

Celebrity interview:
Viola Davis, ‘The Help’

A graduate of the Juilliard School, Viola Davis built an exceptional background in theater productions and has continued to perform on the stage throughout her television and film career. Making her feature-film debut in 1996 as a nurse in “The Substance of Fire,” she followed that up with several TV movies and guest-star appearances on dramatic series like “Law & Order” and “NYPD Blue.”

She went on to play another nurse in “City of Angels,” a hospital drama with a predominately African-American cast that didn’t last long on CBS. She began collaborating with Steven Soderbergh for “Out of Sight,” and went on to star in two of the director’s subsequent films, “Traffic” and “Solaris.”

In 2001, she appeared in “Kate and Leopold” as well as in Oprah Winfrey’s television presentation of “Amy & Isabelle.” The following year, she landed parts in both “Far From Heaven” and in Denzel Washington’s directorial debut, “Antwone Fisher.”

However, in 2008 she made the most of a modest but critical role as the mother in John Patrick Shanley’s screen adaptation of his award-winning play, “Doubt.” Although her screen time was minimal, her indelible performance garnered Viola an Academy Award nomination in the Best Supporting Actress category.

Here, she talks about her latest outing as Aibileen in “The Help,” a compelling tale of survival, set in Mississippi during the waning days of Jim Crow segregation, which explores the unspoken tensions simmering just below the surface between well-to-do white women and their African-American maids.

Kam Williams: Hi Viola, thanks for the interview. I’ve admired your work for a long time, so I’m very honored to have



CELEBRITY
INTERVIEW

by Kam
Williams

this opportunity to speak with you finally.

Viola Davis: Thank you, Kam.

KW: I have a lot of questions sent in by fans, so let me get right to them. Legist/Editor Patricia Turnier asks: What message do you want people to take away from “The Help?”

VD: That anything can be achieved with a good, healthy dose of courage. These ordinary people who are just kind of just going about their lives are transformed into heroes because they have the courage to put their voices out there. I think that’s a powerful message in this time of political strife.

manages to stand out from other Civil Rights era films?

VD: Well, I made a choice to humanize this woman beyond her uniform is what I did. I made a choice to explore Aibileen fully: her joys, her grief at losing her son, her journey in finding a purpose in life, because when you meet her, she has basically died to herself after losing her child. So, that’s what I did. I created a human being. That’s not what you usually see in a maid. You see the woman cooking in the kitchen or taking care of a child, and she comes up, says her one line, and then she goes back into the kitchen. So, I made a choice to use my craft to create a character.

KW: Rene Harris says: I read an article in which you were quoted as saying it is a painful certainty that you will never see a contemporary black woman on screen as layered and complex as you. Do you expect someday to be in a position to greenlight just such a story someday?

VD: Oh, absolutely! My hus-

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KW: Patricia also asks: Are there any unwritten rules which are part of the movie industry?

VD: Yes, there are a lot of unwritten rules in the industry.

KW: Film director Kevin Williams says: Congratulations on another great performance! How did you approach you’re role and the material in such a way that it

band [Julius Tennon] and I started a production company. We’ve already optioned a book and some scripts to do exactly that, to create more complicated, multi-faceted roles for African-Americans, especially African-American females. I think it’s important. Cicely Tyson was my inspiration to become an actor. And one of the people I’ve always wanted to emulate in pursuing that dream



Octavia Spencer with Viola Davis, in “The Help.”

was Meryl Streep, in terms of the different types of roles she’s been able to play and the number of different stories she’s been able to tell. I know very few black actors who’ve been given the opportunity to do that. I want to do what she does. I want to span different genres. I want to be able to transform. I want to be able to be sexy, and funny, and quirky, and all the other things that I am. And I feel that the best way that I can achieve that is by producing. I am not a writer, but I feel that when our production company is successful, we’ll be able to give some young writers with fresh voices an opportunity to put their work out there.

KW: Rene was also wondering whether there are any books that present complex women of African descent that you might consider getting the rights to?

VD: Oh, there are 50 million of them! I already optioned a book called “The Personal History of Rachel DuPree.”

I also like “The Book of Negroes,” by Lawrence Hill.

And I love all of Octavia Butler’s books. She’s created some very complicated black heroines with a variety of belief systems. There are many great books out there, but those are a few of the ones that stand out.

KW: Speaking of writers, children’s book author Irene Smalls says: You are one of my favorites. I read an article saying that even though you are dark-skinned you have succeeded as an actress in Hollywood. How do you feel about a comment like that?

VD: I really appreciate that comment. I’ve always seen myself for who I am, which is a lot of things. So, I guess that when I walk into a room, I bring all those things to a role, and I’ve always just simply seen myself as an actor. And I believe that it serves me well to just think in terms of my craft. If hypothetically, I saw myself only as a sex symbol, or as some other limited stereotype, I think I would feel like a complete failure. I’ve been to acting school and I think that at the end of the day, when you just focus on the work and you’re comfortable with who you are, that at some point someone’s going to recognize your talent and give you an opportunity. And after that, there’s a domino effect. I’ve always believed that, and never wanted to be anything other than who I am.

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman says: I love your work, and have enjoyed seeing you on Broadway. I’d like to know whether the actresses bonded along racial lines during the filming. I’m asking because I saw some cast members on a TV talk show, and there seemed to be different reactions to the cover photos of you on Essence and Vogue.

VD: The absolute truth is that the bond between all of the actresses on the set was beyond compare. It was the most loving and most supportive environment you can imagine. First of all, we had a great cast which was all about the work. No egos. Secondly, I think we all understood that we needed each other. We needed a relief from the world that we were creating. Each of us was as uncomfortable as the next. In terms of the magazines, I’m not exactly sure what Bernadette is referring to. I suppose that the covers are open to interpretation, but I want to assure you that if you were in a room with the cast, you would see absolutely no division.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles asks: How do you encourage someone to see the film who might say, “I read the book and already discussed it in my book



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