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# An Interview with Julie Dash

by Zeinabu irene Davis



*A graduate of AFI and UCLA film programs, Julie Dash is one of the most prolific Black women independent filmmakers working today. **Illusions**, her 1982 short, won Best Film of the Decade from the Black Filmmaker Foundation and numerous other national and international awards. When the canon is written on Black independent cinema, **Illusions** will go down as one of the key pioneering pieces of the movement.*

*Despite the usual setbacks of financial difficulties, Dash's spirit stands unbroken and optimistic. In the midst of post-production in her own living room where she had two huge flatbeds and thousands of feet of film in editing bins, Dash took some precious time to talk to **Black Film Review** about the inspiration and production of her new film, her first feature, **Daughters of the Dust**.*

DAVIS: I want to start with a genesis of *Daughters of the Dust*. How did you first come up with the idea?

DASH: The genesis of the idea came from always hearing my father being called a Gee-chee and then wanting to do something on Gee-chee culture, which is also called Gullah. I was also inspired by reading Melville Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* and Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* and other things. I wanted to do something on African retentions and survivals, because the Sea Islands had remained culturally isolated and insulated from Western cultural experiences for a long time. To this day, the people of the Sea Islands maintain and preserve a wealth of West African traditions, mores, and religion. So it was an area which was ripe for discovering.

Usually, when we see films and television productions on early African Americans, they deal with African Americans living in Alabama and Mississippi. I really don't remember too much about Africans in the Sea Islands or African Americans who were still practicing and speaking in languages that were reminiscent of the time before they were captives.

DAVIS: When you were living in Los Angeles, I remember you talking about a triptych or a series of films. Is *Daughters of the Dust* a part of that?

DASH: Yes, it is part of a series of films that I am doing on the experiences of Black women in the United States from the turn of the century up to and beyond the year 2000. *Illusions* is the section that took place in the '40s. I hope to do a section in the '20s, and something in the '60s, and then something beyond the year 2000 because you usually don't see futuristic films with Black people involved in them.

DAVIS: Yeah, that's right, we don't exist past the year 2000.

DASH: The whole series is trying to show Black women at pivotal moments in their lives and to incorporate historical events and issues. I focus and depict experiences that have never been shown on the screen before. Specifically, I focus on intra-group relationships, rather than on images of Black women as victims of the outside world that's impacting on them.

DAVIS: So would *Daughters of the Dust* be the first of that series?

DASH: Yes, it would.

DAVIS: How about the title *Daughters of the Dust*, does it have any special significance?

DASH: Yes, it does. It goes, way, way, way back. It's kind of paraphrasing a passage in the Bible, in Ezekiel which goes, "O ye sons of the dust," and I changed it to daughters of the dust. Dust also implies the past and something that's grown old and crumbling. The whole film is about memories, and the scraps of memories, that these women carry around in tin cans and little private boxes. Everyone's grandparents or old aunts and uncles have scraps of memories—like when you go to an old relative's house and you find boxes with all these little bits of this and that, that have to do with your family. "Scraps of memory" is also taken from a paper that W.E. B. Du Bois wrote about the fact that African Americans don't have a solid lineage that they can trace. All they have are scraps of memories remaining from the past. I wanted memory to be a central focus of the story.

DAVIS: Can you give us a brief synopsis of the story of *Daughters of the Dust*?

DASH: It's about a family that's preparing to migrate North and the great grandmother is trying to get them to remain on the island. The story is concerned with conflict and struggle as the family prepares to migrate North at the turn of the century. That's not a great synopsis. It's such a dense script . . . There are so many subplots that it's hard to say that it is any one thing. To really make it simple, it's about a family of women who carry their cultural traditions into the future. These women carried scraps of memories from the past, and, then, they carry these same scraps of memory into the future.

DAVIS: Over the years, how did the script change for you? Did your life experience affect the story?

DASH: I guess having my daughter had a great impact on the script and the story line because it made me think a lot about what it would be like to have a child and then have that child taken away, sold away in slavery. I mean, exactly how would that feel? What kind of impact would that have on the rest of your life?

How do you maintain after that kind of personal tragedy? What happens to you?

I think we all take slavery for granted. Sometimes we say, "Yeah, there was slavery, and people were sold away." But what did it do to an individual when that sort of personal tragedy occurred?

DAVIS: How and when did you begin writing the script?

DASH: I began writing it in 1976 when I was at AFI, I wrote it as a 30-page script, and it was funded originally by the National Endowment for the Arts as a short. It kept growing as I was doing more research on it; it kept getting longer and longer, and I realized it was a feature. It was funded in 1981, by the Guggenheim Foundation for Research; that was how I was able to do intensive research on it.

I had historical advisors working on the project, like Dr. Margaret Washington Creel at UCLA and Oscar Sims at the UCLA Research Library. I realized that I would need more money to make it into a feature and we went to the Islands in 1987, shot for two weeks and made a trailer out of it.

DAVIS: Was the initial intent to make a trailer?

DASH: No, it wasn't; it was to make a short film. When I realized it was a much longer piece, I got money from the Rockefeller Fellowship, from the Rockefeller Foundation, from the Fulton County Arts Council, here in Georgia, then from the Georgia Humanities and the Appalshop Southeast Fellowship. All these fellowships and grants I got, for the most part, after I came to Georgia. When I was in LA, I couldn't get practically any funding for the project, except for the NEA. I couldn't get any regional funding, and I couldn't get any studio development money.

At one point, Universal Studios called me up after seeing *Illusions*; they wanted to hear my idea. I went and spoke to them, but they said no; I spoke to an executive at Warner Brothers, and they said no; and then I spoke to some people at Columbia, and they passed on it too. They said to bring it back to them when I had finished the film. Who needs to do that at that point? So there was no studio that was interested in developing it. I came to Georgia and shot the trailer, and from the trailer I went to a PBS weekend retreat at Sundance and Lynn Holst from American Playhouse was there. She saw the trailer, liked it

and told me to send her the screenplay. I did, and American Playhouse agreed to fund my film. Once American Playhouse agreed to do it, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting [CPB] put some money into it, too. Prior to that CPB had rejected it. That was while I was in California; they said that the script wasn't very "interesting."

So, we went and shot it in '89.

DAVIS: From when to when?

DASH: From October 16th to November 19th. We finished right before Thanksgiving. We've been in post-production ever since.

The final budget from American Playhouse was \$800,000.

DAVIS: Did they ever tell you why it was so low? I thought their rate was supposed to be \$1.5 million for a picture.

DASH: They told me that it was high, that normal budgets were \$500,000.

DAVIS: Could you go back a little more into your research process. I think it's interesting, and people don't think that filmmakers do research

about a subject. I think most people think all ideas just come out of your head. But I know that you took a long time to carefully uncover your story.

DASH: Yes, it came from intensive research at UCLA's University Research Library, the Schomburg Center for Cultural Research in New York, at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and from Dr. Margaret Washington Creel who is an expert on the Sea Islands' culture, religions, etc. There was a five year period of research and writing.

I also collected stories from relatives who came from the area. I included some of [my mother's] recollections of folklore and things like that. I included lots of my father's stories, and my grandmother's on my father's side, and my aunts'. Things that they used to say, I used as dialogue.

DAVIS: Do you have a character in the story that you personally identify with more?

DASH: I think it would be the Myown character. She does eventually leave the island, but she is the one who is carrying scraps of memory North. She will be the person, the individual, maintaining cultural traditions in the North, the Western world.

DAVIS: Would you like to talk at all about the restrictions that were supposed to be placed on you by American Playhouse, in terms of the script?

DASH: Well, actually it was a very good experience working with American Playhouse. I couldn't think of a better situation in which to give voice to a story. They did not put any restrictions on me; in fact, what I did and what they wanted me to do was to expand the story. I expanded the story, the dialogue and the locations, so I just made it a bigger story.

DAVIS: Could you tell us who some of the actors are and what their roles are?

DASH: I really tried to use the actresses who had worked previously in other Black independent films. The Great Grand Mother (Nana Peazant) is played by Cora Lee Day who was in Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*. Kaycee Moore plays the part of Haagar Peazant, she, of course, was in *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett) and *Bless Their Little Hearts* (Billy Woodberry). Then of course, Barbara O plays Yellow Mary and was previously in *Diary of an African Nun*, and Sandra Sharp's *Back Inside Herself*. I also used Alva Rogers who was in *School Daze*, she's the female lead, Eula; Adisa Ander-

son as the male lead, Eli, who was in Alile Sharon Larkin's *A Different Image*; Geraldine Dunston from Iverson White's *Dark Exodus*; and also Trula Hoosier from *Sidewalk Stories*.

The whole thing was to hire actors and actresses who you know are good and who have also supported Black filmmakers in the past. These people worked months on films for little or no pay at all; so, now that I was finally able to pay them for their work, why look somewhere else? Of course, there are many other people who were in it, but the main characters, I wanted to be these people.

DAVIS: Can you talk a little about your crew?

DASH: I had a great crew! The director of photography was A. J. Rogobodiyen; second camera operator was N'gai Kai. She just recently married one of the actors in the film, Cornell Royal who plays the part of Daddy Mac. They met on the set and married about a month later.

Then we had the wonderful and fabulous Nandi Bowe as first assistant director. She worked on *Cry Freedom* and *Do the Right Thing*. I tried to hire Black women in key positions.

DAVIS: I see. That was going to be my next question. Most people don't think there are black women film technicians. Is there anyone else you would like to mention?

DASH: Vita Campbell did sound; she also did sound for Charles Burnett on *To Sleep With Anger* and *My Brother's Wedding*.

The whole production design and set was real interesting too. They were done by fine artists as opposed to so-called experienced film production designers. I had Kerry Marshall, who is an artist in his own right, as production designer. The art director was Michael Kelly Williams. Their work usually shows at the Studio Museum of Harlem and many other galleries. Martha Jackson Jarvis was a production artist on the set and David Hammond was also a production artist whose work can be seen in the film.

I wanted the look of the film to come from a rich African base. All the artists I just mentioned are nationally known African American artists.

I would also like to mention Butch Morris for the music he has been composing for the project for the last two years. I used some music on the soundtrack in the trailer, and some people went off on it. Butch is Black

and is composing original music for the film that will incorporate South Carolina field cries and calls. There will also be strings and large orchestral sounds. We've been experimenting with a lot of things.

DAVIS: Was any of Butch's music on the trailer's soundtrack?

DASH: No, because it would cost about \$30,000 to have the music recorded—with the musicians and rental of the studio time. The music that's on the trailer came from a record.

DAVIS: Were there any other Black independent filmmakers who were on your set?

DASH: Yes, William Hudson was an assistant camera person, Nandi Bowe is an independent filmmaker. Pam Jackson is an independent producer, who worked on *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*. Floyd Webb worked with us as unit publicist.

There are others I'd like to mention who helped so much. Steven Jones was production manager, line producer and now he's post production supervisor. He is possibly the best feature film production manager that I have ever worked with.

Gloria Naylor also worked with us from the beginning to the end as a swing production assistant. She worked in the art department, costumes, and all over the place for us.

DAVIS: How did you get her?

DASH: She came to us. She has a house there, and she's going to be shooting *Mama Day*. She heard that we were in pre-production down there; so she came and volunteered her services. She was a tremendous help.

DAVIS: Could you tell us about your production period. Did you shoot with any special cameras?

DASH: We shot in Super 35, which is similar to Super 16. So the film will have to go through a reduction process. We required a special camera and special editing equipment and all that.

DAVIS: Why was that done?

DASH: We did it so it would look better, when you go to a reduction process the grain will be even smaller. And, of course, we used Agfa-Geveart film, instead of Kodak because Black people look better on Agfa.

DAVIS: Any other aspects of the production that was unique?

DASH: Well we used this proto-type piece of machinery called a speed aperture control—it's the only one that exists in the United States. It's a computer operated speed control where you could have a character speaking at 24 frames a second sync and you could click off and go into slow motion right in the middle of the scene without stopping and starting and vice-versa.

We used it throughout the film, but one specific scene is when Viola, the Christian missionary, is talking to the photographer that she brought to the Island to document the family's crossing over to the mainland. She's talking about the old souls and how the children are the most important members of the family. While she's talking, the camera pushes forward, and we see two children near the seaside practicing hand signals in slow motion. After they practice hand signals, the camera pulls back out to the scene encompassing Viola and Steve watching them, and their dialogue continues at 24 frames.

DAVIS: Can you talk about some of the differences for you as a director/writer on a feature as opposed to short films?

DASH: Actually, I think it is more difficult to do a short because you have less time as a writer to develop characters. You have to introduce them, develop them and resolve the story all within 30 minutes. But in a longer form like the feature you have a chance to develop, to embellish and to have lots of nuances and really stretch out creatively without falling into stereotypes on certain characters.

DAVIS: Would you go back to doing short films after this?

DASH: Oh, sure I would. In fact, I've been talking to this dancer, Jawole Willa Zollar from *Urban Bush Women* about doing a 30-minute dance film called *Praise House* for Alive From Off Center.

I'm not locked into features; for me, it's about making films and showing Black women in ways that have never been seen before. It's about moving people, about disseminating information.

DAVIS: It was a long process to get *Daughters of the Dust* from the script to celluloid. What other kinds of things did you do in the interim?

DASH: I did quite a few videotapes for an organization in Atlanta called the National Black Women's Health

Project. They were doing things on adolescent pregnancy in the Black community; I did some medical films for them on preventing cancer and things like that. I also did a piece for Alive From Off Center called *Relatives*, a dance film by Ishmael Houston Jones. Ishmael danced in *The Brother From Another Planet*; he was the one who was throwing himself up against the wall. He's a great dancer.

So, I've been working, even though it hasn't been in film. I've worked a lot in videotape.

DAVIS: What kinds of things are you trying to do aesthetically with *Daughters of the Dust*?

DASH: I think viewers will see the film as a foreign film. It will be something very different to most people because we came from an Afrocentric approach to everything: from the set design, the costumes, from the hair to the way the makeup was put on. You know, the way Black women put on makeup: they put liner on the inside of their eye—that comes from wearing khol in the desert regions of Africa.

DAVIS: When you say you approached the film from an Afrocentric

point of view and way of doing things, what makes that different from Western or Hollywood standards?

DASH: Like the "doo-rag" on the hair and how its tied and all that kind of stuff. The way we approached it was to do as your mother did—and as did her mother before her. So, it would be tied in a much different way than what popular American culture would allow us to see it. The manners in which African women tie their heads with scarves has different meanings. Everything means something; there's a source for everything. You just don't put a scarf up on someone's head. You just don't put jewelry on someone; you put it on in a certain way. People's motor habits—the way they stand and the way they walk, the way they laugh—I tried to maintain the integrity of West African motor habits. An example would be of turning the head slightly to the left when listening to an elder and putting a hand over your mouth when you laugh.

All this is approached from an Afrocentric perspective. I wanted to have a connection to the past. The men have these hand signals that they give to each other from across the sand dunes. They communicate with

one another in hand signals; these were derived from secret societies in West Africa, like the Poro for men and Sande, which was a women's secret society.

DAVIS: I think that gives people a deeper understanding of what you mean, because people use the term Afrocentric quite loosely. Then there are also different camps of opinion on Afrocentrism. Some people look at Afrocentrism in strict political terms of Black Nationalism, and that's supposed to be what Afrocentrism is.

DASH: No, Afrocentrism, as I'm applying to this film, is that your actions are derived from West African culture rather than from the hinterlands of Europe.

DAVIS: What would you like *Daughters* to do in terms of distribution?

DASH: I'm looking for a wide and general distribution. We already have several distribution companies set up that are interested in the film. We're really pushing the editing so that we're able to give them a screening soon. American Playhouse is pleased with what we shot.

DAVIS: How come they're not distributing?

DASH: They don't distribute, not theatrically. They just deal with PBS. After 2 years of theatrical release, they then put it on television, and they own all the PBS rights.

DAVIS: Do you feel hopeful about this attention to Black filmmakers, because some people feel like it's just lip service and that it won't last.

DASH: Well, we have to make sure that it's not. I'm very optimistic about it. We need films financed by Hollywood. We deserve them, and it's long overdue. Filmmaking is a business venture. It's not a charity; we have stories to be told, and studios have money to be made.

DAVIS: So you don't think that Hollywood will try to rip us off like they did with the Black exploitation era?

DASH: No, I don't think so. I don't think that's going to be the case this time. There are so many filmmakers just ready to go with product, and they're certainly competent. Their

films have been winning awards in film festivals and getting critical acclaim world-wide. I think there's a possibility of a rash of Black films that will also be made by white Hollywood filmmakers, but I think we're in a much better position right now than we were twenty years ago.

DAVIS: But with *Daughters*, by choosing a style . . .

DASH: Yes, that was a problem with *Daughters*. The studios looked at the idea and said it doesn't seem commercial. But, now, they're interested in it because it's already been done. The films that Black filmmakers want to do . . . We're just going to have to go ahead and start them and not worry about what someone else may think about their commercial viability or lack of it.

Black people want to see what Black people are doing, thinking and seeing. It's time for Black businesses to start supporting African American independent filmmakers.

DAVIS: In what way?

DASH: Financially. There are these

large Black insurance and hair care product companies. They should start investing in Black independent film. It's as simple as that. They will be making just as much money on their hair care products, and our stories will be getting told—and their stories will be getting told.

DAVIS: Do you prefer a particular aspect of filmmaking?

DASH: I think the writing and research is exciting, but I like it all. As Black independent filmmakers we've always had to write, direct and edit our films in total, and I think we have an advantage over some other directors who only direct. They don't know the whole process like we do, and they can't incorporate that knowledge into each phase of their project because they don't have that experience. When we're writing something, we know how much money we have or will have to do our films, and we know how we can write it, and that we can't have that rocket ship in it. We know what our constraints are; so, we're cutting it as we're shooting it.

DAVIS: From your example, if you write a scene or film and you have a rocket ship in it, then as a Black independent filmmaker you can't have a rocket in it . . .

DASH: But you can have the smoke of the rocket ship taking off . . . that's how you can pull that one off.

DAVIS: . . . but some people say that's self censorship.

DASH: I don't think it's censorship, I think it's knowing what your parameters are. Censorship would be saying, "Well, I can't have a scene in here at all about people taking off in a rocket ship because it's not economically possible; the budget won't be able to withstand that." You have to get creative, more creative than someone who does have a budget for a rocket ship.

DAVIS: I'm going play devil's advocate. I'm going back to Clyde's [Clyde Taylor, *Black Film Review* 5:4] argument that if Black filmmakers continue to be auteurs, it won't be productive for the movement as a whole. Do you think that its a good idea that Black filmmakers write, direct, produce and edit their own films?

DASH: I think we do that out of necessity rather than desire to do it all. I mean it's better to write, direct, produce, edit and dip it in the developing solution to have a film than not to do it at all. But, if it's possible to have someone else produce for you who can pull together everything that you need and require, then get them. If you can locate an editor that works with you and if you can hook up with a writer who expresses things that you never even thought of and who expresses it better than you ever thought possible, then, I think that's great. You can work together on that. But if you can't, then I don't suggest that you just sit home and rent a tape.

Some people might *prefer* to do it all and be the auteur, but I would like to write from scripts that have all ready been written. I don't know anyone who would give me a script right now, I can't afford to option a script or a book. I don't have that kind of clout or money yet. Hopefully, after *Daughters*, I will. But for now, I'll keep writing and doing all the things that I need to do in order to get the visions that I want on the screen rather than sit back and complain about it.

DAVIS: Would you like to address yourself to the position of Black women filmmakers?

DASH: In the '90s we are going to start seeing a lot of work by Black women independent filmmakers and I think it's going to open up a whole new world of dreams, desires and aspirations. It's going to make a lot of young Black women happy and inspire them and address their needs. I think it's a good thing and I think we've all been out here for a long time; it's all going to come together in the '90s.

*Zeinabu irene Davis is an independent filmmaker who teaches at Northwestern University. This is a longer version of her interview with Julie Dash, which originally appeared in Black Film Review. It is reprinted in this special issue of Wide Angle with the kind permission of Ms. Davis and Jacquie Jones, Editor of Black Film Review.*