

Chadwick Boseman To Star In Bridgeport Attorney's Film 'Marshall'

December 17, 2015



Chadwick Boseman will play Thurgood Marshall.

(Jordan Strauss / Associated Press)



Susan Dunne Contact Reporter

Chadwick Boseman to play Thurgood Marshall in movie written by Bridgeport attorney

Bridgeport attorney Michael Koskoff co-wrote a screenplay about U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and sold the script to producer Paula Wagner. Wagner, who has produced several blockbuster films including the first three "Mission Impossible" movies, has cast actor Chadwick Boseman to play the lead role, it was announced on Wednesday.

Marshall was the first African-American U.S. Supreme Court justice, appointed in 1967. Before that appointment, he was most famous for his Supreme Court victory in the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education case, which desegregated public schools.

The fact-based story told in "Marshall" takes place in Bridgeport. In 1940, a Greenwich socialite, Eleanor Strubing, accused her African-American chauffeur Joseph Spell of rape and kidnapping. To ensure Spell got a fair trial, the NAACP oversaw the appointment of a Bridgeport lawyer, Samuel Friedman, to defend Spell, and brought in Marshall to assist Friedman.

"It's the story of two young lawyers, one black, one a Jew, in a time of a huge amount of antisemitism and racism," Koskoff said.

The film will be filmed out of state because of Connecticut's moratorium on filmmaking tax credits. "It should be filmed in Connecticut. We wanted to film it in Connecticut," Koskoff said. "We can't for monetary reasons."

George Norfleet of the Connecticut Film Office said "we do regret the decision" made by Wagner to not film in Connecticut. "It's a very powerful, historically relevant, especially to Connecticut, story," he said. "We would very much have liked for them to film it here."

Norfleet added that the moratorium — which freezes tax credits to films slated for cinema release, but not to films going straight to TV, DVD or the internet — will not be lifted until 2017.

"Marshall" will be Boseman's third role playing an African-American icon. He played Jackie Robinson in "42" and James Brown in "Get On Up." The movie will be directed by Reginald Hudlin.

Koskoff wrote the screenplay with his son, Jacob Koskoff, a screenwriter whose adaptation of Shakespeare's "Macbeth," starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard, is in theaters now. Koskoff's daughter, Sarah Koskoff, also is a screenwriter. She wrote the 2012 comic romance "Hello I Must Be Going," which starred Blythe Danner and was filmed in Westport. Koskoff's other son, Joshua, works with his father in at the law firm Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder. The firm, which also has an office in New Haven, was founded by Koskoff's father, Theodore.

Koskoff said the late Jacob Zeldes, a partner in the Bridgeport law firm Zeldes, Needle & Cooper, gave him the idea for the film. "It particularly appealed to me because of my background. I handled a lot of civil rights cases in Connecticut in the 60s," including defending a member of the Black Panthers, Koskoff said. "I also handled discrimination cases in Bridgeport and New Haven, to integrate the fire and police departments. It was a topic I felt I knew something about."

Koskoff has worked on the screenplay for years. Lauren Friedman, the daughter of Samuel Friedman, is a mutual friend of Koskoff and Wagner showed Koskoff's script to Wagner. Wagner liked the early draft, Koskoff said, but wanted him to work on it more. Koskoff brought in his son to help him polish it.

"It started out as an anatomy of this one trial. It evolved into something more than that," he said. "This story is shown within the context of Thurgood Marshall's early life. In that year of his life, he found out who he was and what kind of a courageous person he was."

"Marshall" won't be the first movie to be made based on a Bridgeport court case. In 1947, Elia Kazan directed "[Boomerang!](#)," a courtroom thriller based on the 1924 murder of a priest in Bridgeport.

It also won't be the first film about Marshall's career. The one-man play "Thurgood" originated in 2006 at Westport Country Playhouse starring [James Earl Jones](#). Laurence Fishburne starred in the Broadway version in 2008 and performed it at the Kennedy Center in Washington. That performance was filmed and broadcast on HBO in 2011.

At Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder, Koskoff specializes in personal injury and malpractice cases. Currently, he is representing nine Newtown families in a suit against the manufacturers of the Bushmaster rifle, on a charge of "negligent entrustment" for making the firearm available for sale to the general public. "The weapon has no legitimate civilian use. It's not for self-defense and it's not a hunting weapon," Koskoff said. "Its only purpose is to commit assault."

Koskoff also has written law-oriented opinion pieces for The Hartford Courant.

Koskoff's script sale is all the more extraordinary because he is beginning a career in the youth-obsessed film industry at the age of 73. "I saw that the person who wrote the screenplay for 'The King's Speech' was about 75," he said. "I said 'That's great. I could do that'."