



Lee Daniels at the Vanity Fair celebration for the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival. Photograph by David Shankbone. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

Daniels, Lee (b. 1959)

by Claude J. Summers

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When producer-director Lee Daniels received an Oscar nomination for directing *Precious* (2009), he became the first openly gay African American to be so honored by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

As he told the audience at the Cannes International Film Festival, where *Precious* received a 15-minute standing ovation, "I'm a little homo, I'm a little Euro and I'm a little ghetto." The reference alludes not only to the complex realities of his own life, but also to the three filmmakers he credits with influencing him the most: John Waters, Pedro Almodóvar, and Spike Lee.

The success of his searing yet redemptive film based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire (Ramona Lofton) vaulted Daniels to the top tier of Hollywood filmmakers, but it was by no means an unpredictable development. As talent agent, producer, and director, Daniels has earned a reputation as a filmmaker of unusual tenacity and as someone who is not afraid of controversial subjects.

Although his projects are generally small-budget independent films about issues that would seem not to be commercially viable, they sometimes return handsome dividends to their investors.

For example, his first movie, the critically acclaimed *Monster's Ball* (2002), which he produced, not only won an Oscar for lead actress Halle Berry, among numerous other awards, but also parlayed modest production costs into a lucrative commercial success.

He was born Leonardo Louis Daniels on Christmas Eve 1959 in Philadelphia, the oldest of five children born to Clara and William Daniels. His father, a policeman, who had once worked as a bodyguard for Muhammad Ali, was killed in a robbery in 1975 when Daniels was only fifteen.

Daniels' father was physically abusive, frequently beating his wife and eldest son, especially after he became suspicious that his son might be homosexual.

As Daniels recalled, his father beat him out of frustration with the disrespect he received as an African American in a racist society and in the hopes that such treatment would toughen his son for the life that might be in store for him: "One time, I put on my mom's red patent-leather high heels, and he beat me. I knew he loved me, but he thought I wouldn't survive as a black gay guy."

Still, Daniels loved his father, and his death was a jolting shock to him. It took him a long time to forgive his father for his mistreatment, but he came to understand his cruelty and the complicated web of motives behind it.

Moreover, Daniels credits his father as the source of his artistic sensibility, since, despite the older man's propensity for violence, he appreciated books and loved poetry. Nevertheless, Daniels grew up thinking that his father was disappointed in him, a feeling that may have spurred his desire to achieve and to prove

himself long after his father's death.

After graduating from high school in West Philadelphia, Daniels studied theater at Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri. However, soon before his junior year, he made the decision to drop out of college and move to Los Angeles, where he hoped to become a screenwriter.

In Los Angeles, Daniels took a job as a receptionist with a nursing agency. He quickly advanced in the company hierarchy, becoming part of management.

He also began a relationship with an older man, who would leave him upon his death a few years later the capital he needed to open his own nursing agency.

His nursing agency soon grew to become one of the largest in Southern California. Among its clients was AIDS Project Los Angeles.

Despite the success of the company, however, Daniels yearned to pursue a career in the movie industry. One of his clients, a film producer, suggested that his business acumen would likely make him a good producer.

To follow his dream, Daniels sold his company for several million dollars and accepted a job as a Hollywood production assistant in order to learn the movie business from the bottom up.

In 1984, after working for a while as a production assistant and, then, as a casting director, including a stint as head of minority casting for Warner Brothers, he established Lee Daniels Entertainment, a talent management agency.

One of his goals was to help further the careers of African-American actors, but his client list included talent of all colors. Among his clients were Cuba Gooding, Jr., Hilary Swank, Natassja Kinsky, and Morgan Freeman.

He also began a relationship with casting director Billy Hopkins. In 1993, the couple relocated to New York. In 1996, they adopted infant twin daughters, the children of Daniels' brother, who was in jail when they were born, and his girlfriend, who was addicted to crack cocaine.

Becoming a father profoundly affected Daniels. Although he was at first reluctant to adopt the children, he finally agreed because his partner, who wanted children, and his mother pressured him. He now acknowledges that the kids changed his life in many ways.

As a result of adopting his children, for example, he decided to give up recreational drugs, which he had used as a means of escaping the pain of his own childhood.

Daniels became a producer almost by accident. In 1999, he read a script intended for one of his clients called "Monster's Ball," about interracial love in the South, and decided to option it. As Daniels told Lynn Hirschberg, "Just like that. I had a 90-day option to raise the money for 'Monster's Ball,' and on the 90th day, I had the money."

The project, deemed risky because of its depressing and controversial subject matter, had been considered by other producers and directors, including Oliver Stone and Sean Penn, but only Daniels had the determination and commitment to bring it to fruition. He hired Swiss-born director Marc Foster and cast Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton in the leading roles.

Produced on a tiny budget, *Monster's Ball* became a surprise hit, both critically acclaimed and commercially successful. Although Berry was considered a controversial casting choice--many thought her too glamorous

for the role of a waitress who falls in love with a white prison guard, not knowing that he had helped execute her husband--she gave an inspired performance.

Berry became the first African American to win a Best Actress Oscar, and Daniels became the first African American to solely produce an Academy Award-nominated film.

Monster's Ball not only increased Daniels' profile in the motion picture industry, but it also exemplifies several aspects of his approach to filmmaking. As in *Monster's Ball*, Daniels has consistently pursued projects that others declined because they were deemed risky or controversial. He is attracted to subjects that are daring, potentially alienating, and often violent, but he discovers in these subjects universal truths and at least a sliver of hope.

Perhaps as a result of his long experience as a casting director and talent manager, Daniels is not afraid of casting against type and of making unconventional choices. He has proven particularly adept at discovering the acting talent of hip-hop artists and other musical performers.

Daniels' films are character-driven and expressive of a strong social vision. They also are vehicles that require and inspire extraordinary acting, and bravura performances often command attention from audiences that may not be particularly interested in the subject matter. Hence, despite subjects that may seem unappetizing to movie-goers, most of Daniels' films have found audiences.

Still, because his films have been unable to secure the backing of major studios, he has had to perfect the role of salesman in order to get his projects onscreen. Partially for that reason, he has sometimes seemed less an auteur than a hustler. As he told an interviewer about the challenge of raising money to make his movies, "It's no different than a drug deal. People have trouble getting their movies made You go in, you go gangster, you get what you've got to get and go on to the next. It's just another hustle."

Although he has not told a specifically gay-themed story, Daniels' interest in social outcasts and his consistent championing of underdogs may well owe something to his own homosexuality.

Daniels' second project was *The Woodsman* (2004), a film based on Stephen Fechter's 1997 play of the same name about the difficult readjustment in society of a convicted child molester. Aspiring director Nicole Kassell, who had won a Sundance screenplay competition with her adaptation of Fechter's play, which she had written while in film school at New York University, approached Daniels about producing a film based on her screenplay and allowing her to direct it.

Daniels was so impressed by Kassell's enthusiasm and by the excellence of her screenplay that he agreed to produce it if he could find investors in the project.

Although the success of *Monster's Ball* had briefly made Daniels the toast of Hollywood, with people "saying they'd do anything with me," when the money people found out that the project he wanted to do next was *The Woodsman*, "I was knocking on doors all over again."

Given the subject matter it was difficult to put together even the small budget an independent film required. Finally, he convinced hip-hop record producer Damon Dash to provide most of the financing.

Many actors turned down parts in the film, either because of the subject or because of the low pay. But fortuitously Kevin Bacon was asked to read the script by a friend who had been approached by Daniels as a potential investor. Bacon was so taken with the script that he contacted Daniels and offered to play the lead role.

Daniels suggested that Bacon's wife, Kyra Sedgwick, would be perfect for the role of the tough but tender woman who befriends the child molester when he is released from prison. Although Bacon and Sedgwick

usually reject opportunities to act with each other, in this instance they accepted.

The film, released just after California placed its sex offender registry online in response to widespread concern about child molesters possibly living next door to potential victims, presents the struggle of a pedophile to put his life together after twelve years in prison.

The character is presented sympathetically, but neither he nor his predicament is sentimentalized. He is not a monster, but he does face temptations, which are not minimized or glossed over. The film is thoughtful, disturbing, and suspenseful.

Featuring superb performances by Bacon and Sedgwick, and by hip-hop artist Mos Def as a parole officer, the film, which debuted at the Sundance festival, received very positive reviews and earned a number of awards and nominations from film festivals and independent film organizations. It is one of the finest independent movies of the decade.

In 2004, Daniels also produced a series of public service announcements aimed at convincing young people of color to take part in the electoral process. He worked with former President Bill Clinton, rap artist LL Cool J, and singer Alicia Keyes, among others.

For his next project, *Shadowboxer* (2006), Daniels became a director as well as a producer. As he explained to Corey Boultier, the transition to director was facilitated by his experience working with actors as a casting director, talent manager, and producer. In addition, his tendency to micromanage his projects from his position as producer meant that he learned a great deal from the directors with whom he worked.

Moreover, he was weary of producing. He told Hirschberg, "I was tired of creating monster movie-star directors. I was stuck with, How am I going to find my next \$2 million to make my next movie and they're walking away to jobs that pay them \$2 million. I thought, How do I get my voice across? I wanted to direct." (Somewhat contradictorily, he told Keith Boykin that he wanted to direct because he thought it would make him a better producer.)

Shadowboxer is a contemporary film noir about professional assassins played by Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Helen Mirren, who are also lovers as well as step-son and step-mother. Despite brilliant performances by Gooding and Mirren, and strong supporting jobs by Stephen Dorff, Mo'Nique, Macy Gray, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, the film suffered from an unbelievable plot and from heavy-handed direction.

Although some reviewers liked it a great deal, it received generally negative reviews and failed at the box office. A British critic described it as incongruously combining the "hit-man cool of John Boorman's *Point Blank* with the operatic colour of an Almodóvar movie."

Characteristically emphasizing the personal appeal of the projects he undertakes, Daniels declared that *Shadowboxer* "was based on my life. I knew killers. My uncle, who took care of me, murdered people, and yet he took care of me too. People who have gone to jail for murder are also human."

While *Shadowboxer* was being edited, Daniels suffered a heart attack. He attributed the attack to his use of drugs ten years previously, and stated that coming close to death led him to evaluate his life and to understand more fully the relationship between life and death.

In 2008, Daniels produced *Tennessee*, directed by Aaron Woodley and featuring Mariah Carey. The film, a road-trip movie about a pair of brothers and an aspiring singer, had some success in the film festival circuit, but had only a very limited run in theaters. With the success of *Precious*, however, the film was released on DVD in 2010.

Although *Tennessee* was intended as a vehicle for Mariah Carey to demonstrate her acting ability after her

disastrous debut in *Glitter* (2001), for which she was nominated for an award as "Worst Actress of the Decade," *Tennessee* may be most significant for bringing Carey and Daniels together, for despite the relative failure of the film, Daniels had no qualms about casting Carey against type in the unglamorous role of a social worker in *Precious*, for which she earned excellent reviews.

Precious was originally titled *Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire*. The title was changed to *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* to avoid confusion with the action movie *Push*, also released in 2009. Both names, of course, emphasize the novel, though the film is somewhat less graphic than the book.

Sapphire was reluctant to allow her book to be filmed. She had turned down several offers for the film rights to her novel, and was not receptive when Daniels first approached her for permission to film her work. However, Daniels, who claims to have "slept with the book under my pillow for three months" when it was first published in 1996, persisted. Only after she saw *Shadowboxer*, which she loved, did Sapphire agree to sell him the film rights to the novel.

Daniels' film has received some of the same criticism that some reviewers made of the novel: that the story of an obese, illiterate girl who is abused by her mother and raped by her father propagates negative images of African Americans.

Armond White, for example, described the film as "a sociological horror show" and asserted that "Not since *The Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as *Precious*." Ishmael Reed claimed that the film was really meant for middle-class white audiences, who would be comfortable with the stereotypical images of black pathology depicted in the movie.

Despite such attempts at racial polarization and profiling, *Precious* has actually attracted a wide and diverse audience. Daniels has defended the movie in the same way that Sapphire defended her novel: he attests to its authenticity. "These are people that I know. This is my family. My movie is the truth. It's absolutely colorless."

Tellingly, two African-American entertainment icons, Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey, who revealed that they themselves had been abused as children, endorsed the truth of the film when they signed on as producers in order to distribute and promote *Precious*.

Precious is distinguished by extraordinary acting, especially the performance of newcomer Gaborney Sidibe in the title role, comedian and talk show host Mo'Nique as the abusive mother, and Carey as the social worker.

The casting of Sidibe, a Harlem teenager whose only previous acting experience was in a high-school play, came after a series of open auditions in several cities yielded no suitable candidates for the role. Daniels' partner Hopkins discovered her in New York and brought her to read for the director, who hired her on the spot.

After the film's launch at the Sundance Film Festival, where it garnered both the Audience Prize and the Grand Jury Prize, the film won plaudits at the Cannes, Toronto, and New York film festivals. When released theatrically, it was widely and well reviewed, and was nominated for and won a host of awards.

Daniels was particularly pleased that the film swept the NAACP Image Awards, winning Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay awards, as well as acting awards for Sidibe and Mo'Nique.

The film was nominated for six Academy Awards, including Best Film and Best Director. In addition, Daniels was nominated as Best Director by the Director's Guild of America.

Although Daniels spent a great amount of time in 2009 and early 2010 launching and promoting *Precious*, he

has a number of projects in the works, reportedly including a film of the musical *Miss Saigon*.

But his most immediate assignment is *Selma*, a drama about the civil rights marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in 1965, which he will direct.

His biggest problem, Daniels told Gaby Wood, is that King is "next to Jesus. So how do I make him human . . . ?" The challenge he faces, he said, is this: "We know King was a hero, so how do I tell the story? By telling truths that we're disturbed by. It challenges me as a film-maker, and as a man."

Daniels' commitment to telling disturbing truths has defined his career as a filmmaker thus far, and is likely to continue to do so.

After 16 years as lovers, Daniels and Hopkins separated in 2009, but they continue to work together and to co-parent their children, of whom they share joint custody. They live in New York City.

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