

FILM REVIEW: Ava DuVernay Tackles Mass Incarceration and more in 'The 13th'

By Dwight Brown
NNPA Newswire Film Critic

The New York Film Festival celebrated its 54th year by trying something new. For the first time in history, its Opening Night World Premiere was a documentary. Even more noteworthy, this non-fiction film is by director Ava DuVernay (Selma) and it focuses on America's deep problem with its criminal justice/penal system and how it affects the Black

community. Screening DuVernay's powerful documentary "The 13th," helped NYFF make a social/political and cultural statement that may resonate for years. Normally, analyzing racism, inequality, involuntary servitude, prison systems and police brutality is such a vast endeavor it would take a collection of books, a string of college courses or a PBS miniseries to begin to understand such complex subjects and their many ramifications. In one hour and 40 minutes, DuVernay masterfully takes on that arduous task, shares some illuminating analysis and starts a conversa-

tion. With photos, archival footage and interviews, she presents something akin to a condensed post-graduate course that delivers facts, figures, history, parallels, anecdotes, observations and controversial incidents that corroborate her thesis. What's on view is an equal dose of academic study, solid journalism and deep emotion that will provoke anger, sadness and hopefully motivation for change.

“We are a nation that professes freedom yet have this hyper-incarceration system that is grinding into it our most vulnerable citizenry — and is overwhelming biased towards people of color”
— Senator Cory Booker

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DuVernay connects the dots from the liberation of slaves by the 13th Amendment signed on Jan. 31, 1865, to the convict leasing that followed, then the Jim Crow system of apartheid, the



Michelle Alexander, author of "The New Jim Crow," talks about the effects of mass incarceration in "The 13th."

FBI's war against Black activism and today's rampant incarceration of poor, Black men. Over 100 years of systemic oppression, dehumanization and what Jelani Cobb, the director of the Institute for African-American Studies, calls "a mythology of Black criminality."

Some of what she points out has been said before, and she is reinforcing it. However, lots of the information she's bringing to light will be alarming news to most viewers i.e., did you know that the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a nonprofit organization of conservative state legislators and private sector representatives, drafts and shares model state-level legislation that legally lets businesses take

advantage of free labor by prisoners?

The film is a revelation on so many levels. When it ends, the feeling of anger and sorrow is almost overwhelming. There's also a nagging feeling that you wish you had step-by-step instructions on how to help break the cycle and make a change. Even, just as a coda, a list of some actionable steps would empower viewers. It would have been helpful, if the film had mentioned the importance of voting, community activism, joining police departments to make change from within, gun control or even decriminalizing drugs. Problems, like the ones depicted in this very observant film, only get solved when someone takes a first step.

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the classics ranging from Shakespeare to Langston Hughes to Edgar Allan Poe.

Unfortunately, exposure to great literature didn't save Maya from further trauma, as she would become a single-mom at 17 after being pressured into a sexual encounter with a boy who wanted nothing more to do with her. She subsequently supported herself and her son, Guy, by holding an array of odd jobs, including work in the sex trade industry as a stripper, prostitute and even a madam.

Yet somehow, Maya would overcome her humble roots and checkered early career to become an African American icon and respected writer. That miraculous recovery is the subject of "Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise," a reverential retrospective offering an intimate look at the life of the late poet/author/actress/director/civil rights activist.

Co-directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack, the film features heartfelt reflections by an array of luminaries, including Bill and Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, John Singleton, Cicely Tyson, Dave Chappelle and Valerie Simpson, to name a few. For example, we hear Secretary Clin-

ton refer to her as "a phenomenal woman" while Lou Gossett, Jr. credits her with raising his political consciousness.

A poignant portrait of a survivor's unlikely path from abandoned street urchin to consummate

poet laureate!

Excellent ★★★★★
Unrated

Running time: 114 min.

Distributor: American Masters Pictures

View the trailer at TheSkanner.com

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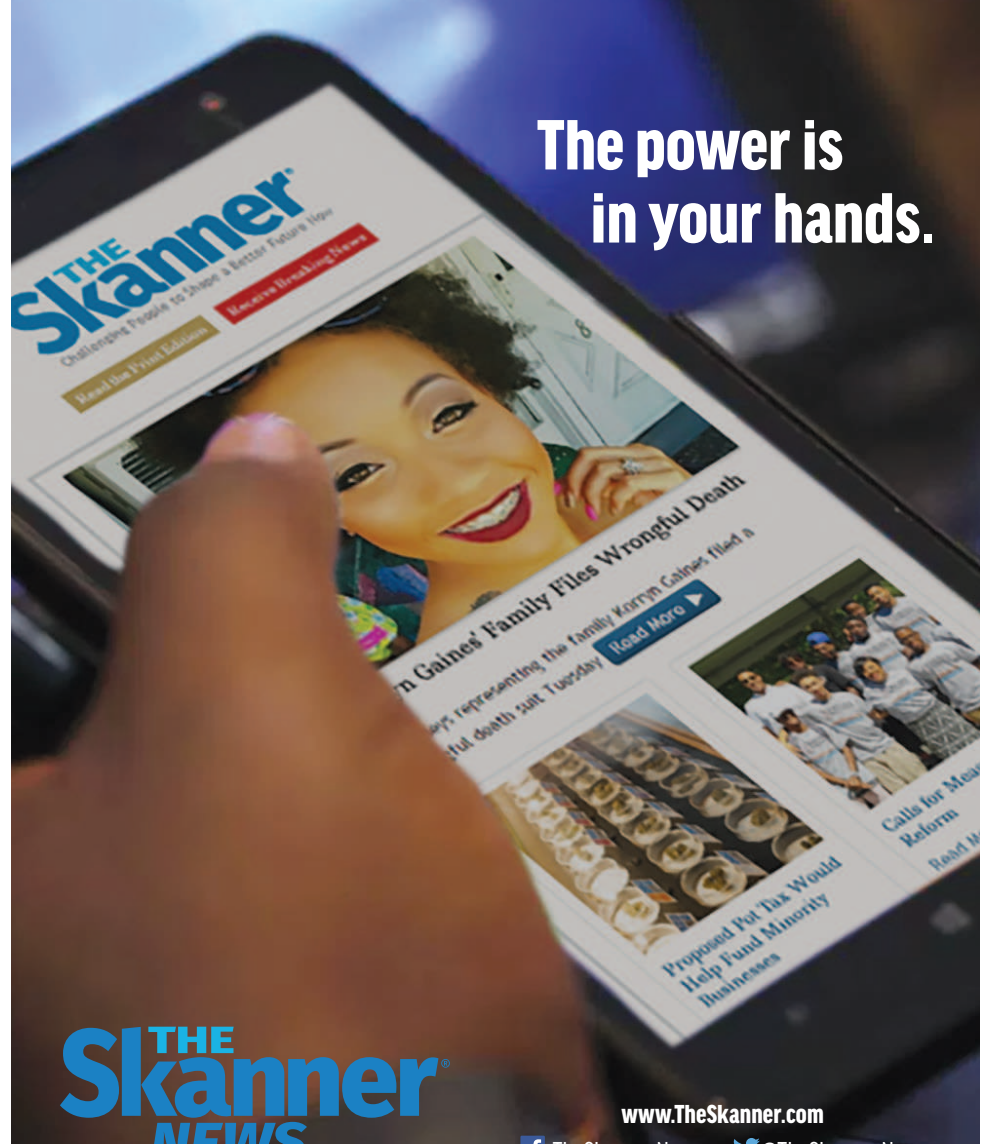
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