

stella

The star of Davis

Viola's
amazing
journey
to
Tinseltown



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Voilà, Viola

Oscar-nominated and championed by Meryl Streep, the actress Viola Davis isn't doing too badly for a girl born into poverty on a Southern plantation. And yet her best is still to come, she tells HELENA DE BERTODANO

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMANDA FRIEDMAN

'The gigantically gifted Viola Davis!' shouted Meryl Streep from the podium. It was 2008 and Streep was accepting the Screen Actors Guild Award for best actress in *Doubt*, the film that also earned Davis an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress. 'My God,' said Streep, flinging her arms in the air in frustration, 'Somebody give her a movie!'

It seems that 'somebody' was listening. Since then Davis has been in a dozen films, perhaps most memorably as the maid Aibileen in *The Help* (2011), which won her a number of awards and another Oscar nomination, this time for best actress. Last year she was listed in *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. Now 47, she has two films out this year - the supernatural romance *Beautiful Creatures* with Jeremy Irons and Emma Thompson, opening this month, and *Ender's Game*, a sci-fi film with Harrison Ford.

In *Beautiful Creatures* Davis plays Amma, a combination of two characters from the fantasy novel on which the film is based: the housekeeper and the librarian. 'I am more the librarian than the housekeeper,' explains Davis when we meet at her large suburban home in San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. 'I told Richard LaGravenese [the director] that I don't want to clean houses in this movie. I don't want to have a sponge in my hand and I don't want to wear an apron. I feel that African-Americans in any story are defined too often as housekeepers and facilitators.'

In the past Davis has accepted whatever role she has been given without trying to tamper with it. 'Putting my foot down is a progression for me,' she says. 'I've always been an actor for hire and to some extent I still am. But I knew I did not want to play a housekeeper.'



There is a steely determination to Davis, a trait that has carried her a long way from her impoverished childhood growing up in Central Falls, Rhode Island, to become a fêted Hollywood star with a reputed net worth of \$3 million. ‘When I see myself as a little girl in a rat-infested, condemned building in Central Falls, rummaging for food, it’s absolutely unbelievable that I’ve come this far. I have achieved more than I could ever have dreamt. I feel like I really have a blessed life.’

Born on a plantation in South Carolina, where her grandmother worked in the tobacco and cotton fields, Davis moved north to Rhode Island when her father got a job as a horse groomer. They were the first black family to live in Central Falls and Davis experienced the trenchant racism of the time. ‘At school they would put us in a line to drink from the water fountain after recess and if I was first or second in line, then that was it. The whole line would refuse to drink. They’d wait for the teacher to walk away and it was, “I’m not going to drink from the same fountain as a n—,” and they would start pushing me. I was an angry kid anyway, so that didn’t help.’

Fiercely motivated, she threw herself into everything at school. ‘I was on the student government, the student newspaper, the drama club, every sport. Wherever there was a competition and I could win something, I would be involved.’ Although neither of her parents had had a high-school education, Davis was determined to make it to college. She majored in theatre and won a coveted place to the Juilliard School for performing arts in New York for four years. Arriving at the audition she was horrified to hear that they expected her to stay for two days. ‘I was already working in rep and I had a show back home that night. I never would have the courage to do this now, but I said, “Are you kidding me? I only have 45 minutes. You have to decide whether you want me or not at the end of this audition.”’ They did. ‘There was something in me that felt I was good. I was so passionate, so gung-ho, so hungry...’

Davis is proud of her solid background in the profession. ‘The reason why I went to Juilliard, the reason why I got a degree in acting, is that I wanted people to understand that I could be technically proficient as an actor, that I’m not just up there flying by the seat of my pants. Anyone who goes to Juilliard for four years of 13-hour days, of being scourged and beaten to within an inch of your life – to get the proper standard American speech – that is a person who wants to be an actor and doesn’t just want to be a celebrity.’

‘In fact,’ says Davis, ‘the celebrity thing is hard to negotiate. Naturally, I’m shy. I didn’t even date

until I was in my twenties. I didn’t know how to talk to men, and let me tell you, nobody was talking to the girl in the corner with no make-up who’s 30 pounds overweight. There’s still that girl in me. I’m not a look-at-me girl.’

She is, in fact, much more attractive in person than in most of her roles. Her hair (when she dispenses with the wigs that she almost always wears in public) is close cropped and she looks slim in a long black, white and pink shift-dress. We are sitting in her living-room, which looks out on to a quiet street on one side and a large pool carved into the edge of an almost vertical rock-face on the other. Her husband, the actor Julius Tennon, is entertaining the



Clockwise from left: Davis in her new film, *Beautiful Creatures*; in *The Help* (2011); *City of Angels* (2000)



‘When I see myself as a little girl in a rat-infested building, rummaging for food, it’s unbelievable that I’ve come this far’

couple’s two-year-old adopted daughter, Genesis, who runs in and out of the room to embrace her mother.

Life after Juilliard wasn’t easy. Davis scraped by in New York. ‘Everyone told me I wasn’t going to make any money, but I was coming out of this life of poverty, so money was very relative to me. I was thinking, if I could make \$150 per week, that would be great. I came from a life that was difficult into a profession that was difficult. And I’m also a type that is difficult.’ I ask her what she means. ‘Well, I’m 47, I’m a woman of a certain level of attractiveness, a certain hue...’ Not, she is implying, the type that Hollywood is queuing up to cast. ‘I’m just saying this in a completely objective way.’

Although she doesn’t have financial worries now, she says she still finds it hard to spend

Previous page: stylist: Jessica Margolis. Hair: Jamika Wilson for Ojon/Epiphany Artists Group Inc. Make-up: Autumn Moultrie for Exclusive Artists, using Chanel. Dress by Dolce & Gabbana. Belt, stylist’s own. Earrings and bracelet both by Rachel Zoe. Shoes by Christian Louboutin. This page: Rex

money. 'I don't get manicures, I don't get pedicures, I don't shop for clothes. It's difficult for me to look at price tags and see \$150 for a pair of shoes. I remember telling Julius that I could not spend any more than \$39.99 on a pair of shoes, that was my top price.'

She met her husband, who is 59 with two adult children, 14 years ago on the set of a television show in which she was playing a nurse and he was playing an anaesthetist. 'He was just the nicest man. I was complaining about living in LA and he said, "I'll show you around." He'd take me out, then walk me to my door and shake my hand and say, "You're a beautiful woman, I had such a great time with you." Then 20 minutes later he'd call me from the supermarket down the street and say, "I just wanted to tell you again what a great time I had." It was the first time I felt like I was with someone who had the capacity to love me.'

When she was named by *Time* as one of the most influential people in the world, she was amazed.

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'I don't consider myself to be influential to anyone,' she jokes. 'Maybe to my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter... and I'm barely influential with her sometimes.' More seriously, she adds, 'Meryl Streep once said to me, "You have to understand that some young aspiring actress is watching you, everything you say and do, every choice that you make." I think actors live on inspiration – that's our engine, that's our fuel. It is very hard to find inspiration in a profession that is so wrought with deprivation, where 95 per cent of actors are unemployed at any given time. We have friends who are actors who've never said, "Boo," on network television. There are hundreds of thousands of actors in Los Angeles, maybe two great roles per year for a black actress, and one person can cover both those roles. So what happens to all the rest?'

She herself idolised the actress Cicely Tyson. 'I first saw her when I was six and I just knew I was watching something different. I started to see acting as an art form.' The two women ended up working together on *The Help*, the film that really established Davis, but about which she has mixed feelings. 'Aibileen is a quiet character and

quiet characters always get the c— end of the stick. In the book she has an internal life, but when you take that away you are left with a mammy, an asexual mother figure taking care of this little white girl. I felt she was so much more than that. A lot of people in the black community had issues with a black woman playing a maid from 1963, and I can understand that'

In an attempt to find better storylines, especially for African-American actors, she and her husband have set up a multi-ethnic production company called JuVee Productions. They are planning to make a film about the life of Barbara Jordan, a leader of the civil rights movement and the first Southern black woman elected to the United

States House of Representatives. Davis, of course, will play Jordan. 'I'm looking for great narratives – as an actress you're not only as good as your narrative.'

But she doesn't want to be too politicised. 'I don't want to be a social statement or a reaction to a social statement: "We haven't seen black actresses as smart so I have to create a character who's really smart." Or, "We haven't been seen as sexual so I have to create a completely sexual character." It becomes almost allegorical in nature. I don't want to be an allegory. I feel the most revolutionary thing I can do is create narratives where you see a fully realised human being.'

Davis was recently described as 'a leading actress stuck in supporting roles'. Does she feel this is true? 'I don't feel I've yet had the role that reflects all I can do,' she says emphatically. 'I'm still waiting.'

Now her focus is also on her daughter, whom she adopted in 2011. 'I always wanted a child but acting is a very self-focused profession. We're late getting married, late having children, all of a sudden you stop for five minutes and think, "What have I been missing?"' Now, she jokes, she knows what real work is. 'This is bringing me to my knees, having a child. My grandmother had 18 children. Can you imagine? Even with one, I feel I'm always on survival mode, just trying to get through each day. I never thought that I could feel like such a failure but, at the same time, I'm amazed at how much I feel like the greatest hero alive.'

I ask if she plans to adopt any more children and she gives me a look, the signature Viola Davis look, that says far more than words. ●



Davis with her husband, Julius Tennon, at Vera Wang's autumn 2012 show in New York

Beautiful Creatures is out 13 February