

“Hit him back, Sidney!”

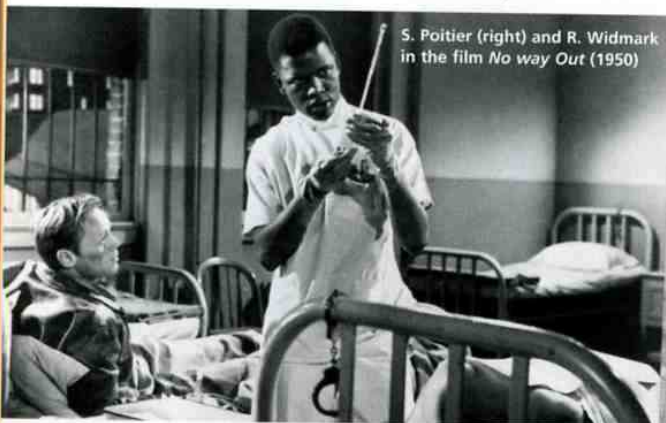
One day my sister Teddy said to me, “What are you going to do? What would you like to do when you grow up?” And I remember – at that time I was about twelve – I told my sister that I would like to go to Hollywood and become a cowboy.

I had just seen my first movie – it was a cowboy movie, of course – and I thought it was the most amazing thing. I had no idea that Hollywood meant the movie business. I thought Hollywood was where they raised cows, and where they used horses to keep the cows corralled, and where the cowboys were the good guys, and they were always fighting the bad guys, who were trying to either steal the cows or do something to the people who owned the cows, and I wanted to do *that* kind of work.

Teddy laughed, but the laughter wasn't *at* me; she laughed *with* me. She was somebody who really loved me a lot, like my mom. She was more than ten years older, and she laughed. I'm sure she must have thought it was so wonderful that I was having this terrific dream, but she didn't correct me, she didn't say, “That's such a way-out¹ fantasy.” She didn't say “Who do you think you are? Man, you better get your feet on the ground. Boy, you got a long way to go.” No, she obviously had dreams too.

About ten years later the family was able to gather in a theatre in Nassau to see the first picture I ever made, something called *No Way Out*². This was in 1950, and it was the first time my parents had ever seen a movie. It must have been something like a fantasy for them, a dream. I'm not entirely sure how much they grasped³ of the concept.

My mother was sitting there, a woman who really didn't know anything about movies. My father was sitting there, a guy who really didn't know anything about movies. The movie played, and they were absolutely enthralled⁴ with what they saw, letting go with “That's my kid!” and all that. But near the end of the movie Richard



S. Poitier (right) and R. Widmark in the film *No way Out* (1950)

Widmark pistol-whips me in the basement of some house. He's hitting me with this pistol, the butt of this pistol. He's beating the crap out of me with this pistol, and my mother jumps up in the theatre and yells, “Hit him back, Sidney! Hit him back! You never did nothing to him!”. In front of everybody. My brothers and sisters are squirming⁵ and laughing, saying, “Mama, sit down.” But she's not joking. She's for real, completely in the moment. “Hit him back, Sidney! Hit him back!”

That was my mother.

SIDNEY POITIER, *The Measure of a Man* (2000)

1. **way-out** (adj.): unusual or strange; weird
 2. **No Way Out**: no solution
 3. **grasp** (v.): understand

4. **enthralled** /in'θrɒld/ captivated
 5. **squirm** (v.): 1. twist about like a worm 2. feel very embarrassed or ashamed