yannick defeated the defending champion **Mats Wilander** and became a **French Open** Champion. I'm sure that made Arthur feel as if he had won the French Open himself.

### ***How did you prepare for the role?***

Well, there were three things that I was blessed with and had in my favor. I'm an actor, tournament tennis player and I have a strong resemblance to him on film. My first initial plan was to stage this piece as a play, in which I had started to do. Then the concept started to look more like a docu-drama and I flipped it. I knew it would reach a larger audience as a film, in the festival circuit.

Arthur was a quite a philosopher. I wanted to capture his essence and passion for the causes he believed in and the diligent, tireless work he did to bring about change in various areas. In tennis, he was known for his serve and volley, but also his powerful backhand. I changed my tennis game to match his and I lost 15 pounds to do it.



### ***What do you want people to see and understand from this project?***

That Arthur Ashe was a true athlete on and off the court, always a gentlemen, but a fierce competitor. I also want to highlight his incredible spirit, intelligence and the legacy he left to us all. He broke down barriers just like **Jackie Robinson** did in baseball. However, Arthur didn't have teammates beside him on the field. He stood alone in victory. Though he encountered a constant barrage of obstacles, he never stopped trying to make tennis a better game, this a better world. The strong sup-

port and business knowledge he lent to athletics, as well as his determined efforts to end South African apartheid and American racism, were just some of the prominent causes in which he was engaged. Arthur also won an Emmy for his documentary *The Black American Athlete: A Hard Road To Glory*, which was also made into a book.

### ***When did you start acting and playing tennis?***

I started playing tennis at age 10. I played all through high school. I started acting when I was 12. My church had a theatre program and we performed two-act plays and musicals. In high school, I was in all of the school plays and on the varsity tennis team. I was also on a full scholarship at the Virginia Conservatory.

### ***Have you portrayed any other famous people?***

Well yes, I played **Larry Hoover**, the most notorious drug dealer in Chicago. His business grossed \$100 million a year while he was still in prison. Though, ironically, he was compared to **Nelson Mandela** because of his leadership skills. The show was called *The Prosecutors*, produced for The Discovery Channel. If this man had put his talents to work in a positive manner, he, like Mandela, would have been a great leader.

**What other famous person would you like to play?**

Well, Arthur was at the top. I've been told I favor so many people. Maybe a famous singer or musician. I would like to know more about, **Simon** the Cyrenian, the man who helped Jesus carry the cross. I think that was one of most significant roles in history. I would like to know more about that person. Maybe do his life story. Because I feel his life was predestined to be standing there at that particular time to assist Jesus.



**Have you done any other TV or film work?**

My first national television appearance was in the Christian Broadcasting Networks version of *God's Trombones*. I played "The Prodigal Son" and Satan. From there, I landed a two-year stint on the Family Channel soap opera *Another Life*; I played a juvenile delinquent who eventually turns into a Broadway dancer. They are still airing re-runs of the soap in the U.K and Europe. I had a recurring role as Gordon's father on *Sesame Street* and a regular on a show called *Side by Side TV*, another children's show. I was also on a show called *Dreamstreet*, which didn't last but a couple of episodes. I have also appeared on *America Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* and had featured parts on all the New York soaps. I've done over three dozen movies as a looping actor and national commercials. I've work Off-Broadway and in regional plays. I also had a successful career as a print model and a professional dancer.

**Did you ever wait tables or shine shoes to pay your bills?**

I was truly blessed in that category. My first full-time job in New York was working as a bookkeeper for the **Metropolitan Opera** then I transferred over to **The United Negro College Fund**, where I worked in the Data Processing Office, as well as all of the charity events. At these UNCF events, I met famous singers and actors like **Whitney Houston, Billy Dee Williams, Elizabeth Taylor**, etc.

**What do you think of the West Coast?**

Well, I moved out to L.A. in 1994 and landed jobs as a spokesperson for **Microsoft** and **Direct-TV**. I later returned to NY and continued working as a spokesperson for **Mercedes Benz, Tivo, 1-800-COLLECT** and **AT&T**, while working on my own projects.

**How involved were you in The Arthur Ashe Project?**

I was involved in every aspect of the production, including everything from conceptualizing the piece to having a hand in costume choices for the characters. What helped me to prepare for all of this was my four-year experience as a Marketing Manager and Event Planner. In that line of work, you have to wear all of the hats from organizing, training, and setting up to delegating. Producing a film project is basically the same soup, just in a different bowl.

**What is in the future for you?**

Well, I'm trying to get my movie *Soul Baby* produced, and I have three other scripts...*The Truest of Friends, 60 and O, and When the Devil Comes Knockin'*. Soul Baby and The Truest of Friends will also be produced as novels. I'm also a lyricist. I wrote the song *Colored People* heard in the Ashe Project. I have submitted several songs to established artists for consideration. I also created the group *ANGELS: Voices of Praise*, a gospel and inspirational trio. I wrote some ten songs for the group to record. You can also hear them singing throughout the Ashe Project. I'm working on getting them signed to a major label. So I have plenty of projects to keep me occupied. I know that God's got my back... so everything's gonna' be all right.