

The Times BFI 53rd London Film Festival 2009 Education Events



Learning Resource: Precious – Based On The Novel ‘Push’ By Sapphire.

Compiled by: Lucia Yandoli

Dir Lee Daniels | USA 2009 | 109min

Synopsis

Hard hitting but full of hope, Precious: Based On The Novel ‘Push’ By Sapphire is the remarkable story of Clareece ‘Precious’ Jones, a sixteen-year-old girl from Harlem who battles her own way through a life that sometimes seems unbearable. Physically, sexually and emotionally abused at home, Precious is pregnant for the second time and failing at school, yet she finds the strength to fight her bitterly angry and destructive mother and seize upon opportunities for change. These come in the form of an alternative school and a patient yet firm teacher, Ms Rain, not to mention a whole class full of fellow mis-fits who, like her, have had to seek an alternative route in life. Friendship and encouragement help her on the difficult journey to light, love and self-respect.

The filmmakers

Director: Lee Daniels

Producers: Lee Daniels, Sarah Siegel-Magness, Gary Magness

Screenwriter: Geoffrey Fletcher, based on *Push: a Novel* by Sapphire

Director of Photography: Andrew Dunn, B.S.C.

Editor: Joe Klotz

Cast: Gabourey Sidibe, Mo’Nique, Paula Patton, Mariah Carey, Sherri Shepherd, Lenny Kravitz

The idea behind the film: Director/Producer Lee Daniels read novel ‘Push’ soon after it was published in 1996 and it affected him a great deal. It was written by New York based poet Sapphire, who, like Ms Rain in the film, taught reading and writing to young people in Harlem. Daniels felt that he knew a lot of people who were ‘just moments away from being the characters in the book,’ and he responded to the uncompromising honesty of Sapphire’s story-telling and her ability to write vivid stories about people whose lives have been blighted by poverty, violence and abuse.

Daniels and screenwriter Geoffrey Fletcher decided to set themselves the delicate task of turning Sapphire’s shocking book into a film that was true to the novel, but that would not alienate the audience due to its hardcore subject matter.

Writing the Film: Daniels was physically abused as a child and remembers that when bad things happened to him, he would fantasize. Daniels relates: ‘when I was twelve I saw someone killed. I remember very clearly that I went into a bubble and I became a prince in a silver crown... I just dropped into a place right there, so I wouldn’t feel the pain.’ Drawing on Daniels’ childhood memories, the screenplay was adapted to allow Precious to temporarily escape her harsh reality. The writers also re-imagined some of the supporting roles such as the character of Nurse John (played by Lenny Kravitz) who shows compassion and interest towards Precious, and school receptionist Cornrows who adds a sense of humour to the film.

Production: Casting Precious was a huge challenge – as Daniels puts it: ‘Hollywood doesn’t exactly turn these girls out.’ So instead the casting director turned to girls who hadn’t acted before, like Gabourey Sidibe who, with minimal preparation, blew casting directors away with her authentic first reading of the character. Sidibe on playing Precious: ‘I think Precious feels as though she’s the ugliest person in the room, that’s the sadness of her, that she’s struggling to be like someone else, struggling to be normal, because she thinks she isn’t.’

During filming, Daniels was known to constantly challenge his cast. Paula Patton, who plays Ms Rain, remarks: ‘He pushed me to my limits and forced me to go deeper and deeper.’ ‘He won’t accept no for an answer,’ says Mo’Nique. But ultimately that is what the film is about. ‘Push’ means push your mind,’ says Sidibe, ‘Do not settle for where you are. If you’re between a rock and a hard place, push yourself out through the side. There’s always room to push further. You are better than you are. All you have to do is push yourself.’

Before the screening

- Do you think that there are some themes (like child abuse) that are too extreme to be told meaningfully on film? What kind of things do you think a director would have to take into consideration when making a film dealing with such issues?
- *Precious: Based On The Novel ‘Push’ By Sapphire* uses a mixture of big-name stars and undiscovered talent like Gabourey Sidibe who plays Precious. How are actors and actresses usually chosen for a film? What can be the different effects of using big-name actors/actresses or non-professional actors? Make a table comparing the styles.
- Can you think of any films that have chosen their actors/actresses unconventionally? Why do you think the director chose to do this? Can you think of any films that used particularly unconventional techniques with their actors?

- Think about the standard look of Hollywood actors/actresses and what their screen lives are like. How does this shape our expectations and outlook? How would it affect someone like Precious?

After the screening

- How did the director Lee Daniels cope with handling the sensitive issues raised in the film? What techniques (narrative/visual) did he use?
- How do you think Precious gains self-acceptance and empowerment by the end of the film? What role do the different role-models in her life play in helping her achieve this?
- Comment on the appearance of the following actors in the film. Research their background and think about how they act differently in the context of this film:
 - a) Mariah Carey,
 - b) Mo’Nique,
 - c) Lenny Kravitz.
- Why do you think the director chose to use a mixture of professional and non-professional actors in this film? How do you think it links with the following themes: fantasy, escapism, destiny, normality, role models, glamour, self-love, obesity.

Further reading and viewing

www.weareallprecious.com – Official Website of the film.

www.screendaily.com/precious/4042793.article – Review of the film (Screendaily)

www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/african/movies.htm – Comprehensive overview of African-Americans on Film

www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/AfricanAmBib.html#bks – African American film bibliography

www.newsweek.com/id/213419 – How Hollywood deals with obesity.

The Unloved (Dir Samantha Morton | UK (TV) 2009)

The autobiographical account of the director’s childhood in the care of the state.

The Colour Purple (Dir Steven Spielberg | USA 1985)

Based on Alice Walker’s hopeful novel about a young African American woman who finds independence after a lifetime of mistreatment and loneliness.

Palindromes (Dir Todd Solondz | USA 2004)

The awkward and painful experiences of Aviva, a suburban teenager played by seven different actresses who are in turn white, black, young, old, thin, fat...

Ballast (Dir Lance Hammer | USA 2008)

James, a young African American living in the cold Mississippi Delta struggles to survive when his twin brother Lawrence commits suicide.