

Director Ava DuVernay: The 'Selma' Interview

Ava DuVernay is a writer, producer, director and distributor of independent film. Winner of the Best Director Award at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, Ava was honored with the 2013 John Cassavetes Independent Spirit Award and the Tribeca Film Institute 2013 Affinity Award for her second feature film, *Middle of Nowhere*.

She made her directorial debut with the critically-acclaimed 2008 hip hop documentary, *This is The Life*. A couple years later, she wrote, produced and directed her first narrative feature, *I Will Follow*, starring Salli Richardson-Whitfield. Prior to directing, Ava founded DVA Media + Marketing in 1999, and worked as a film publicist for over a dozen years. Her award-winning firm provided strategy and execution for more than 120 film and television campaigns for such industry icons as Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood and Michael Mann.

The UCLA grad is the founder of AFFRM, the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement. And she is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, as well as the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, as well as a board member of both Film Independent and the Sundance Institute. Here, she talks about her new film, *Selma*,



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams

about Roger in the movie.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: Why was it important for you to bring this story about *Selma* to the big screen?

AD: Because there's never been a film with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the center released in theaters. Ever! One does not exist. You've only seen tele-films and stage plays about him. Yet, we have big screens biopics about all kinds of people. So, I think it's only right that there be a full-length feature about Dr. King. I don't think there could be enough of them, but there should be at least one. So, here it is!

KW: Patricia also says: The contributions of many black women to the movement, including Coretta Scott King, haven't been credited enough. Will the audience learn more about this aspect of history in your



Oprah Winfrey plays Annie Lee Cooper, a woman who tried to register to vote five times, and had an infamous tussle with the local sheriff in *Selma*.

translated into Spanish on my trilingual webmag. Will *Selma* be available in movie theaters in French and/or Spanish? I have a friend, a beautiful sister who is deaf and mute, who would like to see *Selma*. Will it be shown in theaters with special glasses so the deaf can watch it with subtitles?

AD: Yes, the film will be subtitled in some French and Spanish-speaking countries around the world, but I don't know whether it will be subtitled for the deaf.

KW: Environmental activist Grace Sinden says: Congratulations on the Golden Globes nomination for directing *Selma*. I cannot wait to see it. We know that it is difficult for women to move up in many fields but this issue has recently received much focus, especially in terms of Hollywood directors. What advice do you have for women trying

to break the glass ceiling? Can you share your thoughts on this issue? Was it any more difficult for you personally?

AD: Ignore the glass ceiling and do your work. If you're focusing on the glass ceiling, focusing on what you don't have, focusing on the limitations, then you will be limited. My way was to work, make my short... make my documentary... make my small films... use my own money... raise money myself... and stay shooting and focused on each project.

KW: Editor Lisa Loving says there have been thousands of people marching in cities all across the country since the Missouri police officer who killed Michael Brown was not charged in his death. In our town,

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There are a lot of sisters there who contributed to the fabric of the Civil Rights Movement

which has been nominated for four Golden Globes, including Best Director.

Kam Williams: Hey, Ava, long time-no speak.

Ava DuVernay: It sure has been awhile, Kam. How are you?

KW: I'm great. How about you? Congrats on the Golden Globe nominations, and with the Oscars just over the horizon!

AD: I don't know about that, but it's been a nice ride so far.

KW: I was surprised to see you in *Life Itself*, the documentary about Roger Ebert, and to learn that an encouraging encounter with him as an adolescent had been such a big influence on your life.

AD: He was such a champion of under-represented filmmakers. He was a very big deal to me. It shows the power of critics. People who write about film, like you, can really affect the confidence of a young filmmaker. He did that for me, so it was such a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk

picture? In other words, did you bring your perspective as a black female to directing *Selma*?

AD: Yes, Patricia, it was vital to me to include woman characters, and Coretta Scott King [played by Carmen Ejogo] is a prominent one. There's a full arc where she's painted, and you get to see behind the veil of her quiet dignity. Another character is Amelia Boynton [played by Lorraine Toussaint], a freedom-fighter who's still alive and 104 years-old. She's the woman who invited Dr. King to *Selma*. Oprah Winfrey plays Annie Lee Cooper, a woman who tried to register to vote five times, but was rejected and humiliated every time, and had a very infamous tussle with the local sheriff in *Selma* that landed on President Johnson's desk through the newspaper accounts. Richie Jean Jackson [played by Niecy Nash] and Diane Nash [played by Tessa Thompson] are also in the film. There are a lot of sisters there who contributed to the fabric of the Civil Rights Movement.

KW: Lastly, Patricia says: The interview you did in the past with Kam Williams was

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