

BAFTA A Life in Pictures: Viola Davis  
15 January 2017 at Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly,  
London

**Danny Leigh:** Hi, good afternoon my name's Danny Leigh, let me first of all say thank you to Audi for their generous sponsorship of the whole Life in Pictures strand. Now some performers can appear in just a single scene and they instantly become all that we remember of a film or TV show for years to come, and others can take the full weight of the story from start to finish, but we're here this afternoon to celebrate one of those very rare performers who can do both, and they do it flawlessly: Viola Davis.

[Applause]

[Clip Plays]

Please welcome the one and only Viola Davis

[Applause]

I think you may have a few fans, just a few.

[Laughter]

First of all let me congratulate you, last weekend you won a Golden Globe, for your new film *Fences*

**Viola Davis:** Thank you

**DL:** And in between then and now, a BAFTA nomination as well.

**VD:** Yes

**DL:** Now, you talk to some actors and actresses and they'll say, 'well awards are simply the icing on the cake' you know 'the real reward is the work itself and awards don't mean that much'. I wonder does someone who has had a lot of love from award ceremonies, and I think will probably get a lot more during the...

[Laughter]

How do you feel about awards?

**VD:** I probably feel the same way, is that I'd rather get the job than the award, let me just say that but it is the icing on the cake. Only because you're, I've been on

both ends of the spectrums of not getting the award which is brutal too, right. But I always focus on the silence after the awards, the flowers come you know, the champagne comes, and then nothing.

[Laughter]

And then you have to go back to work and I don't know how most actors feel but I know with me, every time I start a job, I always have the imposter syndrome, that this is gonna be the job where people find out I'm the hack that I am. You've got to go back to work man, and you can't bring the award to work. It's not gonna play Annalise Keating.

**DL:** Then I suppose it's a question of seizing the moment though, while you have that platform, and it was interesting last weekend you thank Dan Davis, your father, you mentioned Dan Davis your father in the Golden Globes speech, I wonder was that a spur of the moment decision or did you think actually if I get a moment on stage I will be doing that.

**VD:** Well, it sort of was both, that during the course of shooting *Fences* it just occurred to me, it occurred to me the whole generation of men in Troy's era, and my father was born in 1936. That is the height of Jim Crow laws in St Matthews, South Carolina, and even when my Dad died of pancreatic cancer he could barely write, he could write his name and he really tried to read thick, thick books. But really he was barely literate. He was an alcoholic. My father was a very complicated man I would say, but it occurred to me when he was dying that I wanted to preserve his stories, and I get the feeling in life that the only stories that are preserved are the people who somehow shifted the culture. The Martin Luther Kings, the Medgar Evers, you know a great musician. But the average man somehow their stories are forgotten, especially the average black man, and those are the stories that August Wilson preserves because it's in that average person that really they're the keepers of history. They're the ones that let you know what was absolutely happening at

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that time and so that's why I mentioned him.

**DL:** Now I wonder what you could share with us about your childhood, and I guess specifically how it shaped you as an actress?

**VD:** It shaped me as an actress like anyone's childhood would shape you as an actress. I mean I grew up in, I always say abject poverty because I hear so many people say, "I grew up poor too, there were times when I didn't even have breakfast!". No, I grew up 'paw'.

[Laughter]

That's one lower than poor! I didn't have breakfast, lunch and dinner, you know. That was how I grew up, I mean you can imagine, you can do the math if you have a mom who has an eighth grade education, a father who has a fifth grade education, and his skill was he groomed horses, he groomed some of the most famous horses in history, but he was a groom, and we moved to Central Falls Rhode Island when I was two months, three months old and so we lived in Rhode Island in abject poverty in condemned buildings, that were infested with rats, a lot of times. Almost never did we have hot water, plumbing never worked, never had a phone. That was really the most, 99.9 percent of my childhood

**DL:** And in terms of it, it always feels outside the profession that a lot of acting is about confidence or about drawing on a kind of inner strength and I wonder, surely your upbringing left you with confidence to make up, there's that sense I think, among people who live in poverty that it's somehow their fault when they're going through it.

**VD:** I don't necessarily feel that acting is about confidence. I feel it's about sensitivity. I feel it's about being a keen observer of life and being affected by the things that you do see. I imagine that most people probably, it's like *Harry Potter*, when you see you know Hermione, and Harry Potter, and you know, they go to the train station and most people are not even aware that

they're walking through walls and all of that. That's how an actor is. Actors walk through almost like ghosts. They're the ones who see everything, they see it all, they see all the stuff that people take for granted, you know idiosyncrasies the mess, the shortcomings, they soak it up. And that's what I did in my life, I knew all the drug dealers, I knew all the people, I knew the people, the paedophiles, I knew the people who were the town drunks, I knew all the people who went to jail. And I looked and I watched, and I soaked it in, and it really has been those kind of observations that has informed my work much more than confidence.

**DL:** Are you still a people watcher now?

**VD:** All the time, I watch people all the time, which can be a problem.

[Laughter]

Because you know when you're watching sometimes you can forget to be kind of in life, when you're observing it. But the beauty is that, I love actors, well sometimes, sometimes they can be a pain in the ass.

[Laughter]

But what actors do is they celebrate it, whereas most people try to hide it. We want to expose it, and I think that has been instrumental in sort of saving my life, saving my life in a way that I felt that I was really good at taking all that stuff and using it in my work, and the stage is a very sacred place, because it is a place that you can leave all the pee and the poop and the snot and all of that, and it can be celebrated. The more you can expose it, the more it will be celebrated.

**DL:** With the screen, I wonder what your relationship was like with the screen as a child, movies and TV, I mean was it just escapism that you wanted or was there a deeper connection?

**VD:** All of it, all of it, I loved it. My sisters and I lived for every year *The Ten Commandments*, every year *Willy Wonka*, *Wizard of Oz*, I mean the list goes on and on, Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee,

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loved Christopher Lee. We soaked it up, and from a very young age I can always distinguish the actors from just the mere entertainers. And not that I did not like the entertainers, because I loved the Redd Foxx, you know, people from *Good Times*, *That's my Mama*, these were all the black shows back in the day. But I always knew that Isabel Sanford was the one in *Jeffersons* that was the actor. I always knew in *Alice* I said those are all actors, they come from the stage and made me lean in more, I could see, I could separate the kind of gimmicky things that actors did from the real craft and that excited me.

**DL:** So at what point do you move from that kind of appreciation of acting to thinking actually you know what, I'm gonna do this myself, and then you start on a road that I guess then takes you to Julliard ultimately.

**VD:** Well I think that what happens because, you know Miss Tyson is the one who was the game changer, absolutely. I can mark the day I wanted to be an actor, watching that performance her age from 18 to 103 was it on a stick. Because I couldn't believe that it was the same woman. I watched how she used her hands and her mouth, I just, and that she looked like me, because when you see a physical manifestation of someone who looks like you doing something that magnificent it makes you believe you can do it. And when a love is ignited, a love of the craft, not a love of celebrity, you want to do it in every capacity you can. I think that's where a lot of young actors, not all, but a lot of young actors go wrong. Because with me, I don't care, I mean I have performed church basements, basketball courts, I have performed in the theatre where there was only one person in that audience. I have performed off Broadway, Broadway, every regional theatre, every chance I got, I wanted to do that, and the goal was to be as good as Miss Tyson.

**DL:** It sounds so specific though, it's so interesting because I think in our teenage years everything is quite fluid and a lot of performers will, they just want to perform, and this could be a

question of acting, that could be a question of doing music, it could be dance, they just want to be on a stage, with you it seems very particular.

**VD:** It was very particular, listen I tried to do all those things.

[Laughter]

But I didn't do all those things well I mean I did a one-woman show, on Sissieretta Jones, a famous opera singer who came out of Rhode Island, my hometown, and she performed in some of the biggest opera houses throughout the world, and so I did a one-woman show that toured several parts of Rhode Island, singing 14 different songs, opera songs!

[Laughter]

**DL:** I think we're all waiting for a...

**VD:** And, you know, here's the thing, the closest I could come to, you know Meryl Streep's performance in *Florence Foster Jenkins*...

[Laughter]

That was me! That was me screeching, and I remember my sisters came to see me and they were like, "Do you hear it?"

[Laughter]

But you know what, as humiliating as it was, and it was humiliating, every performance I did a bad show, I tried to be better. I just tried to be better, I tried to control the things that I could, just to make people believe that I was actually that woman.

**DL:** And then you embark on a stage career and I guess that that whole experience you just described which, I think you're a being a little teensy bit modest about, I guess it's toughened you up a bit, because I mean stage acting is, from everyone I know that's acted on stage, it's tough, and it's kind of lonely as well .

**VD:** It's absolutely lonely. It does toughen you up, I suppose because it does take

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courage to be an actor, and it takes courage because, and I forget who said it, that acting is about standing in front of an audience naked, and turning around very slowly. And you see it most of the time you do it in acting school, because frankly, you don't get the roles that will show what you do. You just don't, like I can look at a slew of my roles and they were like two or three days of work, whereas in acting school I played, you know, Paulina in *Winter's Tale*, and I did some really fabulous roles but on screen I would be so and so in two scenes, you know, but it's, in acting school you always have that scene there's an exercise that you do in acting school that you have to do something very, very private, you can choose whatever it is, I'm surprised at what most people choose, they choose going to the bathroom, which I'm like oh can we not, and some people choose masturbation, some people choose getting naked. But whatever it is you choose something very very, very private, and forget that people are watching. And the more you can do it and the more uninhibited you are, then the better. And then the reason you do that exercise is to infuse it in your work. Because think about it, a lot of the scenes that you do are not public scenes. You have many a scene in the bedroom with someone, and it's not necessarily having sex, just something that's private, something that is exposed. That takes courage, it takes courage and I'll leave it at that because I was gonna make an editorial comment and someone upstairs told me shut up Viola.

**DL:** I may come back, I may try and get the editorial comment.

**VD:** And hopefully I will have forgotten what I was going to say.

**DL:** It would be perfect, I mean you mentioned just then in terms of screen work having to I guess make quite a lot of very little, and it made me think of your first, you say your first screen role was *Substance of Fire*, and was that where you got your Screen Actor's Guild card for, and that's for a character who doesn't have a name at that point.

**VD:** Her name was Nurse.

[Laughter]

**DL:** Right, and yet somehow I guess you wanted to do screen work and I'm wondering at that point, combine the stage and the screen or to maybe concentrate on the screen.

**VD:** It's not a matter of wanting, it's just that's what you do as an actor. You know, I'm at a point where I listen to people all the time saying, "You want to be a stage actor, TV actor, screen actor?", and I'm thinking, "What does that mean?" I wanted to be an actor. Your agent calls and says I have an audition for you, like OK, and you know what, I'm gonna just be honest, sometimes you do it for the money, because 95 percent of us are unemployed at any given time, all these people you see up here represent 0.007 percent of the profession, they really do. Most actors out there, they're struggling to eat, they have mortgages on their homes if they have one, a lot of them have put off having children, they have a horrible Peter Pan syndrome.

[Laughter]

You know, I see actors all the time who have \$200,000 of student loans because they went to acting school like NYU or Yale, and they have \$200,000 of student loans but "I don't want to do television". And I'm thinking to myself, myself, the one who grew up 'paw' and I'm thinking who's gonna pay for your student loans? Sometimes you do the job for the money. Listen, Meryl Streep, and I always use her, I'm gonna apologise to her once I can sit down and have a great martini, because she loves martinis, once we can have martini, and she is one of the few actors that throughout her whole career, has had fabulous roles. But for the most part a lot of the roles you get are gonna be really shitty. But guess what, you still have to dig into that role and do the work. OK? That's the career of an actor, so I don't care what I'm doing, I'm an equal opportunity actor.

[Laughter]

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**DL:** Let me just ask, you've brought up TV, and I think I'm trying to remember, it was like 2000 or something I think it was the first time I saw you was in *Law and Order*, and *Law and Order* is a hugely popular show, still gets repeated a lot in the states and here as well, so people will still be seeing your appearance on *Law and Order*, tell me how that was for you, because you played a serial killer.

**VD:** Oh that was *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, I loved...

[Laughter]

**DL:** Yeah, I kind of wanted to find out how that was for you?

**VD:** Oh I loved it, I loved playing that role. Yeah I played a serial killer, I think she kills a family with a baseball bat. And I think I was a security guard who was running some kind of scheme in making money so that I can afford to send my kid to private school, kids, and I'm a bit of a sociopath. I loved it, I loved it because I get, what has happened for me in my career, and I think I could speak for many dark skinned women, is there is a sense that we want to be overly sanctified in roles. Overly domesticated in roles, if we are mean and unlikeable we're cussing someone out. I have cussed, I cussed George Clooney out in so many movies, tell it like it is you know, I know what to say, I don't need Buddha, Jesus, I don't need anyone, I'll cuss you out because I know what to say. Then it was refreshing to play someone who literally was way more complicated in their pathology, that was not necessarily likeable or not likeable, but someone, something different, something different, something different to show that we are indeed complicated, that we do have a pathology that's not necessarily just kind of four things that I always play, you know you've got to play strong today, we're gonna play sassy today. So I always hate when I read a review and I've tried so hard to make the character complicated and I see a review written by someone who's a great reviewer and the adjective they always use is 'and Viola giving a very soulful performance'

[Laughter]

Oh my god, shit.

[Laughter]

**DL:** The thing that stayed with me about that performance as well was the amount of time that you were on screen, as well, because it was a great role for you to kind of sink your teeth into, because actually in movies you were appearing, you had kind of great little nuggety parts in some interesting movies but then you were here and gone, and that must have been a little bit frustrating, it must have felt like hard ground as an actress.

**VD:** Let me tell you something, all of it is frustrating, when I don't care if I'm in 15 scenes, if when you put pen to paper, and you don't have an imagination to then begin the process of saying OK, this is the first question I'm going to ask, who is she? Who does she love? What are her secrets? Did she have sex that morning? Did she... if you haven't asked any of those questions but you put me in a lot of scenes, then it's just as bad as being in two scenes and having no name. I do that all the time, I see a lot of people in movies and people say hip hip hooray there's a black woman in a movie, but by the time she's on the screen, I'm asking all kinds of questions about her and by the time I've tried to answer them she's gone. The most revolutionary thing you can do is write a human being, that's it.

[Applause]

**DL:** You're someone who has this incredible perceptive sense of their own character, and I wonder if, when you mention that, whether you want to write yourself, why aren't you writing screenplays, because your screenplays would be amazing, so why aren't you doing that?

**VD:** You think so?

[Laughter]

You know Meryl Streep just sent me a text about that, I'm outing her today, but

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she just wrote me a text, she says, "why don't you write yourself?" I'm always wondering when people get the time to do that, and maybe I'm incredibly lazy but I have a six-year-old at home, I'm doing a TV show, I'm thinking when do people have time to write? But it's not necessarily something I feel extraordinarily confident in, I'm the one who's always critiquing other people's writing, so maybe it's in my future.

**DL:** I wish you would. You've mentioned Meryl Streep a couple of times, and I want to talk about *Doubt*, because *Doubt*, suddenly after 15 years of doing screen work, suddenly *Doubt* becomes this landmark role, suddenly people are very aware of you. I wonder, and this is a one scene role, I wonder how much competition there was first of all to get that role and what the kind of audition process?

**VD:** A lot.

**DL:** Right, OK, tell us a little bit about that.

**VD:** Whenever there's a great role out there for a woman of colour everyone has auditioned for it. And you know what, here's a thing too, you can get a little egotistical by saying it, oh god I'm gonna audition for this, I really want this role, and I auditioned for it and I got a call back, and it was a screen test, and in my mind I thought it's between me and Adriane Lenox, who did the role on Broadway, fantastic actress, so I said it's me and Adriane Lenox I'm so nervous, but it's me and Adriane Lenox. So I had to fly to New York for it, I fly to New York, they put me up, and they give me a call sheet, I don't know if you all know what a call sheet is, sure you do. Seven different actresses.

[Laughter]

Everyone from Audra McDonald to Taraji P. Henson, everyone was on that call sheet, and we each had 45 minute sessions to screen test. You get to the venue which was a big warehouse and everyone is being put in hair and makeup, so you see seven different Mrs Millers. And my favourite part is you hear all their auditions, and my other favourite

part is you hear everyone going 'oh my god she knocked it out of the ballpark, oh my god!' So to answer your question, yes it was very difficult!

**DL:** Wow, ok, it's a good answer. Who'd be an actor? I mean really. You mentioned preparation, and I wonder, with Mrs Miller how much preparation had you done for what we're about to, we're going to take a look at a clip from *Doubt* in a minute but I just wanted to find out how much work had gone into what we're about to see?

**VD:** A lot. I could not understand that character. I could not for the life of me understand that character. You know, and this is not a slight to John Patrick Shanley, it's not a slight to anyone it's probably a slight to me, but there is a bit of an allegorical metaphoric element to *Doubt*, almost Mrs Miller being a device to present an idea. An idea of if you do have a son who could, who is gay, and whose father beats him everyday because he knows is gay, then I don't care if this man is having sex with him, as long as he loves him, he's taking him under his wing, he's doing all of that, OK. But I think it was presented as an idea, I always say that writers, they write something incredibly dynamic, you have to make it work. Those are two different things. I didn't get it, maybe because I'm a parent. I don't understand how a mother could sacrifice her son that way, and I did not want to play her like, yeah, I didn't want to make a judgement on her. I thought it was more interesting in making her incredibly nurturing, but a woman who is willing to do that. I think that's more interesting as opposed to making a judgement and saying 'the only woman who would be able to do that, she's got to be cold, she's got to be all that'. So I had to write a bio that was, I stopped at about 100 pages, but it was about four months of calling everyone I knew and making them read it, talk about it, everything, before I had my 'ahah' moment.

**DL:** And you're the woman who just described herself as lazy, and you've just done...

[Laughter]

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**VD:** Yeah I did

**DL:** Let's take a look, I mean, this is Viola's scene from *Doubt* and you're confronted, really by Meryl Streep's Sister Aloysius who is convinced that your son is having an inappropriate relationship with the priest, and there's nothing else to be said let's just watch this scene from *Doubt*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Now I know what my response to that scene is, and I'm sure it's shared throughout the room which is the breath kind of stops in your throat. But I wonder what was your response the first time you saw that film? Because the actor is often the last in line of the cast and crew to see, you know you'll go to a cast and crew screening just before the film comes out to the public, and finally see what you've done, so how did you feel about that?

**VD:** The first time I really saw the scene was in the looping session, ADR session, I was so depressed. I thought it was so horrific that I went home, I remember I went home, I went to a restaurant in Santa Monica and I had a salad to go, and four bags of bread.

[Laughter]

And I went home, and I lay down for maybe a week, the bread was gone after five minutes. And I ate, I had the blanket over my head, until one day my husband finally got hit to the fact that I wasn't getting off the couch, and he said, "What's wrong with you?" And I said, "Julius, this is going to be the end of my career, it was horrible, I went to looping it was horrible", and he said "Well, what was Meryl doing in the scene?". And I said, "I don't know what the hell she was doing I wasn't looking at her! I was looking at me!" You know I, there's no more to say about that.

**DL:** OK now clearly I think we can say you were wrong about that, I think that's fair to say, but at what stage did you

realise that actually people were latching on to your performance in this movie more than any other factor? You're there with Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, great actors all, but you walked away with that movie, and you must have been aware that as soon as the first reviews came out, what people were talking about was you.

**VD:** Yeah but you know, it's not my style, that's what I always say, it's not my style. I mean I get what people were saying, and I love that because any actor who has the imposter syndrome, which is all of us, we don't want to be found out, but still I, you always want to be better. That's all, you always want to be better.

**DL:** So when you watch that scene now are you looking to where you could improve it? Because from the outside it doesn't look like it could be improved.

**VD:** All the time.

**DL:** Really?

**VD:** You know the one thing that I really wanted to get in that is because I did not see Adriane Lenox perform it, I just wanted to do it myself. I wanted that scene to feel like a confession. I didn't feel like that last part of the scene of you know, maybe some of those boys want to be caught, that that's just information that she would offer. It's 1968, I'm trying to remember, and she's black, African Americans have very specific ideas about homosexuality, that I don't think that that's something that she would just offer up, that's something you've got to kick out of her, so I really wanted that last scene to be a confession. So, that's all I'll say.

[Laughter]

**DL:** I mean once the performance has worked its way into the world, there is suddenly something that you haven't faced until that point, which is the pressure of celebrity, and suddenly people are talking about you not just as an actress but you're Viola Davis, the face on a magazine cover, Viola Davis being written about by journalists. Was

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that an adjustment to make? Because you strike me as quite a private person in some ways.

**VD:** I'm really not that private.

**DL:** OK, that's good to know.

**VD:** I just think that no one's really looking at me like that, so I get off as looking like I'm private which I love. I'm private, you know. But I don't really think I'm known for anything other than my work. I'm not known for, you know, representing Revlon, and I sort of like it that way. I was a journeyman actor for many years, I'm a character actress, I'm 51. So the celebrity part, the hardest part of the celebrity part I have to tell you is, and I always do this with the story, it's a very very brief story. I went out with my daughter at Target, you guys, I don't know if you have Target here, but Target is a store that I love, and I went with my daughter and I never dress up when I go out, I've got some messed up hat on, I look like you know, I just got out of jail.

[Laughter]

And I had my daughter with me and we have a blast, we go to Target, we take pictures of that dog they have at Target with the little bullseye on it, we buy a bunch of stuff. I went to Target, and the paparazzi got me. And I really looked tore up. And then I had a party at my house, and I had someone who came to the house, who will never come to my house again by the way, and someone mentioned that picture and she said, "Oh I want to look for it". She got her phone, she looked at the picture, and she held it up in the middle of the party, and she said, "Now Viola, what did you learn from this picture?" And I said, "I should have worn a different hat?"

[Laughter]

But I think that's what I hate about celebrity, is that you do so, I shouldn't say hate, I don't like it as much, is you so much publicity, that you begin to see that that is what it is that you do. And it's not, it really is just a by product. So you go to Hollywood and you have a bunch of people, and they're out there

constantly, 'you've got to wear the new colour, grey is the new colour!' Viola, you're gonna go out to the grocery store looking like that? And oh Viola, you're gonna do... it's like yeah I'm gonna go out looking like that because this is not what I do. That has been the hardest part of celebrity.

**DL:** Sure, and the perception from outside I guess as well is that when you have a role like that which is seen as a breakthrough, seen suddenly as, you know, people are talking about Viola Davis as if you've come from nowhere, the perception is that you've suddenly, there are suddenly brilliant roles coming through the door, but was that the case did things change in terms of the kind of work that you were being offered at that moment?

**VD:** I just was offered more work after *Doubt*, I was just sort of offered more roles like that in terms of the size, I was just getting paid a little bit more money. My career didn't change until after *The Help*, and then it really hit after *How to Get Away with Murder*, *How to Get Away with Murder* has been the game changer, and just FYI nobody understands what it is that an actor does. Nobody understands, actors don't understand it. I listen to actors all the time and I'm just baffled, I really am I'm totally baffled. Nobody understands, not even a little bit.

**DL:** Well I want to try and unpick that a little bit, we've got a couple, because I want to try and get through *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which I thought was a phenomenal performance from you, and then let's talk about *The Help* and then let's talk about *How to Get Away with Murder*. I want to talk about *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* first because I think it's a fascinating contrast with what we've just seen with Meryl Streep, because in this film, you're playing opposite, in the scene we're about to see, you're playing opposite a 12 year old boy who I think, my understanding is, had never acted before at that point, he'd been on a game show, so suddenly you're taking the weight of sharing a scene with him. So for people who haven't seen the



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film it's about tis boy whose father died in 9/11 and then he tries to trace everyone with the surname Black in New York ?

**VD:** Yes exactly.

**DL:** Abby Black, your character is one of those people and he kind of comes to try and forge a connection I guess and see if there's a connection between you and his father, and there's this astonishing scene, let's take a look at that and then pick it up afterwards.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

You're being modest again! I mean that, we've seen a lot of people cry on screen over the years, but that tear and that emotion feels so real and so powerful. I just wonder, without wishing to try and get all your secrets, I wonder how you access that, an emotion that feels so authentic, it feels so real.

**VD:** Well, you know in this situation she's going through a divorce. So, her husband is leaving her, and her whole life is about to change and then this young boy kind of comes to the house looking for his father who he just sort of, they just sort of collide with each other. People ask me how I access that all the time, I just do the work. That's all I can say, you know, I do the work. I, back in the day at the studio they always tell actors observe the life, observe the life, and I know people who have gone through a divorce and they say a divorce is like death. So that's one of the things that I access, and then I use my craft. We have these breathing exercises we used to do in school where you think of a song, like *Happy Birthday*, you stand in front of an audience, or the class, and you sing *Happy Birthday*, but you do it by taking a big breath and you sing it by just releasing one syllable at a time. It is the greatest acting exercise ever created, because what happens when you breathe is you see the wide range of emotion going through the actors. First of all, it's just the fear of being in front of everyone, but because you're breathing, the laughter, the tears, the fears, the fear, the shaking, everything

comes out through the release of breath, so I do that before I do a scene. I try to do that as much as I can

**DL:** And we mentioned obviously that contrast between Meryl Streep in the clip from *Doubt* and Thomas Horn there, who's obviously a boy with huge presence but hadn't acted before, so I'm wondering when you're doing your work, you're also I'm guessing having to support him a little bit, you're not directing him that's the director's job, but you're having to also share the scene with him, and kind of coax something out of him.

**VD:** I didn't feel like I was coaxing anything out of him, no. I don't feel like I do that. I felt I did that in *The Help* though, I will say that, because I was acting opposite a three-year-old. Three-year-old! But I didn't feel like that with him, he was going through asp- he has Asperger's so there's a sense in him that he could not access his emotions. What I do when I'm with another actor is that I leave myself alone, and I receive whatever it is that they give me. I'm not aware that I'm trying to alter their performance because if I'm doing that I can't work. But I did opposite a three-year-old.

[Laughter]

**DL:** I think that's understandable. I mean let's talk a little bit about *The Help*, because *The Help* then comes in very closely to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and it's the sixties and it's the South and I'm wondering when you first got that script whether there was an immediate sense of OK, this is maybe something that with my background that I have to do, because this is like personal history for me.

**VD:** I'm always trying to be honest in my interviews. I knew it was a bestselling book, and I knew it would change my career.

[Applause]

That's what I knew. I loved the premise of it, I love Tate Taylor, and I love, love, love all those women who were in it, and I did

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feel like it was an important story. I had a lot of issues with *The Help*.

[Applause]

**DL:** Maybe we'll take a look at a clip, so you're playing Aibileen Clark, you're a nanny and a maid who looks after white kids, and let's take a look at the clip and then pick this up afterwards, because *The Help* was a movie that I think lots of people were conflicted about, I thought you were great in it, but they had issues so it would be fascinating to hear what your issues were too, let's take a look at the clip and then discuss.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

**DL:** So *The Help* was this huge, phenomenal success as you say, it has been a successful book and then the film too, phenomenally successful, you seem to have mixed opinions about that, tell us a little bit about that.

**VD:** Like I said, I absolutely love the premise, absolutely love it, I love the fact that Skeeter said 'I am going to write a story from the maids' perspective of what it feels like to work with these white women'. Operative term meaning the maids' perspective. I don't feel like it was from our perspective, that's the problem I had with it. I had it from the very beginning. Now there were a lot of things in the book that I did like, and then there were some things in the book that I had issues with, number one meaning, or being, that Skeeter would offer the women money to tell their stories, knowing that it's dangerous for them, knowing that they're meeting late at night, in their homes, and I think at one point she offered someone \$38. And in the book the response with all the women were, "No Miss Skeeter we don't want the money, we just want to tell our story." They would take the money. They would take the money. I mean look at Aibileen was not even eating in the book. She's eating preserves given to her by her neighbour. She is barely making a living wage, they would take the money! That's number one. Number two, the anger, the vitriol, and the hatred that

they would have towards these white women if they were asked, if they were put in a situation where they were isolated, would have been vocalised. You didn't see none of that! You saw Minny putting the shit in the pie, but to be perfectly honest I think a huge part of that, which I am so thankful it was in the book, but a huge part of that is comedic in nature, so it's an easier pill to swallow. But in reality, if you were to isolate those women, and there was actually one scene where this one woman did express her anger, it was removed from the movie. These black women would hate these women. But I felt, and I still feel, that one of the reasons why this movie was so successful, and I do think fantastic actors, love everybody in it, wonderful performances, is a lot of people were brought up with these co-mothers, they were brought up with these maids, these maids stood in the gap for a lot of people. And I think one of the reasons why they weren't shown as messy is because nobody wants to stain the memory of that black woman who loved them probably more than their mothers loved them.

[Applause]

They want to preserve that memory of them being loving and the women who wanted to be with them all the time, you know, and so they want to keep them pure. And so there was a constant battle that I had, and for instance I wrote that monologue, that monologue was not in the script.

[Applause]

It wasn't in there, there was a scene with Minny and Aibileen where they're in, it's the big scene where they're dancing, all the people are dancing, and that's when they're doing the bunny hop and all of that, and Minny and Aibileen are in the back, and they're preparing the food and they're laughing about all the clothes that everyone is wearing and Minny says, "Well I've got to go out there and serve some food", and I say "Yeah, you serving crackers to the crackers!". And you know, cut. And it was cut because they felt it was too mean.

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But, there was no problem with the white characters saying 'nigger nigger nigger'. So it was not telling the story. It just wasn't, and I felt the power of that narrative, as if, what if you did, I don't think you're losing anything, I really didn't. And it was a huge problem because I felt that, the other side of that, to make it even more complicated, is I think that for a lot of people the only problem they really had with it was the fact that we were playing maids. And we didn't look cute. That's not the problem, the problem is it wasn't fully explored. And there was also a scene that was cut with Minny, where Minny is being beaten by her husband Leroy. Beaten. First of all I had a problem with Minny having a phone, can I just tell you, phones are expensive, we never had a phone, Minny had a phone! But she gets beaten by Leroy, and she calls Aibileen and she is beat and bloodied, her kids are around her, they don't have any shoes on because you could tell they just ran from the house. First of all I know that scene, because I grew up in domestic violence, and Octavia did it beautifully, so she's running to the gas station, she calls Aibileen she says, "I can't take it anymore, he can't beat me no more", and her kids are around her they're clutching her and they're [crying noise], and I said, "Minny just don't go back, don't go back just come here, come here", she's like, "Aibileen, Aibileen". It's one of those scenes. And it was cut because it was too depressing. That's the issue I have with a lot of our stories. By the time you see the truth with starts here, and then it makes it to the screen, the truth is so filtered down, and then it's given to you to make you feel very comfortable.

[Applause]

It's not our job to make you feel comfortable, it really isn't. If you feel comfortable, then that is your journey to, and your cross to bear. That is the beauty of art, the beauty of art is that we throw it to you, you receive it, and if you shift in some way we've done our job.

[Applause]

**DL:** I want to ask you in that case about Tate Taylor specifically because I was sitting here, I am sitting here as a white dude, I was surprised a white man was hired to direct that story in the first place. But it does sound like although you've got these really profound reservations about the script, it sounds like you had a decent working relationship with Tate Taylor, you worked with him again on *Get on Up*.

**VD:** I love Tate.

**DL:** OK.

**VD:** He allowed me to write that scene, and really, you know, and to further complicate it, it's really not necessarily a white or a black director, OK, it's a director, and it's not even necessarily the director, it's sometimes a studio. For instance, in Mississippi, you go to Mississippi, literally we had a lot of people visit the set, one day we had about 14, 15 people on the set, and we were all talking one day, and one of, once again observe observe observe, they all had gold teeth. Everybody in Mississippi has a gold tooth, or teeth! They were in the front, they were in the back, white, black all, I looked at, every last one of them had gold teeth. So I remember at one point I was thinking about that, I thought because I had a gold tooth as Aibileen, you never saw the gold tooth. So I'm standing there and I said, you know what it's interesting that since I've been out here there's so many of you that have gold teeth in your mouth. And they said, "We don't have gold teeth!" They all had gold teeth. I chose to have a gold tooth in my mouth. We fit it, we did the cast and all that, and it was right here, it went back to the studio, they said it was distracting. So they moved it back, they said it's still distracting. So then they moved it back some more, y'all remember me having a gold tooth?

[Laughter]

That is what I'm saying, you know, so often, not to go back, to bring up when people, there's a sense that black actors are not as technically proficient, not as

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good, whatever, that's because we have a gag order on us.

[Applause]

And that's the gag order, the gag order is we're doing the best we can to give you the truth, that the actors who are trained but if the people who are in power are the people who don't want to be indicted, who feel uncomfortable, they don't allow you to do what you need to do to make you technically proficient. So therefore, you remember a gold tooth?

[Laughter]

**DL:** In that case let me talk to you about *How to Get Away with Murder* because you're working there, it's Shonda Rhimes who is the creator of this, and I wonder how different it is?

[Applause]

To actually work for a black woman who is, it's her show, she owns that and you're working with her, so how different does that feel on a day to day basis?

**VD:** Completely different. I love it. I love every bit of it. Now I am aware that it's a soap opera, that it's a melodrama, that people don't see it the same way as, I don't know, *House of Cards*. But in the centre of it is Annalise Keating, played by me. And what it affords me to do is play other adjectives. She's sexualised, she's sociopathic, she's messy, she's smart. She's all of those things, and the best part is she, you can't put your finger on her, and I love that because what it affords me to do is redefine what it means to be a black woman who is 51. And, you know, once again it goes back to acting school, it goes back to acting school when you would do something in front of the class, and sometimes what you did was really crappy, but the teacher would throw something at you that was really, really crappy OK, a premise. Or would ask you to play a role that absolutely is something you wouldn't be cast in, and then watch you play it, and ultimately, sometimes it wouldn't be successful. You would make the biggest mistake possible. But within

that, those mistakes, were little moments of perfection that stretched you, and put something different out there, that people would not necessarily see you do, and that's how I see Annalise Keating, as this fantastic experiment. Because I still, to this day, with everything that's on TV, I always say who is on TV like me? Even on cable. Who is it? Who is having sex with women, men, you know. A white man, white man, white woman like Famke Janssen, who's gonna think of that, who's gonna look at me and go bisexual? You know Billy Brown, oh let's put her with Billy Brown, let's put her with Tom Verica, let's put her in a courtroom, let's make her an alcoholic, let's make her a c-c-c-c-c. And it's interesting that I have so many interviews, and I love these interviews, where people say, "Viola, ha!"

[Laughter]

"Do you?". I really do hate when people smile too much when they interview me because I know they're gonna hit me with something so brutal, "Do you have a problem playing someone so unlikeable?" No, I don't. And I don't think they would ask a man that question. They won't ask James Gandolfini that question. Listen, *Goodfellas* is one of the greatest movies I have ever seen, but I still can't watch it again because if I have to watch that scene where they beat the shit out of that man in the bar and blood is splattered all over the room, I'm gonna like, I'm gonna need, you know heart medication. Nobody ever asked Ray Liotta, Robert De Niro how did you do that scene? But also, no one's gonna ask a white woman that. No one's gonna ask Glenn Close, or Robin Wright Penn 'How does it feel to play someone so cold?' They're gonna celebrate it, they are going to explore what would possibly be behind that pathology, OK. And so I saw Annalise Keating as an opportunity to explore all of that. To see why to ask the question why is she sociopathic? Why is she sexual? What does it mean to play sexual? Every time I see a woman who plays sexual she switches her hips, and walks in heels like she's been on the runway for five years. I mean, I know everyone in this room, every woman in

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this room has had sex and is sexual, we don't walk like that!

[Laughter]

It's like, there's a difference between sexy and sexual. I wanted to play sexual. I just felt like I scored, in *How to Get Away with Murder*.

**DL:** I think we have to see a clip of Annalise Keating at this very moment.

[Applause]

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

So, it's not the aspect of Annalise that you were just talking about, we don't see that there, but we get a sense of how, for people who haven't seen this show, how powerful and how challenging actually the programme can be.

**VD:** And one of the things I told them when I agreed to do it is, I said, I've got to take my wig off, I've got to take my makeup off, I am not going to create some kind of illusion of because I've got to bring an audience that I'm gonna go to bed in full makeup and lip gloss, and I have to play some semblance of a person. Some semblance. I don't know if they knew what they were getting themselves...

[Laughter]

**DL:** That professional relationship we just saw on screen there, I mean how nice is that for you to be able to make that connection?

**VD:** A dream. An absolute dream, you know I said, "Pete we've got to see her family life, we've got to see her mom." And he said, "Well, who do you think could play your mother?" I said, "Miss Tyson." And they said, "Well, isn't she too old?" And I said, "Pete, do you realise that I'm 50 years old, I'm not 25! She can play my mother, we don't want a 60 year old black woman playing my mother." You know they do that too. So when she first came to set, and I, because I am a believer of God, that

God willed it. When she came to that set, which by the way she didn't speak to me because she was in character, it hurt my little feelings too, by the way.

[Laughter]

But she turned 90 years old the day we shot that first scene when she was parting my hair and greasing my scalp

**DL:** The other thing about the show is that it's internationally successful, and I wondered with you, you're open, and it's brilliant to hear it, about being quite strategic about your career, and actually to be able to appeal, I read that you did the movie *Blackhat*, the Michael Mann movie, partly at least because it was going to be a big thing in South East Asia...

**VD:** Absolutely.

**DL:** So, it was supposed to broaden your, I mean to do you realise how rare it is to actually talk about that stuff openly because again, most actors and actresses won't. They'll put their career down to happy accidents, and they'll talk as if it just happens around them. But you're very up front about the fact that this is like a planned thing. You're driven artistically but also professionally.

**VD:** Absolutely, because I think that that's one thing that they say to actors of colour, is that you don't translate internationally, that you just don't translate, you know. A lot of times they won't even release the film internationally or they'll release the film like *12 Years a Slave*, there'll be a big poster of Brad Pitt, and a tiny little picture of Chiwetel running in the...

[Laughter]

It's got to change. It's got to change. Listen, I don't like change, I'm a creature of habit, you know. I have a six-year-old daughter and she's making, forcing me to change. I still want to hold onto my habits. But you know what, the world is changing. I go back to Central Falls, Rhode Island, and in 1965 we were the only black family in Central Falls, the only. You go back there now you have a

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slew of Nigerians, Syrians, you have a lot of Puerto Ricans, a lot of Dominicans, it is changing, you'll see a blonde woman waiting at the bus stop with a crinkly haired baby. The world is not the same anymore, it's not the Brady Bunch. And we know more. Art has got to reflect that, you know. And I think what's going to happen is the audience is going to demand it. And I think what it is, it's a holding on to the past, and a lot of money making people, I think it's rooted in fear. Maybe. I don't know, fear, but I think that there's enough people out there that will risk. But it needs to be risked

**DL:** Now I'm aware that I've monopolised the conversation so I want to turn things over very quickly, I just want to talk very quickly about *Fences* which obviously is the one thing we haven't really dealt with. *Fences* is such a fascinating project for you to do now you've got this longstanding relationship with August Wilson, with Denzel Washington, you've played this part before on stage. So I wonder was there ever a point where you thought well actually maybe having played this quite recently, in 2010 on the stage, maybe this is too close? Maybe actually this is a role, maybe I should move on to other things, or did you always think, I'm doing *Fences*, that's my movie.

**VD:** I always said I'm doing *Fences*. Absolutely I mean I don't know how you turn up a role like this. August Wilson, to have that sort of narrative. To have that kind of character who is so complete in her journey, so complete. Sometimes you've got to force a journey. Here all you have to do, I was so tired of making things work, you know, seeing work that was not complete and trying to make them complete, getting together with the director and rewriting things, I was so tired of that. This, you didn't have to do any of it. And to be with Denzel, the same actors who did it on Broadway which almost never happens, and to shoot it in Pittsburgh, absolutely, and it's different. I always say I know what's out there and people are, I'm not saying that they're lumping it, but I wonder if people understand how different this is. When have you ever seen this? I mean

there are scenes where there are 11 page monologues, four page monologues. Where you have actors who collectively, Stephen McKinley Henderson, 40 sum years in the business, Mykelti 50 years, Russell Hornsby 20 something years, I've been in business 30 years. I mean actors, journeyman actors who've really been out there fighting the good fight. I remember I did a reading with Lynn Redgrave before she passed, and she said when she left Los Angeles, she said 'I was surprised that I'd been there for so many years and I just left, nobody was trying to make me stay' and she said she felt like her past didn't count for anything. And I think there's a slew of journeyman actors, like the actors that I worked with in here, who sometimes people don't understand, they've been around doing great work, and this is the reward, you know. So yeah, I was gonna do it.

**DL:** It's another landmark I think, in a career full of landmarks, let's look at *Fences* and then I'm going to hand the floor over because I'm sure people here have lots of questions.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

**DL:** Now, as I said I'm sure lots of people have questions, please raise your hand I'll endeavour to get round to as many people as I can, there'll be a microphone thrust into your hand, start over there.

**Q:** Hi Viola, I've got a question that's not that deep really I'm sorry. I just wanted to know, that, like you, I'm a fellow actress and like you I had that dream since I was five. Now that you're there and you're in Hollywood, is it all that it's cracked up to be, is it what you, it was when you were five, is it what you thought it would be?

**VD:** It is everything that you thought it would be, and everything you thought it wouldn't be, it's a culmination of both. I think that anyone would say that the kind of disillusionment of a dream but absolutely the dream it's like getting my star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, with Meryl Streep introducing me.

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[Applause]

But it's the other side of it too, it's the scrutiny, it's the feeling like, I'm on Facebook, and I get so many people who send me scripts and say, "If you got my script, my script is going to change Hollywood, it's only a 21-million-dollar budget, all the characters are beautiful in it, and it's going to sell, all you need to do is read it and finance it, Viola."

[Laughter]

That's a downside.

**DL:** There's a question down here in the second row

**Q:** Hi Viola, Connie Jackson. I've lived here for a long time, I've lived here for 14 years, as you can tell I'm an American. I saw *Fences* just before I left for the airport, I saw the ten o'clock show before I left for the airport to come back here, and there were three people in the theatre, and I guess the reason I went at 10 am before my seven am flight is because I was afraid that with two black lead actors it would not make it to London, which so often happens because the distributors say 'that's a black film' and so it becomes urban. Is there something, I know that you all can do collectively I think, to try to look at black actors financing, and getting to the business side and financing, distribution companies and opening things up so that we can make certain that our stories are told, and distributed around, and not only around the world but also in more theatres in the U.S. Because it seems that if it's a black movie it goes into five theatres, but a general release movie goes into 3000 theatres.

**VD:** Absolutely, I mean movies like *Hidden Figures* and *Fences* were distributed in what, 2,000 theatres which is unheard of. And someone like a Denzel is an international star that's one thing we have going for us. But you have people like Macro Films, which did most of the financing for *Fences* which is really really instrumental with black films. They're gonna be the game changers.

You have Ava DuVernay, who does have a distribution company, we're trying. I don't know if people understand how much we're trying, and I think the reason why they don't see how much we're trying is because they don't see it. But just because you don't see it don't mean we're not in the rooms trying to make it happen. I'm certainly trying to make it happen with my production company, or should I say my husband because he does all the work. And we've sold seven television shows so far, and we've been open since April. We're trying, Taraji P. Henderson, trying Halle Berry, really trying, Kerry Washington, Octavia Spencer, we're trying, and that's why you're seeing slow change, is because we are completely tired of waiting, we're really tired of waiting.

[Applause]

So, we will get it done.

**DL:** Question down here in the front row. I think sadly we may have to leave it after this question

**Q:** Thank you, hi.

**VD:** I saw you last night!

**Q:** Yes you did!

[Laughter]

Yeah that was me, I've come with a different question though this time. This time it's about your production company you just mentioned that. I wanted to know what are the difficulties you're finding in getting that work out there?

**VD:** Now that's a four-hour conversation

[Laughter]

**DL:** We can stay for that!

**VD:** You've got to sell it, that's the difficulty, you've got to sell it as something that the masses are gonna watch. And big, big difficulty is the writing of it. You can have the best idea in the world but then someone's got to write the script. We're having that issue

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with Harriet Tubman. And I think that people, when they look at the premise, they're like 'why can't that, you could just write it!' No honey, that is a big big big difficulty. Money, money is real hard, you know, Denzel says it all the time, he calls it business show, and he says if you have an issue with it then just lend me 25 million dollars, I'll give it back to you, just lend it to me. That's really hard. People may, I had one guy on Facebook, I have to get off Facebook, said 'why can't we sell my script, it's only a 21-million-dollar budget?' 21 million dollars is a lot. Because you're not looking at P & A costs, you're not looking at distribution, you're not looking at who are you going to put in the film that's going to command that kind of money. Then you've got to put butts in the seat, and like I always say, people always say 'you know what, why aren't people watching these black films', you've got to watch it. You've got to see that it's worth it. I remember doing *The Help* and we came up against a lot of my people, I will say my people, who said, "We're not gonna go see *The Help*. We're not gonna go see it, we'd rather see *Spiderman*, because..." I'm like OK, well you've already told Hollywood what you want to see. Because what they're gonna see is you plop money down for *Spiderman* so they're gonna churn out the *Spiderman*. And you didn't see *The Help*, so they don't want to see those kind of movies. There's no one in Hollywood that's gonna sit and go 'you know what? They didn't see *The Help*, so let's try to do another film where, you know black people aren't maids anymore, let's do a black film where they're just more evolved', no they just won't do black movies, they'll just make more *Spiderman*. So you've got to plop down money for the ticket. That's a big one, it's a real big one. We're doing Barbara Jordan biopic, we have Tony Kushner writing it and Barbara Jordan was a lesbian, she was a closeted lesbian, and she had a girlfriend who literally was a white woman with freckles. Someone who sort of looked like Julianne Moore. So the big thing is finding a white woman who's a big box office draw to make that movie more compelling. That's hard, that's still happening now. So those are all the difficult, it's a minefield of

walking into those offices and trying to convince them that our stories sell. But you can help in all that, and I think it is helping because *Hidden Figures* and *Fences*, all these movies, they're making money, that's a good thing.

**DL:** Listen I'm so sorry we're going to have to leave it there. It doesn't get much smarter or much better than Viola Davis, with thanks to Audi, thank you Viola!

[Applause]