Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Viola Davis as Ma Rainey

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 19th, 2021



Viola Davis © Armando Gallo HFPA 2015

Viola Davis was nominated for a Golden Globe as best actress in a drama for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, directed by George C. Wolfe from the 1982 play by August Wilson and produced by Denzel Washington, but on February 28 the journalists of the Hollywood Foreign Press gave the award to Andra Day for her stunning acting debut in *The Unites States vs Billie Holiday*. Davis had also been nominated to the Oscars, but on April 25 Academy voters gave the best actress award to Frances McDormand for *Nomadland* by Chloe Zhao. In 2017 Davis had won a Golden Globe then an Oscar as best supporting actress for *Fences*, also based on an August Wilson play, directed, produced and co-starring Denzel Washington.



Viola Davis (c) HFPA 2017

Denzel Washington said: “I’d heard of Bessie Smith, but didn’t know anything about Ma Rainey before I saw the play in the 80s, and I fell in love with August Wilson on the spot. Five or six or seven, or however many years ago (2015), August’s widow came to me and said that the estate was interested in making his plays into films, and I agreed to shepherd them. August Wilson is one of the great writers in American Theater, like Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. He’s richer, deeper, his stories are so specific, but the themes are universal. So I try and take these wonderful stories and be a part of sharing them with people, surrounding them with great actors and storytellers. In this case, George Wolfe, who is a brilliant human being, and Viola Davis, who’s obviously a great actor. Her performance is brave, strong, sexy, unapologetic, brilliant. To her managers, Ma Rainey was just a paycheck, so they are prostituting her, but she understood her value, her leverage and her power and she wasn’t going to be steamrolled.”



Viola Davis as Ma Rainey © David Lee-Netflix

Viola Davis said: “Business people tend to walk all over artists who are not in high standings, so it was a joy to play someone who has their own agency and autonomy. Many times, as a person of color, you are seen through the gaze of white society, but, within the context of Black America, I grew up with a number of people who felt confident about themselves, about their bodies, about their abilities, and they would cuss somebody out if they crossed the boundary. So it was great to be in an August Wilson play, where he wrote us as we actually are, in the context of our own life. And that’s what was so liberating about playing someone like Ma Rainey, who knew what her worth was.

“Everything that’s happening now can’t be reduced or overly simplified. It’s a mess, it’s a quagmire, but it has always been happening; it just blew up. It emerged at a time when there was a pandemic, people were not working, everyone was at home, so they could really pay attention to George Floyd, and it woke people up. So now we see where 400 years of systemic racist policies has gotten us. I’m hopeful, because without hope there’s death, and this young generation, born at a time when they had a Black president, when they’re seeing the first Black female vice president, where there’s a lot of interracial relationships, where you have the LGBTQ community, they’re much more open and pliable than we are. But it’s going to probably take generations of people dying off to bring the sort of change that we need to see.”

George Wolfe said: “The play is a fictional work set in 1927, and after 1928 Ma Rainey never recorded again. In the 1920s, in the South, she was a show biz entrepreneur, she owned two theaters in Georgia, she toured around and she was in command of her whole career. Therefore, when she shows up North, in Chicago, she’s not an angry annoyed person, she is coming into the equation, saying, my power is different from yours, but I have power and you are going to acknowledge my power.

“Viola is a force of nature emotionally, and intellectually she is unbelievably smart. She has a very analytical brain when it comes to digging into text and storytelling, her skill set is so evolved and sophisticated, and she was there throwing in her comments. So it was a glorious collaboration, she’s a jewel and a joy to work with.”



Viola Davis (c) Theo Kingma-HFPA 2018

For Chadwick Boseman, a passionate trumpet player in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, you may read my article here.

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