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VIOLA DAVIS'S CALL TO ADVENTURE

How the star of "Fences" and "How to Get Away with Murder" got away from her difficult past.

By John Lahr

"I had a call to adventure, a call to live life bigger than myself," Davis said.

Photograph by Awol Erizku for The New Yorker

On January 25, 2009, a jubilant Meryl Streep stood before a gala crowd at the Screen Actors Guild Awards, in Los Angeles, having just won an award for her role in "Doubt," the film adaptation of John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize-winning play about sexual abuse, race, and the Catholic Church. Clutching her statuette, Streep gave a shout-out to the rest of the cast. When she got to Viola Davis—who had earned her first Academy Award nomination for her performance as the mother of an African-American boy a priest is accused of abusing—Streep saluted her colleague as "gigantically gifted," then threw up her hands. "My God!" she said. "Somebody give her a movie!"

The industry seems to have listened. Davis—"a newcomer at forty-five," as Streep later joked—has made twenty-one films since then. Not all her roles have been large or central to the narrative arc, but, as Aibileen Clark, the maid who helps expose the folly of the white Mississippi matrons she serves, in "The Help"(2011), she was a popular success and gained a second Academy Award nomination. "No one had ever

akst me what it felt like to be me," Aibileen says at the end of the film. The lack of white curiosity about black life is something Davis is always tilting at. "I've played many best friends, crack-addicted mothers, next-door neighbors, or professionals with no personal lives," she said. "There's a limitation to how we are seen."

When Davis took on the role of Annalise Keating, a high-profile defense attorney and law professor, in the ABC legal-drama series "How to Get Away with Murder," currently in its third season, she addressed this cultural trivialization directly. The show and her character were hatched in close collaboration with the series' creator, Peter Nowalk. From the start, Davis pushed him to dramatize Annalise's interior world and to show the private moments of this tough, brilliant professional, who has a difficult, and promiscuous, past. "I'm trying, within the confines of the narrative that I've been given, to show her pathology," she told me. "I don't see acting as hiding. I see it as stepping up buck naked in front of a group of people that you don't know. Every single time. It's about exposing. If you're not doing that, you're basically not doing anything." Nowalk elaborated, "From our very first phone call, she said, 'I want to be a woman who takes off her wig and wipes off her makeup, and you see who she is underneath.' She made the character frankly more complex, more interesting. Taking off her wig—that is the show's most famous moment, and it is all hers." He added, "I can never state too much how she elevated the character." It was a spectacular exhibition of agency in a woman who is, as she puts it, "darker than a paper bag." "Colorism and racism in this country are so powerful," Davis told *Entertainment Weekly* last year. "As an actress, I have been a great victim of that. There were a lot of things that people did not allow me to be until I got . . . Annalise Keating. I was not able to be sexualized. *Ever*. In my entire career."

In 2011, Davis, with her husband, the actor Julius Tennon, formed JuVee Productions, a multimedia company that takes on everything from virtual reality to movies. JuVee began as a strategic way for Davis to try to alter the public perception of African-American life, which hasn't changed much since Zora Neale Hurston observed, in 1950, that "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America." Davis told me, "It's hard for people to see us beyond narratives

that are didactic. I'm trying to change the landscape. And not just for me, for everyone." JuVee's productions so far include the vigilante thriller "Lila & Eve" (2015) and "Custody" (2016), in which Davis plays a judge presiding over a custody case. "The Personal History of Rachel DuPree," a drama about an African-American farming family in the Badlands of South Dakota in 1917, is under way. Davis and Tennon have also commissioned a bio-pic, about the politician and civil-rights leader Barbara Jordan (with a script by the playwright Tony Kushner).

In January, Davis, who is fifty-one, will get a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, but the real acknowledgment of her renown will come a couple of weeks earlier, with the December 25th opening of the movie adaptation of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Fences" (1983), in which Davis gives the best performance—in the best role—of her career. She plays Rose, the tender and sorely tested wife of Troy Maxson (Denzel Washington, who also directed the movie), a once great athlete who is now a garbageman, cheated of his potential by social circumstance. "Fences," which is set in the fifties, is the most commercial of Wilson's ten-play "Century Cycle," a series that chronicles, decade by decade through the twentieth century, what he called "the cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in." Davis and Washington, who delivered Tony Award-winning performances in the same roles in the 2010 Broadway production of "Fences," are two of Wilson's most eloquent messengers. And the film, which was shot in the Hill District, in Pittsburgh—the working-class black neighborhood where Wilson grew up—is that rarest of phenomena, a cinematic adaptation that is better than its theatrical template.

Davis's depth and delicacy are exceptional; so is her range. "She finds the character's song and she plays in that key and that melody," her co-star Stephen McKinley Henderson, who plays Troy's sidekick, said. In 1995, as Vera, the sometime girlfriend of a smooth-talking forties musician, in Wilson's "Seven Guitars," Davis was alternately shy, sassy, and saturnine; in 2001, as Tonya, the wife of an ex-con who strives to live by his own moral code, in "King Hedley II"—a performance for which Davis won her first Tony Award—she was fierce, heartbroken, and shipwrecked. In "Fences," she is full of love and lament. When Troy reveals to Rose that he has fathered a child with another woman, she stares at him in blank disbelief; then, as understanding settles in, Davis's face begins to register Rose's roiling internal weather. "There are moments in life where emotions are just not understated," Davis told me. "They're not thought out. It's a release." Rose's grief at Troy's betrayal is one of them. She tells him:

> You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs and dreams . . . and I buried them inside too. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. It didn't take me no eighteen years to realize the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom.

By the end of her speech, Davis is so submerged in Rose's shame and fury that, as tears stream from her eyes, snot comes out of her nose. Of her performance in the scene, Henderson said, "You can't go there if you haven't been there. There's no path to that."

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"A black person in this democracy is certain to endure the unspeakable and the unimaginable in nineteen years," James Baldwin wrote in his essay "The Price of the Ticket." It took Davis half that time to understand the horror of her situation. "If you haven't experienced poverty, you can't imagine it," she said. "It's so close, so tight. It's fraught with so much deprivation that it just explodes." She added, "Homosexuals, the transgender community, women, blacks—they're mistreated. With poor people, it's not mistreatment. You're not even there. You don't exist. It seeps into your brain." That sense of invisibility made it hard for Davis to come to terms with her childhood. "Our whole lives were about hiding, not sharing the secret," she said. "Because you're afraid of being judged. You're afraid of the shame. I just wanted to get out, to be somebody. I was always so hungry and ashamed. I couldn't get at the business of being me."

Davis's parents, Dan and Mae Alice, married when Mae Alice was fifteen and Dan, a racehorse groom, was twenty-two. (Dan left school after second grade and was illiterate until he was fifteen; Mae Alice quit after eighth grade.) Davis, the fifth of their six children, was delivered by her grandmother in a one-room sharecropper's shack on a former plantation near St. Matthews, South Carolina. "My mom says that all the aunts and uncles, everybody was in the house, just drinking, laughing, eating," Davis told me. "She said, 'And then when you was born everybody was yelling and cheering. Jumping up. I had a sardine-tomato-onion-mustard sandwich.'"

Soon after Davis's birth, her parents decamped to Central Falls, Rhode Island, an old mill town that was close to two racetracks, Lincoln Downs and Narragansett Park, where Dan hoped to find work. Central Falls was rumored to be both the smallest and the most densely populated city in the state, and the Davises were the first African-American family to live there. Among the many dilapidated buildings they lived in, the most notorious in family legend was 128 Washington Street, a partly boarded-up, condemned building, in which the Davises lived rent-free for a time, often without heat or electricity. Rats ate the faces off Davis's dolls; from her bed, she

could hear them killing pigeons in the attic. She went to bed each night with rags tied around her neck to keep them from biting her in her sleep.

The precariousness of Davis's life made it difficult for her to concentrate in school. "I messed up all the time," she said. "Detention every day. Nasty back talk with teachers. I pushed a teacher once. I wanted attention really bad. I felt I just didn't fit in." She wet the bed until she was fourteen. "We didn't have money all the time to do laundry. A lot of the time, we didn't have soap or hot water," she said. "We were smart kids academically"—her sisters Deloris and Diane made the Rhode Island National Honor Society—"but we'd go to school smelling. I reeked of urine." Davis and her sisters were lectured on hygiene by teachers and by the school nurse. But "it wasn't an option to out ourselves," she said. "We just sat there with our heads down."

For most of Davis's childhood, school lunch was her main meal. "When I say we had nothing, I mean zero," she said. "I remember one time a friend came over to the house and she opened the refrigerator. There was nothing in it. She said, 'Are you guys moving?' " Davis and her sisters mooched off the families of friends, dumpster-dived, and stole. "The last time I stole something, I was nine years old," Davis said. "I stole a brownie, but I never got it out of the store, because the store owner just told me to get away and never come back."

Racism was as pervasive as hunger. "People would throw things out of cars and call us the 'n' word," she said. At school, she was taunted and chased by the white boys. When she finally told her mother about the bullying, Mae Alice handed her a crochet needle. "I tell her, 'You don't run away, you stand your ground. If they mess with you, you just take out the crochet needle and you jab them,' " Mae Alice recalled. "I'm not gon' teach them to let someone call you names, hit you, and make you feel like you're not worth nothing, 'cause you are worth something." Davis never had to use her weapon. "But I tell you, the power of suggestion," she said. "I had my hand around it, in my coat pocket, and I had this kind of internal monologue going in my head: 'Jig 'em all, jig those motherfuckers.' At eight years old, I had a filthy mouth." She went on, "I could hear them behind me: 'You ugly. You black nigger, you

ugly. You black nigger.' I felt them grab me, and I said, 'If you touch me again, I'm gonna stab you to death.' I said it methodically. I remember the first kid, Stanley, he stepped back. He was, like, 'Oh, we don't mess with you anyway.' "

At home, however, there was no escaping the violence. Although Davis "never for a moment" doubted her father's love, Dan was an alcoholic who had been a boxer in his youth. Every Thursday, when he got paid, he came home drunk. The havoc could be spectacular. Dan once ripped the door off the refrigerator. He beat Mae Alice on a regular basis. "There was no peace in my household," Davis said. Sometimes, she recalled, after a beating Mae Alice "would come into our room, go into a closet, and hide in the back all night and just cry." It could take "all night, two days, or five minutes" for Dan's anger to dissipate, Davis said. Sometimes Mae Alice ran for help, and Davis went with her. "One time, she ran to the corner drugstore when it was real bad, when it lasted a couple of days. I stayed with her as long as I could, and then they took her to the hospital. I was about fourteen," she said.

The idea of leaving Dan "never occurred to me," Mae Alice said. She went on, "My mother never leave. My grandmother never leave. My aunts never leave. That's showing me something. You can't expect real life to be like a fairy tale." In the last ten years of her parents' marriage, Davis said, the violence abated and they grew close. "My mom said he apologized to her," Davis told me. "The way Mom phrased it was: 'Mae Alice, you know all those things I did to you? You know I didn't mean it, right? You know I'm sorry.' " Mae Alice, who now lives in an apartment in Providence, was Dan's caretaker until he died, of cancer, in 2006. "The day before he died, she was bathing him," Davis recalled. "She said he looked up and said, 'Thank you, Mae Alice.' She misses him."

On an unseasonably hot day in November, I visited Davis at her five-bedroom, seventy-five-hundred-square-foot home in Toluca Lake, a shady neighborhood of Los Angeles. She appeared at the gate, in bare feet and a black shift from Target, to escort me into the cool, high-ceilinged biscuit-colored hall. "Here's the thing," she said. "Because I grew up in such tight spaces, I don't get manicures,

pedicures, I'm not into cars, but I am into a fabulous house. I wanted the spiral staircase, clean sheets on the bed, to be able to take a shower." Davis moved into her new home in August, and many of the rooms were still undecorated, but it was clear that she was still living with the ghosts of her past. "The big 'Aha!' moment is that the trauma never goes away," she said. But now, through acting, she could release the anguish rather than hide it.

"Well, at least he didn't get Secretary of State."

Davis was preparing collard greens for dinner, a recipe that she said she'd passed along to Meryl Streep—"The only area where I could absolutely challenge her is my collard greens," she said. As she chopped onions to add to the simmering pot, Davis gazed out the window at the swimming pool beyond the patio and its stainless-steel Viking barbecue console, which looked like NASA Mission Control. She and her husband like to throw parties, for which they cook together. "Julius grew up with a mother who was ultra-clean, so everything has to be ultra-clean. I grew up with no food, so there's never enough food. 'I only have enough food for forty people, what if they want two or three servings? We're gonna run out of food—they're gonna be hungry.' That's me."

The house is a kind of trophy of Davis's survival. "I consider myself a hero," she said. "I don't have a cape, I don't have a golden lasso. I had a call to adventure, a call to live life bigger than myself. I found the elixir." Davis and her sister Deloris (who is now Deloris Grant and teaches drama at the Central Falls high school they attended) started performing early. "We wanted to dream away the problems," Deloris said. When their father was drunk or there was turmoil, they would disappear into the bedroom and become "Jaja" and "Jagi," rich, white Beverly Hills matrons, with big jewels and little Chihuahuas. "We would play this game for hours," Davis recalled. " 'Oh my, Jaja, I bought this fabulous house and my husband bought me this beautiful diamond ring.' It was so detailed, to the point where it became transcendent. We actually believed we were in that world." Eventually, Deloris would break the spell. "She'd always say, 'You're not Jaja. You're poor. You're on welfare. You don't have diamonds,' " Davis said. "Then we'd fight and it would be over."

As a shy, overweight teen-ager, Davis discovered uncanny powers of dissociation. "I

knew how to throw myself outside my body," she said. She would lock herself in the bathroom, focus on a body part, and, she explained, "totally clear my head. I wouldn't let anything, any thought, any sound, in, until I felt myself literally floating out of my body. I could actually look at myself like I was maybe five steps away from myself. I did it for fun, for laughs."

Through acting, Davis discovered a healthier way to get outside herself. She showed me a photograph, on her cell phone, of a Pawtucket *Times* article, published forty-two years ago, that captured the first time she experienced the thrill of performance. She read aloud, "Participants in Skit Day staged Friday at Jenks Park, under the sponsorship of the Central Falls Recreation Department, included nine-year-old Viola Davis (left), who played the role of Junior from the television show 'Good Times.' " Davis interjected, "They messed that up. It was the Woooo-Whee Kid from 'That's My Mama.' " She went on, "And Diane Davis, fifteen, who appeared as Fred Sanford from "Sanford and Son.' "

The sisters had approached the contest with the same tenacity with which they pursued every opportunity to escape their circumstances—model legislature, cross-country running, basketball, arts club. "We were like hunters. Even if we didn't really have any interest, we'd do it just to get out, just to channel ourselves into something," Davis said. For the contest, they had rehearsals, rewrites, and even a production budget of two dollars and fifty cents, which they spent at the Salvation Army on a hat and a straw purse. In the Davis children's landscape of loss, the rare victory was pivotal. "It was just one of those perfect moments of feeling like a winner, understanding the power of your talent, having no doubt," Davis said. "We showed everyone." Their prize was a plastic baseball bat, which they used to kill rats.

When Davis was fourteen, she enrolled in an acting class through the federal program Upward Bound, which helps prepare low-income students for higher education. The class was run by a young actor and coach named Ron Stetson. " 'How many people in this class want to be an actor?' " Davis remembers Stetson saying. "We all raised our hands. He said, 'You know you have to work fucking hard

every fucking day.' A fourth of the hands went down. 'Every day.' More hands down. 'You can go on an audition every fricking day for six weeks and never, ever, get a job. You know that, right?' More hands down. I remember thinking, Wow, that is awesome. My hand still was up. I was trying to reach the ceiling with my hand. 'And you're gonna get rejected time and time and time again.' " Davis continued, "Pretty soon, I was the only one who had my hand up. He kept going at me. 'You're gonna get egg on your face. You're gonna fail.' I kept my hand up, staring at him. He stared at me. 'O.K., let's get back to class.' "

"Whatever Viola got from me, she brought," Stetson told me. "I just happened to be standing there when she was ready to give it." Stetson's class proved to Davis that her dream was bigger than her fear. Acting, and the emotional release it allowed, Davis said, "gave me great joy. Perfect joy. It wasn't like I had to search for anything else." When you're acting, she explained, "you're feeling everything—every last receptor in your body is alive, one-hundred-per-cent alive, and you're not hiding anything, because everything is used as a tool to make the character a fully realized human being." Davis enrolled at Stetson's alma mater, Rhode Island College, where she was awarded a full scholarship. She graduated with a B.A. in 1988, and was one of two dozen actors chosen from a thousand applicants to the Juilliard School, in New York City.

At Juilliard, Davis's dream wobbled. Politically, she was waking up; artistically, she was hibernating. Instead of focussing on her strengths as an actor, the teachers fixated on her perceived weaknesses. "I wasn't light enough, too much gravitas," she said. "For the next four years, this woman with lots of gravitas was leaping across the stage like a ninety-pound Caucasian girl." Davis also bridled at what she saw as the school's Eurocentric notions and its aesthetic, in which "if you were emotional, if you were vulnerable, then that did not show technique." But, the summer after her second year, Juilliard gave her a grant for a two-week study of dance, music, and folklore in Gambia. The experience was an antidote to the school's orthodoxy. In Gambia, witnessing traditional ceremonies—baby naming, food preparation—Davis experienced communities in which art was not separated from life. "It wasn't about

technique; it was about the soul. In their zest for life, their need to connect to each other and to God—everything they did was done with extreme passion," she said.

Davis now compares her student days to cough syrup: unpleasant but useful. "It was good to see how other people see me," she said. "Because then I began to have an inner gauge as to how to direct myself, how I'm coming off." Three years after graduating from Juilliard, in 1993, Davis earned her first Tony Award nomination, for her performance in "Seven Guitars." By the time that "Doubt" premièred, in 2008, she had established herself, in eight plays on the New York stage, as a major actress, with a Tony to prove it.

As Esther Mills, in Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" (2004), an expert seamstress who succeeds in her lingerie business but fails at love, Davis exhibited a particularly arresting reserve, a quality of silence that translates with equal power to her screen performances. "What she doesn't do is (or can be) as important as what she does with a scene," Meryl Streep wrote to me. "She has enormous restraint as an artist. It's a big dam holding back the deluge, and that power, held in check behind her eyes—what she withholds, or lets you wait for—is evidence of real mastery." Streep also recalled "the softness of her patience" when filming "Doubt": "After she had shot her most challenging scene (what seemed) scores of times (and perfectly, sublimely), the director decided he didn't like the background. He went back to the location the next day and put her through it all over again, as inexplicably many times as the first, for hours. I thought it was abuse, and had a snit on her behalf. But she was almost blazing under the emotional yoke. She used it, as actors are meant to, in our masochistic craft."

The back door of Davis's kitchen opened, and her six-year-old daughter, Genesis, whom she adopted five years ago, skittered in after a long day at school. Genesis clamped onto her beaming mother with her arms and legs. In the background, a babysitter stood with Genesis's backpack in hand. "What do you say, G.," Davis said. Genesis whispered a shy hello, then scampered off to do homework.

Davis put a skillet on the stove and dumped some rice and butter into it. “When I first started, acting was very therapeutic,” she said. “I needed it. I felt I was unfinished. Then I went into therapy. I got married to the most beautiful man.”

Three weeks before Davis met Julius Tennon, in 1999, she prayed for a husband. “I said I wanted a big black man from the South who looked like a football player, who already had children,” she recalled. Davis was in the craft-services line on the set of Steven Bochco’s “City of Angels,” a short-lived medical drama in which she played a nurse, when she was approached by Tennon, who had a recurring part as an anesthesiologist. “I heard her complaining about Los Angeles and not knowing anybody. Being a good Southern boy, my mom always told me that, if you like a girl, just give her your phone number.” Tennon gave Davis his card. “I don’t have swagger,” Davis said. “I’m not that gregarious woman who knows how to flirt.”

Davis was thirty-four; she’d had one long-term relationship, with an actor who had only once told her that he loved her. It took her a month to overcome her low self-esteem and, at her therapist’s prompting, call Tennon. She was surprised that he recognized her voice. Tennon took her to a restaurant near the Santa Monica Pier. He liked her big laugh. “She just had a zest for life,” he said. “She wanted to reach out to somebody. I scared her, because I told her everything about me.”

Tennon, who is eleven years older than Davis, had a story to tell. He’d been reared in Texas, one of eight children in difficult circumstances, won a full football scholarship to the University of Tulsa, where he was a starting strong-side linebacker and the first African-American to graduate from the university’s drama program. He was a single parent who had brought up a daughter and a son alone, for seventeen years. Tennon remembers Davis saying, “Wow, you’ve lived a life. I’ve never had a life. I’ve just been an artist. I just wanted to do this.” By the end of the evening, according to Davis, “basically, it was a wrap.” Three months later, they’d moved in together. “I had anxiety attacks before I met him,” she said. “I had no money, because I had to pay for my apartment in New York and pay to live in L.A. for seven months. My driving was crappy.” She continued, “The moment I met my husband, all of it stopped. The

worry, the anxiety. Everything."

While Davis was attending to the rice—"Just a little butter. I cook the onion a little. Then I add chicken broth. Delicious"—Genesis ran back in and was quickly scooped up by her mother. "What's the best thing Mommy does for you?" Davis said.

"Cuddle," Genesis answered in a soft voice.

"Not cook"—Davis laughed—"because Mommy don't cook every night." She straightened the pink bow in her daughter's hair. "What does Mommy say to you all the time?" she said.

Genesis whispered something inaudible, then, prompted, said it louder: "No one's gonna love you like I love you."

"That's what I tell her. She loves it," Davis said.

When Genesis had skipped off again, Davis added, "There are days when I give myself a D as a mom, then on some days I give myself an A. A great Mom Day is when I can bring her to school, pick her up, help with homework, cook a great meal, and put her to sleep. A bad day is when I can't do that." Genesis has brought with her "a different understanding of mortality," Davis said. "We're older parents. Julius is always trying to teach her everything he can right now." She smiled, and said, "There's a lot of living in this household."

Davis has described marriage as a process in which "you sort of die to yourself and you're reborn into this union." Her perspective on her career also underwent an adjustment. The more successful she was, the more her work revolved around publicity rather than performance. The stereotypical parts she was being offered—"I have been given a lot of roles that are downtrodden, mammyish"—were as unfulfilling as she found the Hollywood community to be. "I've been in movies

with actors I've never met," she said. "I felt like I needed higher meaning in my life." Davis committed herself to motherhood and to the social issues of childhood hunger, education, and sexual abuse.

When she became the first African-American to win an Emmy for Best Leading Actress on a television series, in 2015, she quoted Harriet Tubman in her acceptance speech: " 'In my mind, I see a line. And over that line I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their arms stretched out to me over that line. But I can't seem to get there no-how.' " Davis went on, "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there." She didn't hear or see a response from her audience. "I didn't think it was landing," she said. "I wasn't so concerned with that, because my whole life I've been focussed on approval, on acceptance, on shame and all that. I've been focussed on it for so much. One day it lifted." The audience may have been startled, but Davis sees her gesture at the Emmys as part of the "unknown responsibility of celebrity." "There is no line in my life and in my spirit, but there is a line in the culture for me as a woman and me as an African-American," she said. That ceremony marked the moment when she began to pronounce herself in public.

The next time I saw Davis was on the set of "How to Get Away with Murder," which is shot at the Sunset-Gower Studios, at the far end of a sleepy warren of drab, enormous buildings, sprawling over a few city blocks, a sort of Levittown of entertainment. While Davis was in hair and makeup, I was directed to wait in her double-wide trailer, which was docked in the corner of a parking lot, thirty feet from the stage door. "Star Wagon," it said on the back. The trailer had a smart TV in each of its two rooms, both turned on. To the left was Davis's cluttered dressing room, full of tokens from her real life, including the December issue of *Essence*, with Davis on the cover, and a box of Genesis's toys. The other room was clinical and tidy—a receiving room, with a gray sofa and a small desk, where the green pages of Davis's next scene were laid out.

"Yo, what you need? I got water, oxygen, protein, carbohydrates, shelter, security, friendship, love, the respect of your peers, and a strong moral compass."

MAY 19, 2014

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This episode, which would air in January, as the winter première, required a sensational opening.* The writers had Annalise being arraigned at the police station. A body had been found in her house, which had gone up in flames. Annalise had been arrested and was being charged with arson and murder. Did she do it? And who was the corpse? None of the producers, assistants, publicists, or crew milling around the set would tip me the wink. Eventually, Davis came into the trailer, and it turned out that she didn't know, either. "I gather you have burned your house down," I said, as she sat across from me in the living room. "I hope that I didn't, because I haven't been playing it that way," Davis said, smiling.

The show's popularity and the power that has come with it have been, for Davis, a surreal reversal of fortune. She talked about how it felt to act alongside the legendary Cicely Tyson, whom she had suggested for the role of Annalise's mother, Ophelia. With a smart TV flickering behind her, Davis recalled the small family TV set at 128 Washington Street, with its portable aerial wrapped in tinfoil, around which she and her sisters crowded to watch Tyson in the 1974 TV movie of Ernest J. Gaines's "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman." "My sisters and I were completely transported by it," Davis, who was nine at the time, said. "We couldn't believe what we were looking at. The fact that she looked almost exactly like my mother. The Afro. She was a black woman. That was one thing. But the other thing was how she transformed. We could not believe that we were seeing a human being transform from the age of eighteen to a hundred and eight." She went on, "It was my first introduction to seeing craft at play and not just entertainment. We would try to imitate her in our rooms. We became obsessed with acting classes."

In the first season of "How to Get Away with Murder," Annalise faced off against Ophelia, accusing her of failing to protect her from being molested by her uncle. Davis recalled the thrill of the exchange with Tyson, who turned ninety the day the scene was shot: "I'm working to convey all this history, this sexual assault, and all the pain. I remember her face, her look, the ease with which her response came out. She

said, 'It happened to all the women, that's our curse. It happened to my mother. It happened to her mother.' You saw all the sexual assault that she'd witnessed—it was in her eyes, her demeanor." Davis went on, "She showed a very specific deep history, and that you cannot teach in school. That's just something that comes around every once in a lifetime. That's exactly why I wanted to become an actor. The depth of the emotional life she is able to convey is what I have to work on."

Davis was called to the set, in a hangar-like structure. The crew were adjusting the wooden walls of the prison room where Annalise would be patted down and fingerprinted. A row of canvas chairs had been set up behind a triptych of color monitors that tracked what was happening on set. A stagehand was running a smoke machine to help soften the reflected light. Genesis returned from the studio playroom and hopped into her mother's arms, excited to stay late at the end of the school week and see Davis at work. For a while, Davis walked around the vast space, with her daughter in her arms, then she sent Genesis off to the trailer to shower and get into her pajamas. Davis strolled over to the cornucopia of food spread out on a table behind one of the unused sets, where we continued our conversation.

"My gift is exposing," she said. "Exposing mess—the humanity, the vulnerability of what it means to be human. I think that that is what acting is about, anyway." She was putting agave nectar on some peanut butter. She added, "At the end of the day, most people gotta put on a mask. Only in acting do people literally take it off, and it's embraced, celebrated."

A makeup artist appeared to prepare Davis for her scene, steering her into an unused library set, where Davis sat down on a chair and pulled her skirt up above her knees. "This is so I don't get ashy," she said, as her legs and arms were slathered with ointment. "African-Americans have a joke about it: 'It looks like you been rollin' around in some flour.' " Davis continued, "Back in the day we just put Vaseline or lard, smeared it on ourselves, because it's sacrilege to go out ashy."

Then Davis headed toward the set for what she said was "a humiliation scene." She

had no lines in this particular scene. She just had to bend forward so that an unsmiling hatchet-faced policewoman could inspect her hair and probe her mouth with a flashlight. There were six or seven takes. As the director and the makeup, lighting, and camera crews fussed around her, Davis remained in character, "being private in public," as she calls it. Her arms held tightly across her chest, her large, heavy-lidded eyes trained on her interior, she was locked in the solitude of memory, leached of liveliness, dead in the eyes, full of the torpor of anxiety, humiliated almost to tears. As I watched, something that Tennon had said came back to me: "She is never far away from that little girl that she talks about. She's never forgot her." ♦

*An earlier version incorrectly referred to the season première.

John Lahr has been the senior drama critic for The New Yorker since 1992. **More**

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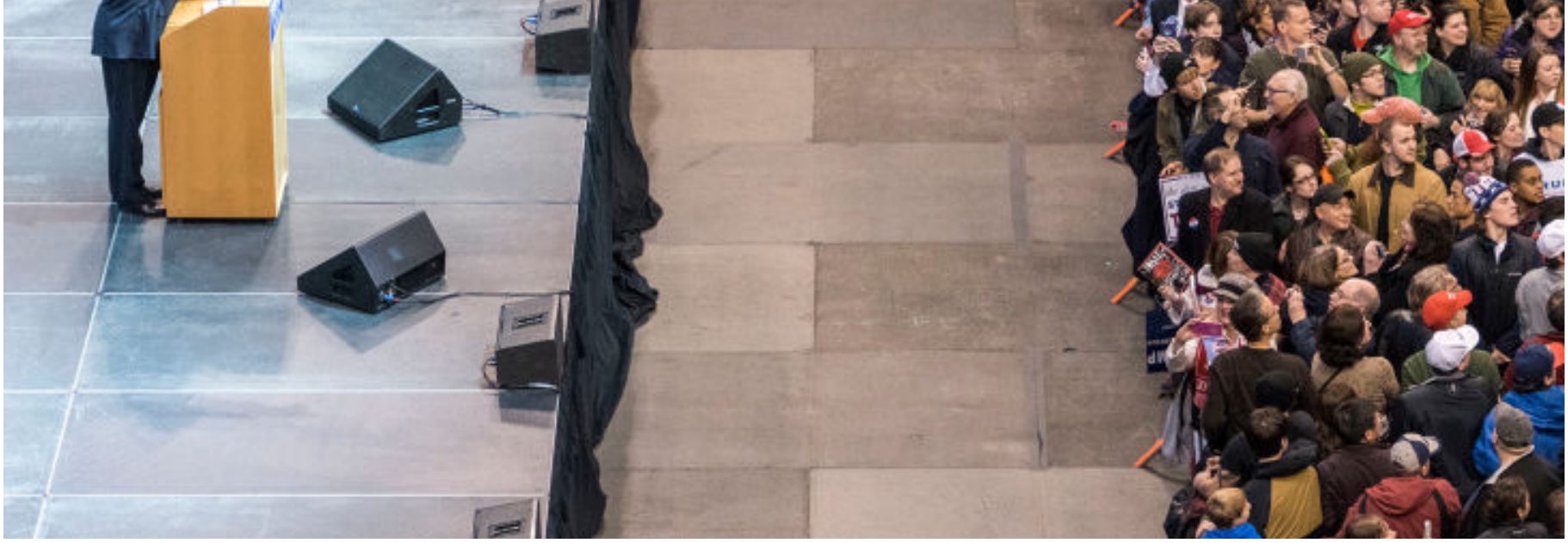

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