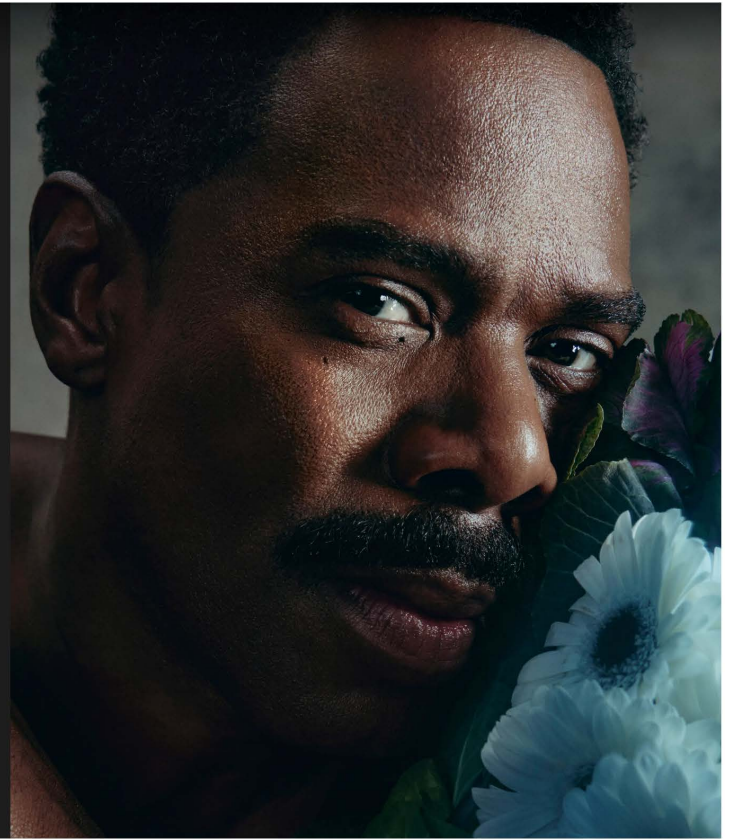


Colman Domingo Leads With Radical Love

By [Stephanie Zacharek](#)



Colman Domingo photographed in London on Jan. 19. Campbell Addy for TIME

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If you can't spend an hour or two with Colman Domingo in real life, you can still find the key to his spirit—the sense of the joy he both draws from the world and puts back into it—in a family photograph from Easter 1976. There's Colman at age 6, a pint-size gent perched between his older sister and brother, wearing a candy-striped blazer so groovy you wouldn't be surprised to see it on Sammy Davis Jr. at a Coconut Grove show. Elegant and poised, he gazes straight at the camera, his legs crossed just so. He brought this picture along when he appeared on *The View* in late November, and after the show's hosts had finished cooing over its adorableness, he provided the backstory: The navy pants he's wearing in the photo had a matching jacket, but it was too small. He grabbed the striped one instead, though his mother observed that it didn't quite match. "But it makes me feel good!" he told her, and instead of arguing, she told him, "Wear what makes you feel good," setting him on the path he follows to this day.

Domingo, now 55, is known for his creative yet classic red-carpet style, inspired by influences ranging from Fred Astaire to the Ohio Players, Cary Grant to Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes—it makes perfect sense that he's been named one of the chairs of this spring's Met Gala, the theme of which is "Superfine: Tailoring Black Style." Style is integral to Domingo's spirit, as a way of communicating, of pushing out into the world, of connecting with Black men and women who came before him—which is to say that anyone who believes style is superficial hasn't met Domingo. How he dresses, how he moves, even how he sips from a coffee cup: all these things are so casually entwined with who he is—as a performer, certainly, but also as a writer, director, producer, and, just generally speaking, a person who's alive to the world—that they charge the air around him.

Generosity begins with the self, and Domingo is so at ease that he has extra grace to spare. In a politically and emotionally precarious world, where people seem to have stopped caring for one another, those molecules of grace are like gold. "Everything I do is about radical love," Domingo says, over a coffee at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. "It's about seeing each other. What am I doing as a creative? It's about getting people to think, maybe helping people think differently. You know, that's all I can do. The macro I can't take care of. But I can take care of the micro."



Photograph by Campbell Addy for TIME

Domingo has earned a Best Actor Academy Award nomination for his superb performance in *Sing Sing*, Greg Kwedar's drawn-from-real-life film about men who find redemption through a prison theater program. This is Domingo's second nomination in as many years: he was also recognized for his turn, both charming and fiery, as civil rights activist *Bayard Rustin* in George C. Wolfe's 2023 biopic *Rustin*. (He's the first actor to be nominated two years in a row since Denzel Washington, who earned nods for *Fences*, in 2017, and *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, the following year.) He's the anchor of Netflix's multipart thriller *The Madness*, in which he plays a media pundit who stumbles into a murder plot in the woods of the Poconos. And the projects he's got going, for 2025 and beyond, stack far into the sky: He plays patriarch Joe Jackson in Antoine Fuqua's upcoming Michael Jackson biopic and stars in Tina Fey's upcoming series *The Four Seasons*, a reimagining of Alan Alda's 1981 comedy. He's ready to direct and star in a Nat King Cole biopic he's written, and to direct a drama about the romance between Sammy Davis Jr. and Kim Novak too.

But even if the spotlight around Domingo now seems particularly bright, he has in fact been everywhere for a while now: In the early 2000s he splashed out in Broadway shows like *Passing Strange* and *The Scottsboro Boys*, garnering a Tony nomination for the latter. In 2022 he won a Primetime Emmy for his recurring role in *Euphoria*. Moviegoers know him from pictures like *Lincoln*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Zola*, and *The Color Purple*.

Still, after working as one sort of performer or another for some 35 years, he's grateful for—and more than a little surprised at—all the extra attention he's gotten in the past five years or so. “How can I say it? I did not intend for this at all. I wanted to be a respected actor, and I found my work as a character actor mostly in the theater. I feel like that's where I was most useful, and that's where I was best being served.” As he began to take more television roles, opportunities began shifting. “It felt like the roles were meeting me and I was meeting the roles.” Now, he knows exactly how fortunate he is, and he's also in a place where he can effect change for others. “I'm like, ‘Oooh, I get to have an impact? What can I do? What can I disrupt?’” He laughs, a great, sonorous laugh that sounds as if it could have rolled in from the ocean, even though Domingo was born and grew up in West Philly. “That's what I want to do, and really do it in the most loving, gracious, generous way possible.”

One of Domingo's early gigs was as a “party starter” for bar mitzvahs, getting recalcitrant guests out on the dance floor. Though he has no formal dance training, he moves through the world on springy, lily-stem legs, and it's hard to imagine Mrs. Rosensweig, or anyone, resisting his effervescence. But given the way he carries himself in every interaction, it's likely Domingo offered something else too: not just charm and fancy footwork but safety, the feeling that, if you join him, he'll have your back.

For his appearance on *The View*, he invited his two nieces—one is actually a family friend, but he considers her family—to hang out in the greenroom with him beforehand and later watch the show from the audience. And to observe him with family—or even the small cadre of assistants on hand to make the day go smoothly—is to see a man who doesn't think twice before opening a door for others, literally or figuratively. It's not only fun to be around him, but almost calming—as if he were looking after the welfare of everyone in his orbit, even amid all the demands that come with being a hardworking performer and, now, a truly famous person.

His friends seem to feel that way too. Writer-director-actor Bradley Cooper met Domingo when the two found themselves on the awards circuit last year, Cooper for his Leonard Bernstein biopic *Maestro* and Domingo for *Rustin*. “I think it was like a CAA party after the Golden Globes or something,” Cooper says by phone from New York. “I went up to him, and we had a wonderful conversation. He was just a luminous human being.” The two exchanged numbers and have since built a friendship. Domingo says Cooper has been a great sounding board for his Nat King Cole project; Cooper demurs—he doesn’t think he’s helped that much—but he values having a friend he can talk to about projects that matter. “It’s always nice to talk to somebody who’s going down or has gone down a similar path,” he says, “and whenever he wants to talk about anything, I would just share my experience and things that I’ve learned and need to work on, or want to work on. Anytime he’s asked me something, I actually feel privileged that he even wants my input.” Cooper is also, simply, happy to have found a true friend. “As you get older, you tend not to make new friends. But I made a new friend, which is kind of wonderful. And he allows that space to be a friend to somebody, which is beautiful.”



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Domingo, like Cooper, has ideas to spare. He’s eager to take on bigger and more ambitious projects—more disruption of the loving, gracious, generous kind. But like lots of successful people, he’s earned his self-assurance day-by-day. He never thought the career he has now was a sure thing. “I’m happy that I’m being met in this moment on my terms, in the way that I wanted to be seen. I didn’t have to become some kind of other artist, who has to leave parts of themselves behind. I bring all of me into it. I bring all my years as a theater practitioner, as a director, as a writer, as a producer. Even when the industry wanted me to just pick one.”

By showcasing his talent across film and TV, Domingo has broadened his scope in a way that allows him to share the wealth. All through 2024, as studio and streaming execs balked at greenlighting risky or ambitious projects—even as many who make their living in TV and movies were still scrambling to recover not just from the pandemic, but from the actors’ and writers’ strikes—the motto of many who’d seen work dry up was “Survive till ‘25.” And that was before so many lost their homes in the horrific Los Angeles wildfires. (Domingo’s house, in Malibu, was spared.) So while he’s riding high, he’s using his career not just to gain recognition for himself but also to help determine which stories get told. In other words, it isn’t just about climbing higher; it’s about lifting others.

His involvement with *Sing Sing*, as both an actor and an executive producer, is a case in point. When he signed on to play John “Divine G” Whitfield—a man, wrongly imprisoned, who finds a lifeline in the performing arts—director and co-writer Kwedar, along with the film’s other writers and producers, suggested a parity model in which everyone involved would be paid the same rate. Domingo loved the idea. “My heart just opened. I don’t know if it works for every project. But I think there are elements of it that can work, especially when it comes to low-budget features. You’re doing it because you love it, and you want to be a part of it.” And when the project succeeds, everyone benefits, not just a few people at the top. “I think that’s just fair,” Domingo says. “So when we did sell the movie to A24, the most beautiful thing was to know the checks were being written out to every single department, and every person. That felt so good and so meaningful, especially right now, when the industry is having an existential crisis. This model can help be a game changer, so that everyone feels respected.”





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Domingo's *Sing Sing* co-star, Clarence Maclin, is a veteran of the real-life prison program that inspired the film, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, and one of the many formerly incarcerated men who have roles in the movie. He plays a version of himself, a man whose capacity for growth expands when he becomes involved with the program. Maclin, who'd gotten his acting training at Sing Sing, with its terrible acoustics and, as he puts it, "sucky sound system," knew how to project; Domingo helped him tailor his performance to the intimacy of the camera lens. But what Maclin took from their collaboration goes beyond mere tips about technique. "He's the genuine article when it comes to someone who definitely is going to be there, someone who means what they say about what they want to do and what their intentions are," Maclin says via Zoom. "The things I want to be, I see in him already, and it's like a guide."

The idea, as Maclin clearly gets, is that living in the world means so much more than looking out for No. 1. We need to focus on what connects us rather than divides us. I met with Domingo three weeks after the election, at a time when many were still feeling stunned—and more than a little helplessly frozen—by the results. As a gay Black man, one who stands up for the people and causes he cares about, he knows the road ahead might be bumpy. But when he woke up on Nov. 6, he didn't panic. Instead, "I thought, OK, this is where we are." Again, he vibrates with so much radiant energy that it's impossible to feel hopeless around him. A conversation with him leaves you with the feeling that he's handing you a key; it's up to you to find the right door to open, but you know you can do it, even if you're not a spectacular-looking six-foot-plus movie star who moves through every space—and the world—with lanky, liquid grace. "The pendulum does swing," he says. "My parents went through a lot, my grandparents went through even worse. And I am here, where I am in my life, but also as a proud descendant of slaves who lived, loved, and fought, and sacrificed, so I could be here. So I can't hold my head down and be sad or despondent about anything. I have to roll up my sleeves to continue to get to work: Fight, love, be joyful in a very revolutionary way."

This is how you honor those who came before you while also opening a corridor for everyone who will follow. This is how you get the party started.

Set design by Ibby Njoya; styling by Ola Ebiti; grooming by Mata Mariéle; production by Ragi Dholakia Productions; retouching by Touch Digital

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