



BY ANDREA STRONG

# VIOLA

## TAKES A BOW

OSCAR-WINNING  
ACTRESS **VIOLA DAVIS**  
WANTS TO ERADICATE  
HUNGER, MAKE HOLLYWOOD  
MORE DIVERSE AND SHOW  
CHILDREN THE POWER  
OF IMAGINATION.

# W

**WHEN VIOLA DAVIS** accepted her Academy Award last year—for her role as Rose in the movie adaptation of August Wilson’s play *Fences* (for which she also won a Tony Award)—she began her speech not with a list of thank-yous, but with an acknowledgment of the people whose stories she has been lucky enough to tell.

“There is one place that all the people with the greatest potential are gathered,” she said to a room echoing with roaring applause. “That’s the graveyard.” Her voice breaking, she continued: “People ask me all the time, what kind of stories do you want to tell, Viola? And I say exhume those bodies. Exhume those stories. The stories of the people who dreamed big and never saw those dreams to fruition. People who fell in love and lost. I became an artist, and thank god I did, because we are the only profession that celebrates what it means to live a life.”

Davis has been exhuming those stories for most of her career—stories of lives hollowed out by disappointment, of unrelenting heartache, invisibility, injustice and the daily reality of loss piled upon inexplicable loss. The stories of Aibileen Clark, the big-hearted and mistreated 1960s housemaid in the movie *The Help* (2011); Rose Maxson, Troy’s beleaguered, humiliated wife in *Fences* (2016); *Doubt*’s Mrs. Miller (2008), whose son may have been molested by a priest at his Catholic school; *How to Get Away with Murder*’s Professor Annalise Keating, whose strength is

tempered by her struggles with alcoholism and an abusive past. Perhaps she is drawn to these stories because it is in them that she finds so much of herself.

Davis was born in 1965 in St. Matthews, South Carolina, as the fifth of six children. Her grandmother delivered her in a one-room sharecropper’s shack on the Singleton plantation. Her parents, Dan and Mae Alice, had little education. Her mother made it to eighth grade and her father, a racetrack horse groom, to second. Soon after Davis’ birth, her family moved to Rhode Island, where her father took a job at the local track. The move was not a great one. Their first home had no heat or electricity and was infested with rats bold enough to bite the faces off her dolls.

Along with poverty, and her father’s drunken rages, came extreme hunger. To feed herself, Davis stole, dumpster-dived and relied on free school lunch to get her from day to day. She was also black in an all-white town, and she was verbally abused by white boys who bullied her and chased her with threats. She learned to defend herself with a crochet needle that her mother gave her for protection. It worked.

The abuse of daily life was unrelenting, but Davis and her sister Deloris found an escape in an imaginary world they created playing “Jaja and Jagi,” two rich white housewives of Beverly Hills (they really were ahead of their time) who wore big baubles and carried tiny yip-yapping Chihuahuas. Davis and her sister would play Jaja and Jagi for hours, losing themselves in tales of caviar and diamonds. It made it all go away. And it was the beginning of Davis’ realization that acting, in the end, might save her.

When she was 14 years old, Davis enrolled in an acting class through the federal program Upward Bound, which helps prepare low-income students for higher education. There she met an acting teacher named Ron Stetson who nurtured her gift. After graduating from Stetson’s alma mater, Rhode Island College, on a full scholarship, she was one of just two dozen actors chosen from a thousand applicants to attend The Juilliard School. Three years after graduating, she earned her first Tony Award nomination for her performance in August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*.

Since then, Davis has become the only black woman to be nominated for three Academy Awards (winning one) and is the only black actress to achieve the triple crown for acting, winning an Oscar (*Fences*), Emmy (*How to Get Away with Murder*) and Tony (August Wilson’s *King Hedley II* and *Fences*). It’s an honor only 23 other people have achieved. In January, Davis was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

The awards are well deserved. Davis is an extraordinary actor; her performances are so powerful that they feel muscular, in part, because in becoming these characters, she takes you there—to that place of pain so raw, so real, it almost has its own heartbeat.

Davis lives with her husband, actor Julius Tennon (you may know him as the gentleman who tries to pick her up on the plane in the most recent season of *How to Get Away with Murder*), and their 7-year-old daughter, Genesis, in a leafy neighborhood of Los Angeles.

I chatted with Davis about the devastation of her childhood, the joys of motherhood, her fight against hunger, Hollywood’s diversity problem, why you should toast your rice and the magic of theater.

**"MY PAST WAS A BEAUTIFUL FOUNDATION, GOOD OR BAD. I FEEL BLESSED TO TAKE PART IN AN ART FORM THAT IS ABOUT EMPATHY."**

**Viola Davis accepting the Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role in *Fences*.**



OPENING SPREAD: WILLIAMS & HARKAWA / AUGUST  
THIS SPREAD: EDDY CHEN/ABC VIA GETTY IMAGES

**Let’s talk first about your childhood, which was quite brutal. What do you keep from that time, always in your heart, and what have you been able to let go?**

When you look at your childhood, there is no way of letting it go. It is part of who you are. I don’t even understand the statement “forgetting one’s past.” I forgive it. I think that you make peace with it and that it becomes part of your narrative. But you cannot forget it.

**Have your experiences growing up influenced the types of roles you**

**are drawn to—or shaped the kind of actor you are today?**

I don’t think my childhood experiences have affected the choices I made as an actor, but it played a huge part in my becoming an actor and in how I process a character. I am a human being with a certain level of empathy from what I have been through. I do find that it is very healing to be an actor embodying characters. You are exploring what makes them tick. You live with them without judgment and without commentary. You are literally becoming them, and that has been a key part of my healing. And

I have had to face what I have been through and make peace with who I am. When you play a character, you can unlock that pathology. My past was a beautiful foundation, good or bad. I feel blessed to take part in an art form that is about empathy.

**You are a partner of the charity Hunger Is. Can you talk about what that work means to you?**

In October I became an ambassador for Hunger Is, a joint charitable program of the Albertsons Companies Foundation and the Entertainment Industry Foundation. Its mission is to eradicate childhood hunger in America. Working with Hunger Is was the first time that I was able to share my story. I grew up hungry. I grew up never having any food. The cabinets were for the most part empty, so by the time 8:20 rolled around, all I could think about was food.

When you’re hungry, you can’t think, you can’t really function because your only concern is getting food. I would wait for that bell to ring for lunch, and I would sit next to kids whose parents cooked so I could get food. I was always foraging for food. That was my life. When you are deprived of things, that is on the forefront of your mind. Knowing how deeply it affected me, it feels like a godsend to

be involved in an organization that is dedicated to eradicating that for kids. The key to unlock a child’s potential is food. Just food.

**Eradicating hunger is not your only mission. You and your husband started JuVee productions in 2011 as a way to make Hollywood more diverse and equitable. You’ve produced quite a lot so far—*Custody*, in which you play a judge presiding over a custody case. Coming up you have *The Personal History of Rachel DuPree*, a drama about an African-American farming family**

**in South Dakota, as well as a biopic about the politician and civil rights leader Barbara Jordan [with a script by Tony Kushner]. And the latest in the pipeline is the sitcom *Black Don’t Crack*, with *Insecure* co-creator Larry Wilmore—which has been sold to ABC. Tell me about the origin of the production company and what you hope to change and accomplish.**

This was my husband’s idea. He told me that this was what we needed to do. It came on the heels of *The Help* [for which Davis was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe]. The three biggest words after you have gotten any sort of major recognition are “and now what?” And what became obvious is that the roles that would be out there for me would always be another mother, another maid. It was important to become an instrument of change.

It started with just me saying we have to create roles for me, and then it became much bigger and the narrative evolved: how to create opportunity for all people of color? And how do we become inclusive in an industry that has become so homogenized? And how do we find those voices? It started with this aha moment of “and now what?”—and now we have a production company that works in television, film and even virtual reality.

We have 326 million people in this country today. We have a growing population, and it’s a much more diverse population. We are not living in the ’70s in the days of *The Brady Bunch*. We are more diverse racially and sexually, and art has got to reflect that.

**You and your husband seem particularly well matched. I read that three weeks before you met Julius, whom you married in 1999, you prayed for a husband. You were 34 at the time. So those were powerful prayers. How did you meet him?**

We met on the set of a television show, *City of Angels*, which was touted as an all-black drama, created by Steven Bochco. He played an anesthesiologist, and I played a nurse. I was in line at craft services, and I was kind of complaining that I didn’t know anyone in Los Angeles. And he said, “Have you been to Santa Monica Pier?” He gave me his phone number and said **CONTINUED ON PAGE 105**

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to give him a call. A month later, I did. And we went to Santa Monica Pier.

**Six years ago, you and Julius adopted a daughter, Genesis, who is now 7. Tell me about her name.**

Genesis is the name she had when we adopted her, but for me, it was apropos because she is the beginning. When I look at my life, I feel like we think of Before Genesis and After Genesis. "After" is the beginning of our family. Her middle name is Neveah, which is *heaven* spelled backward. She is my blessing. She is my heaven.

**I've read that you are particularly proud of your collard greens. You even taught Meryl Streep how to make them. What else do you love to cook? Or is Julius the cook in the family?**

Both of us are cooks. But for me, I love all of the Thanksgiving foods. The collard greens and the homemade cornbread and cranberry sauce, which I put a little bit of brandy into. My mac and cheese and coconut rice. My tip is to always cook rice on the stove first with no water, nothing in it, just to toast it up. Then you add the liquid. Like paella.

**You're writing a children's book, *Corduroy Takes a Bow*, which continues the story of the teddy bear made famous in Don Freeman's million-selling book and is set to come out September 11, 2018, marking the original book's 50th anniversary. What inspired you to do this book?**

I love *Corduroy*, and I have been reading it to my daughter for years. I love the innocence of that character, and I love that the main character, Lisa, is an African-American girl. It's set in New York, which is such a diverse place. You enter the story through her eyes and through her friendship with the bear.

I'm writing the book for my daughter, and I am writing it because I love the fun and imagination that comes with children's literature. I love the magic of the theater and how it transports you and stimulates imagination and makes you feel far away in another world. I wanted *Corduroy* to discover that magic. I want all children to know it. ▼

## PUZZLE ANSWERS

Easy KENKEN

24x	3	3-	2-
4	3	1	2
3	2	4	1
2	1	10+	4
1	2-	2	3

Hard KENKEN

11+	6	5	2	4	3	1
1-	3	2	4	6	1	5
25x	1	4	6	3	5	2
11+	2	6	5	1	4	3
1-	5	1	3	2	6	4
4	3	1	5	2	6	

Easy Sudoku

4	8	2	3	7	9	5	6	1
7	3	9	6	5	1	8	2	4
1	5	6	8	2	4	3	9	7
9	7	3	1	6	8	4	5	2
6	2	1	4	9	5	7	8	3
8	4	5	7	3	2	9	1	6
2	6	4	9	8	7	1	3	5
5	1	8	2	4	3	6	7	9
3	9	7	5	1	6	2	4	8

Hard Sudoku

8	3	5	2	7	1	9	6	4
4	9	1	5	6	8	3	2	7
7	6	2	4	9	3	1	8	5
1	8	6	7	5	9	4	3	2
2	4	7	1	3	6	8	5	9
3	5	9	8	4	2	7	1	6
5	7	3	6	1	4	2	9	8
6	1	8	9	2	7	5	4	3
9	2	4	3	8	5	6	7	1

T	H	O	R	R	E	A	R	M	N	E	O	N
R	E	V	E	E	R	G	O	T	E	X	P	O
I	L	E	S	A	R	G	O	N	V	E	T	S
F	I	R	E	A	L	A	R	M	J	E	S	S
L	U	S	T	S	T	E	M	P	E	R		
E	M	T	S	E	A	S	A	L	T	O	A	F
	A	P	E	X	S	T	A	C	U	R	E	
K	R	Y	P	T	O	N	E	N	A	C	T	E
H	O	E	S	D	O	E	E	S	S	O		
Z	E	D	P	U	B	L	I	S	H	F	W	D
		M	I	S	L	E	D	S	E	M	C	E
X	E	N	O	N	E	M	U	L	S	I	O	N
M	A	Y	O	A	G	E	N	T	A	U	T	O
E	V	E	N	N	A	N	N	Y	T	R	O	T
N	E	T	S	A	S	T	O	R	A	T	N	O

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