

Transcript: The Professor (2007)

A Documentary Short Directed by Jason Price

Total Running Time: 0:24:59.000

Contact: jasonjprice@yahoo.com / www.jasonjprice.com

[Opening Title Card]

0:00:01.000

TC: Liberia is a West African country founded in 1822 by freed and formerly enslaved African-Americans.

0:00:08.000

TC: 2006 was an important year in Liberia's history. After two disastrous civil wars that spanned 14 years, a tentative peace was restored. Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was declared President, and the dictator Charles Taylor was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity. As a result, Liberian exiles throughout the world began to consider the possibility of return.

0:00:30.000

TC: Roughly 6,000 Liberians have resettled in Park Hill, Staten Island since the 1980s. One of them is Professor David D. Kpormakpor

0:00:43.000

TC: *The Professor*

[Scene 1: The Professor]

0:00:48.000

DK: We've been over these questions so many times now.

0:00:51.000

FF: I know, I know.

0:00:53.000

FF: I don't want to make any mistake, over there. You know?

0:00:58.000

DK: The first question is...

0:01:00.000

DK: Who is the present President of the United States?

0:01:04.000

FF: George W. Bush is the present President of the United States.

0:01:08.000

DK: Who is the Vice President?

0:01:10.000

FF: Dick Cheney is the Vice President.

0:01:13.000

DK: Hmmm?

0:01:14.000

FF. Dick. Cheney. (She laughs.)

0:01:17.000

DK: It's not funny!

0:01:19.000

FF: I know. But one thing you should know Prof, I wasn't born here, I came. Grown up.

0:01:27.000

DK: That's no excuse.

0:01:28.000

FF: It is...

0:01:31.000

DK: I was not born here either.

0:01:32.000

FF: I know. But I don't speak like the way the Americans speak, the real Americans speak, I can't.

0:01:37.000

DK: No. But don't leave out the s's. They're part of the word.

0:01:42.000

FF: Okay

0:01:42.000

TC: *A Film By Jason Price*

[Scene 2: History]

0:01:57.000

VO: This is Fanta Fofana. She is a home health aide, originally from the war-torn, West African nation of Sierra Leone. She left home shortly after the tragic death of her husband, mainly to support her three, young children. She is studying for her citizenship exam in the hopes of bringing them to America.

0:02:22.000

VO: Sometimes her favorite client helps her study. This is David Kpormakpor. Yet he is mostly known as "Prof" or "The Professor." He is 71 years old and requires twenty-four hour nursing care.

0:02:40.000

VO: Ten years ago, he lived under very different circumstances.

0:02:48.000

VO: Former law professor and Supreme Court Justice David D. Kpormakpor served as Interim President of Liberia between 1994-1995, during its disastrous civil war. He was appointed by a handful of warlords who had been searching for a neutral person – uninterested in power – to chair the Council of State.

0:03:14.000

VO: Kpormakor was an ideal choice. Born far from the capital, he was the first member of his family to read or write. As a young man, he impressed a missionary from Mississippi who secured him a place at the prestigious College of West Africa. He finished third in his class and won scholarships to San Francisco State University and UCLA. He returned home, became a professor of law, and was appointed to the Liberian Supreme Court. His reputation as incorruptible, and perhaps a bit naïve, made him a superb candidate for the warlords who were looking to install an uncomplicated figurehead for the government.

0:04:03.000

VO: As Interim President, he had little power beyond the capital; and even there one of his generals seized the mansion in what amounted to a failed coup. Ultimately, Kpormakpor left office with nothing. He spent the next two years living on a military based guarded by African peacekeepers who broke into his home twice, stealing everything he owned.

0:04:32.000

VO: In 1997, with his health declining and the ruthless dictator Charles Taylor coming to power, Kpormakpor returned to America. He settled in a housing project in Park Hill, Staten Island, where nearly 6,000 Liberians had sought refuge from war and poverty. He has lived here alone, on welfare, for nearly a decade.

0:04:58.000

VO: It is morning in Park Hill. The night shift is over. And Fanta is about to replace Rafia at Prof's apartment.

0:05:17.000

FF: Hello...

RW: Good Morning...

FF: Good morning, how are you?

0:05:20.000

RW: Fine.

FF: Sorry I'm late.

RW: No problem. He already had his breakfast.

FF: Oh really?

0:05:24.000

FF: Mr. David

0:05:26.000

RW: Mr. Kpormakpor

0:05:27.000

FF: I'm here. "Ginger Ale".

DK: I see you.

FF: I know.

0:05:33.000

FF: It's more than 12 hours she's supposed to leave at eight o'clock. But I was late, so...

0:05:37.000

DK: You know, in Liberia we say, "You eat your food and then rub the palm oil on your mouth." (laughter)

FF: Look at you, you look so nice!

0:05:46.000

VO: Corruption has long been standard practice in Liberian politics. By consequence of his presence in Park Hill, it is likely that Kpormakpor was unique in that he did not use his political office for his own ends, for this reason, he is a peculiar figure in the Park Hill community. Some people believe he isn't normal, that he stole millions and is simply storing it away somewhere. Others accuse him of being a fool, for not taking what was rightfully his.

[Scene 3: Questions]

0:06:24.000

JP: Do you think about these things a lot, now?

0:06:30.000

DK: Not really. I guess you mean, do I, say, argue with myself? Why did you do so, so, so... Why you didn't... You had a golden opportunity to do so and so and so and so... Why you didn't do it? You could have been...

0:06:55.000

JP: Could have been what?

0:06:58.000

DK: Could have been a whole lot better off.

0:07:08.000

DK: People say I didn't take anything from this position. I said "But I was only there for two years. But Sawyer was there for four years"...

0:07:23.000

DK: Varney Sherman, one of the big lawyers there in Liberia, he said, "If you had been there 100 years, you would have come out the same way."

0:07:38.000

DK: I don't know. In answer to your question... If I had tried to listen to Sawyer and tried to protect myself?

0:07:52.000

DK: And you'll say again, if self-preservation is the first law of nature... But I didn't do it.

0:08:00.000

DK: And if your next question is... if you were faced with the same dilemma...

0:08:09.000

DK: I don't know.

0:08:15.000

JP: So did you break the law of nature?

0:08:20.000

DK: I guess if I tell you "no", then I don't understand what the law of nature is.

0:08:27.000

JP: If you were not following the law of nature, then what law were you following?

0:08:35.000

DK: Stupid law.

0:08:40.000

DK: Do you think there are other people... You're not an old man, but with what experience you have had, have you come across some other people who behave like I?

0:08:50.000

JP: Yes.

0:08:53.000

DK: But I bet you can count them on one hand.

0:08:59.000

DK: Just some people are just that way.

0:09:12.000

DK: Some of the former government officials, who are still in the government, this new government that will be set up, the politicians, when they come in and find out what kind of a man I was would say, "Oh that man there is a bad man. He's a bad man. He pretends like he's more holy than the Pope."

0:09:47.000

DK: So, right now as I'm sitting here, I could say to myself, "I will never do it again." But who knows. If I had that opportunity... you know?

0:10:06.000

JP: Never do what again?

0:010:11.000

DK: I would try to be more holy than the pope.

[Scene 4: Church]

0:010:15.000

MT: Okay, that's the church. (singing)

0:011:22.000

P: We know God is faithful. We have seen the miraculous work he has done in this church, and we are grateful to God to be here. So once you are standing, just connect yourself with someone. Hallelujah.

0:011:40.000

P: Now father, our female president, guide and protect her. Build a hedge around her. Give her wisdom and understanding, so that she can lead your people according to your way. Be with our former president, David Kpormapkor. He is declining Lord. But because of you, you will give him strength once more. And we know you have never started work that you cannot complete. And because he is trusting in you, we say give him his heart's desire – that he will go again to Liberia, and he will be the man that he was before.

[Scene 5: Exam]

0:012:23.000

(laughing)

DK: Okay, okay, next time.

FF: You know what?

DK: Next time.

0:012:30.000

FF: You were once a president, so you know all this stuff.

DK: What is the...

FF: Whether it's Japan's constitution or wherever.

0:012:39.000

DK: What is the national anthem of the United States?

FF: "The Star-Sprinkled Banner."

DK: Is it "sprinkled"?

FF: Spankled. S-p-a-n-g, S-p-a-n...n? g-l-e?

DK: You better make note of that.

FF: Okay.

DK: The Star Spangled, S-p-a-n-g-l-e-d

FF: Spangled

DK: Banner

FF: B-a-n-n-e-r?

DK: Yeah

0:013:10.000

DK: There is a song - *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*. In Liberia, we used to sing it with the same words, and when we came to America we would replace it with Liberia.

FF: Ahhh.

DK: *Liberia, Liberia, God shed his grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.*

[Scene 6: Letter]

0:013:47.000

JM: I'm almost done, Prof. I'm almost done. Let me bring the chair for you. This is the final draft we're going to work with.

0:014:01.000

JM: 'Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf...'

0:014:18.000

JM: Alright, Prof, I got *Forum* newspaper – one of the Liberian news outlets. Now I've *Perspective* too right here. So what would you like to change in the document?

0:014:30.000

DK: 'If you need any help or advice, be sure to let me know. I am proud of your success and know that you... and your leadership...'

0:014:50.000

JM: 'I know that you and your leadership will bring you much personal satisfaction.'

0:015:01.000

DK: Why do we have to send this letter to the newspaper?

0:015:04.000

JM: It's going to be in the newspapers. The president reads the newspapers. At least she will be say, well, Prof is thinking about me. And if she has interest, she will contact you, your address is here. Your address... I'm sorry. Let me put your phone number there, as well. She'll be able to contact you, if she intends to reply to you, there's the address, she could write you back.

0:015:25.000

DK: I was telling him today, when I was here in the sixties, I used to receive a letter from Liberia within three days, and vice versa. But today... It may not be so.

0:015:57.000

JM: Ahhh, Poppy.

[Scene 7: Coconut]

0:016:00.000

DK: We do not take care of our former. We treat them like, I often tell people... You know coconut?

0:016:08.000

JP: Yeah.

0:016:12.000

DK: When it's not too full, you cut the head off, you drink the juice, and then you get a spoon, you scoop the meat from there, and then you lay back and you throw it in the ocean. You don't even throw it around because you don't want to see it again. That's how we treat our formers. And so when the man gets into office he's got to look out for himself. If he doesn't he's, he's, he's doomed.

[Scene 8: Pharmacy]

0:016:51.000

DK: Thank you.

0:017:03.000

DK: I used to go on Forest Avenue for my glasses and I didn't have to pay because I got... What do they call it?

0:017:08.000

EA: You have Medicare and Medicaid. See Dr. Powell, she'll take care of everything, and she's a pleasure. I mean everybody's gone there have been very happy with her. They're raving about her. These two I'll take care of. I'll play with this one. Give me a couple of minutes with this one.

0:018:08.000

DK: Quite frankly though, if I had it to do again, I would do it differently. Don't you know there are a group of Liberians here, who knew me in Liberia, they say I got the money and I don't want to spend it. I think I've told you this before. So you get nothing out of it. You take it, they say you took it, you don't take it, they say you took it. So, I guess the best thing to do is...

0:018:20.000

DK: How are you?

Z: Fine thank you.

DK: Long time.

Z: Yeah.

DK: Are you going home to run for the foreign ministry?

Z: Oh, no.

0:018:38.000

DK: When you are not in government, you see things a different way. So when you join the government, they say "put on the glasses that you brought from outside." You put them on. They say, look out there, what do you see? You say, "I see A, B, C, D, E, F..." They say, put your glasses down. Take our glasses from this office, put them on. When you put them on you say, "What?" You see everything differently. You start singing the same song of those you have been criticizing.

0:019:21.000

JP: So what glasses are you wearing now?

0:019:23.000

DK: You tell me!

BT: Different glasses! Different from before. (She laughs.)

DK: Huh? Say that again.

BT: Different from before.

DK: I'm not wearing any glasses now.

BT: He dropped his glasses for a long time.

DK: The glasses I used to wear, they don't fit me again.

BT: They don't fit him. They're too big for him now.

[Scene 9: Divine]

0:020:03.000

FF: Here,

DK: Oh, there's some more? I thought we were finished.

FF: No. It's 100 questions.

0:020:16.000

DK: What group has the power to declare war?

FF: The Congress.

DK: Hmmm. The war going on in Iraq, was it declared by Congress?

FF: I don't know. I don't want to talk about this. (KNOCK)

0:020:38.000

FF: Who is it?

DK: Go attend to it.

0:020:54.000

FF: What's your name? Divine? Okay, I'll tell him.

0:021:01.000

FF: Who is Divine? A lady, a young lady.

DK: What did she say?

FF: She'll come back.

DK: She'll come back?

0:021:11.000

DK: She told you her name was what?

FF: Divine.

DK: What?

FF: Divine.

DK: Divine?

0:021:21.000

FF: Yeah, a white lady. Where do you know her?

DK: Don't give me that kind of question.

0:020:26.000

FF: Yeah, I have to...

DK: You are an employee.

FF: Because I'm...

DK: You are an employee...

FF: Yeah, I know but...

DK: You are an employee here.

FF: I know but I have to be on the safer side. Yeah, anything happens to you, they hold me responsible. You're immediate relatives...

DK: Ohhh, I think I know who it is.

FF: Who is she?

0:021:45.000

DK: She used to come here and beg me for money.

FF: For money! And you give her money?

DK: Sometimes I would give her...

FF: Oh my God.

DK: When I don't have small money, twenty dollars, I'd say, "Go change it."

FF: You don't have to do this!

DK: When she goes she never comes back again. She did it to me twice. She and her husband, I met them as soon as I moved here. She said...

FF: In this building? They live in this building?

DK: Yeah, she said her husband was in the hospital, but he has passed away. I felt sorry for her.

0:022:15.000

FF: Yeah. But you know the way... Oh, I see her I'm scared though. Yeah... trust me.

DK: I don't think she want anything from you.

FF: No! But what about you?

DK: What could she do to me?

FF: Maybe she thinks you have a lot of money in here. You see? People kill for \$100, \$200, \$50. Yeah... I'm serious.

DK: What you're saying makes a lot of sense. What you're saying makes a lot of sense.

FF: So whenever she comes you don't have money. You don't have money! You don't work! So don't give people money!

0:022:59.000

DK: You know what? Human beings... we are like the fingers...

FF: I know.

DK: We're all not the same. I don't have money, true. But yet, I eat everyday...

FF: Thank God.

DK: And you don't know how she's managing.

0:023:23.000

DK: I think her name is Yvonne.

FF: Yvonne?

DK: You said Divine.

FF: (she laughs)

DK: Her name is Yvonne.

FF: Okay. Can we go ahead?

0:023:39.000

FF: But don't you tell her I said these words.

DK: Oh. Are you scared?

FF: Yeah, of course. She'll say, "Oh. Now that my friend won't give me money no more."

DK: Not "no more." "Anymore."

FF: "No more." Okay, Prof.

[Closing Credits]

0:024:00.000

Produced, Directed, and Written by
Jason Price

Cinematography

Jason Price

Additional Cinematography

Christopher Fraga

Steve Fletcher

Edited by

Jason Price

Additional Editing

Ya-Hsuan Huang

Sound

Ya-Hsuan Huang

Christopher Fraga

Additional Sound

Jon H. Manto

Damien Stankiewicz

Andrew Ventimiglia

Robert Y. Chang

Jason Price

Technical Support

Ya-Hsuan Huang

Cheryl Furjanic

Aaron Glass

Jeff Himpele

This film is dedicated to Professor David D. Kpormakpor

Thank you to the people of Park Hill

Jacob Massaquoi

Fanta Fofana

Bamba Toure

Moussa Toure

Ethan Asedo

Esther Sharpe

Ernest Cassel

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Tchocky
Amy Smiley
Ed Sherwood
Warren Stewart
Frank Wildermann
Joyce Jed
Arnold Wendroff
Lucas Bessire
Purcell Carson
Faye Ginsburg
Amali Ibrahim
Jonathan Kahana
Tobia Reu
Par Parekh
Sadia Shepard
April Strickland
Becca Howes-Mischel
Alex Huerta-Mercado

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Department of Anthropology
New York University

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Key:

TC: Title Card
DK: David Kpormakpor
FF: Fanta Fofana
RW: Rafia Tou Wilson
JP: Jason Price
VO: Voice Over
JM: Jacob Massaquoi
P: FUCC Pastor
Z: Zacharia
BT: Bamba Toure

MT: Moussa Toure
EA: Ethan Asedo