

# Women In Motion Talk

## Viola Davis

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**19 MAY 2022**

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Welcome to Kering's Women In Motion conversations. I am Elizabeth Wagmeister, *Variety's* Chief Correspondent. I am so excited to be here today for the kick-off of this programme at the 75<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival.

We have a wonderful guest for you here today: the one and only Viola Davis.

Of course, you know her from her award-winning work: in *Fences*, in *Doubt*, *The Help*, *How to Get Away with Murder*. Viola Davis is the most nominated black women in Oscar's history and one of the most decorated actors in the world.

Kering's Women In Motion conversations celebrate achievements for women in cinema, but also beyond the film industry. Kering's programme celebrates the progress of women in society and beyond.

I cannot think of a better guest than Viola Davis. With that, let's get started. But, for everybody in the audience, if I can please ask you to make sure your cell phones are silent. You are free to take photos and videos, but we just don't want any noise to interrupt the conversation.

*[photographs]*

I mean, it is the Cannes Film Festival, isn't it?

### **Viola DAVIS**

It is, it is.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

OK. Viola, you have had such an incredible career. As we were doing the introduction, I listed some of your many accomplishments. We spoke about your many awards, your work, but then one thing I didn't get to in my introduction is that you have now added "author" to your résumé.

So, Viola just had a memoir that was published. What was that process like: writing, for you?

**Viola DAVIS**

That process was very cathartic. You know, I started writing the book during the pandemic, when I felt like I was having a really existential crisis of meaning: you know, BlackLivesMatters was happening, of course Covid over it all, and the LGBTQ community fighting for their rights, we had a very sort of contentious election, and all of the sudden, I am starting to look at my neighbours different, I am starting to look at my white counterparts different – I'm sure they're not looking at me differently, not negative or positive, but just in a way that is more "woke".

And with all of that, questioning connection, questioning what am I doing, what is all of that? And whenever you have an existential crisis, I always say, it's time to press the reset button, right? Like, when your cell phone is messing up, they tell you to turn it off, right? Then, turn back on? And so that's what I did: I went back to the beginning, with my book, to Viola as a little girl.

**Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

In that book, as you said, you talked about Viola as a little girl. You are very raw and honest; you hold nothing back. You write about your childhood, your upbringing. I'm curious: how did your upbringing affect the woman that you are today?

**Viola DAVIS**

You know what? It has made me a fighter and a survivor. That despite the trauma in my past, in childhood, despite the fact that, listen, at the end of the day, I grew up in a predominantly White community, I didn't feel adored, I didn't feel pretty. But despite all those feelings, I still kept moving. I keep spouting the quote from Anne Lamott, which is: "all courage is, is fears said with prayers".

I am very good with understanding that I have fear, understanding that I have anxiety, understanding that I have self-doubt, but it doesn't keep my feet and my spirit from moving forward.

I actually don't think that ambition and moving forward is the absence of fear. Just like I don't think that a great life is the absence of failure and heartbreak and trauma. I think all of it is a part of the journey. I do. And I think really messed-up things happen.

But through it all, absolutely, without question, I could say this: I felt that I was worth it. I felt there was something out there in the horizon, the Land of Oz, and Viola deserved that Land of Oz.

**Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Where do you think that come from: that belief in yourself? Even during the tough times, you knew that your deserved more and have bigger things ahead of you.

**Viola DAVIS**

I have absolutely no idea where it came from. I'm sure that when my life is over and – for me, my belief – and I meet God, he will explain that to me. "Why did you inject that in me?", you know?

All I know is that I have it. Just like if you did a DNA profile, you don't know what is going on in you, you really don't. And then you get your DNA, and you are like, "you've got to be kidding me".

But what I know that I know that I know is that there is something about getting your heart broken a lot – and it breaks, and it breaks, because you know, especially if you are living a life, you are going to get heartbreak, so you hit the bottom, you get the heartbreak, and then you have the choice to just sort of wallow in it, and stay there, or it gives you clarity of what life is really about.

You know, I was watching a programme where this guy was driving home. It was sort of a little tragic. He was driving home because something had happened to his daughter. He was absolutely beside himself.

But he made an observation, as he was driving back to his house to see what was going on with this daughter. He saw everything with such clear clarity: the trees, the birds on the side of the road, you know, the water. All of the sudden, he was like, "Wow, this is a route that I take every single day, and all of the sudden, I am seeing it with a totally different vision, like an X-ray vision".

And I think this is what happens, even when you get your heart broken a lot in life. You then appreciate life. Like, I'm telling you right now: I appreciate a good meal. I appreciate a full refrigerator. I appreciate clean sheets. I appreciate going to a furniture store and buying a new bed. I do. I appreciate soap and water, because I never had it. And I think that is what I got from my life. I appreciate things that other people take for granted.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Right. Right. You are talking about heartbreak and how those moments can really end up resulting in the best – it depends what you do with it. Acting: this whole industry is an industry where you hear the word "No" a lot.

### **Viola DAVIS**

You hear a lot of words a lot.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

A lot of words a lot. A lot of words I won't say. But a lot of words a lot, especially the word "no", when you are coming up through auditions, and they don't see that you are the right fit.

Is there a moment in your mind that sticks out as a moment of heartbreak or rejection, through your career, that really was a moment for you, where you were able to see the positive, and grow from it?

### **Viola DAVIS**

Well, let me tell you something. I could point to those moments, but I will say this: seeing the positive of it takes time.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Yes.

### **Viola DAVIS**

Because there is something about... It's... You know, how do you make a life? How do you... I don't care what everyone says, when you leave this life, you want everyone to know that you took up space in it. So, how do you do that? If I were to be really honest and bold, I do that through acting, because I don't really have...

Well, I do, in my life: I have my husband and my daughter, and my mom and my sister. That makes my life meaningful, but...

So, your work is really important to you. It's your stamp, it's part of your legacy.

So, it hurts when people reject you. I have had, I would say, any rejection that I have had where people have said I was not pretty enough for a role, really gets on my damn nerves. It breaks my heart and it makes me angry.

For many reasons. A lot of it is based in race. It really is. Let's be honest, if I had my same features and I were five shades lighter, it would just be a little bit different. And if I had blonde hair, blue eyes and even a wide nose, it would be even a little bit different than what it is now. We could talk about colourism, we could talk about race. It pisses me off. And it has broken my heart. Any number of projects which I won't name.

How I have dealt with it is exactly what I told you before: "courage is fear said with prayers".

I got *The Help*, I got the Oscar nomination for *The Help*, and then it was over, and I thought, "And now what?" I was getting the same types of roles. Because how else are they going to cast a dark-skinned black woman who is really not a model? So, you could get three days here and two days there, two days there, and I had hit my bottom.

So I knew that, then, the only sort of position I could move into that gave me some sense of worth and the only way to reconcile that anger was to find roles myself. That was my response to that.

It was sort of a – excuse my language – a "fuck it". And there was value to anger. There is value to a well-placed "fuck it". Because with that, with that burst, I feel that the burst represents that one moment of change. That after that, you can never be the same. There is something about pure, unbridled anger – that is healthy, not mentally ill anger, OK? – that is healthy anger that sparks ... what is the word I'm looking for?... that sparks movement.

You cannot be complacent afterwards. You have got to do something about the anger, because you don't want to go back there again.

And I would say that when I came to LA and all the sort of rejection I got for lead roles because of the way I looked, supposedly, pissed me off enough to make the change, to start JuVee Productions with my husband, you know, to find the material ourselves – and to make it as big as we wanted it to be.

People said, "you should only start with you and your husband". I don't have to do anything. I can do exactly what I want to do. That was my response to all of that rejection. That is sort of a nebulous answer.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

It was a great answer. Thank you for that. And I think something interested that you just mentioned is: you were nominated for the Oscar, for *The Help* and that was a rock-bottom moment. Because on the outside, people think: "Nominated for an Oscar! You've made it. You can pick whatever you want to do, you can have your say, walk into any room", and it wasn't the case for you.

### **Viola DAVIS**

But that's, I think with everything. People sort of have this reaction to everything: towards relationships, towards having a kid, towards you know marriage. It's like a Thursday night line-up on ABC.

It's like the famous line from Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*: "you don't want to know the truth".

We want to see the Oscar's, we want to see people dressed in pretty dresses, and then they get the award. It's like: "She won! She finally won!" And you see them walk off the stage, and you imagine a life for them that *you* want. That is why – that is the only issue I have with vision boards. It's that people put a vision of their lives on the board of where they want to be, but they don't know that this destination comes with reality. It's the minutiae of actually being there.

And the reality of being there in Hollywood is: where are the roles?

A good sort of place to go in your mind, when anyone walks off the stage, is you look at their stats: are they a man or are they a woman? Are they young or are they old? Are they black or are they white?

And then, when they walk off that stage, you go back to, I don't know, Redbox, Netflix, or anywhere, and look at all the movies that are being made, and you look at all the roles and all the stories that are being rolled in there: do they have a person who looks like that person who just walked off that stage with that Oscar? And if that movie had those people in it, what are the roles that they are playing?

That gives you a good bar as to how their career will progress: based on what is out there, based on what is being developed, based on what is being encouraged.

If you have an issue with it, think about it, let's go even deeper. What kind of movies do you plop down your money to go see?

And I feel like, when you go there, then you go to a deeper place as opposed to just staying in the fantasy place of, "OK, you have an Oscar, OK, you're all good. OK, so do you want to get something to eat later?"

As opposed to "Oh, you got an Oscar, you're Hispanic, you're dark, you're whatever, so..." When is the last time I saw a movie with a dark or Hispanic woman in the lead role? Do I even want to see it? No, I am going to see the Marvel movie. I am going to see the Marvel movie. I am going to see the Marvel movie because that guy is so cute – and I want him to get with her because she is cute too. And blah blah blah blah blah blah.

And you see the problem. And you see the extent to which you are part of the problem.

We need to start encouraging the story-telling out there with people who are on the periphery, instead of sitting on a stage or getting a microphone and talking about "there should be more opportunities out there!".

We have to understand what part we play in creating the kind of world we want to see. And then that sort of metastasises into every aspect of our culture.

But right now, you know, there is a sort of resistance to that. Maybe because that is the way we have seen Hollywood all of our lives, with movie-making and the Marilyn Monroe of it all, with the Joan Crawford of it all. But now, we have a different life, where people are fighting for space. The Joan Crawfords are replaced by Shaniqua Watkins, you know, and I don't know, you know, Garcel Rodriguez.

You know, these people who, if the story-telling were more expansive, then I could be sitting here and you know... listen, I could be sitting here and I could have a sort of movie career that sort of

mirrored counterparts who are my age who don't necessarily look like me. But that's going into another conversation.

But I think that is what gets me out of bed in the morning, if I were to go full circle. I'm going on. It is my anger as the 6 or 8-year-old Viola. It is because I was running from a world that was spitting me out. That's what I felt. The boys and really a culture calling me that ugly black niggah. What it motivated me to do is, yes, get out of my life. But what it also motivated me to do, in my anger, is to create a life that did not spit any more Violas out like that. Just spit them out and told them that there is nothing out there for you, there is no rope, there is no journey, that you are the leftover.

That is why my husband and I have JuVee Productions, yeah.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

So, I wanted to ask about JuVee Productions. You are creating space.

### **Viola DAVIS**

Yeah.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

For others. I also think it's interesting that *How to Get Away with Murder*, created by Shonda Rhimes, a black woman, is creating space.

Have you seen change through the work that you are doing at JuVee Productions, *How to Get Away with Murder*, these roles that had not been seen before: are you noticing that the work you are doing is resulting in progress?

### **Viola DAVIS**

Yes. I say "yes" all the time like that, but I don't really know. I don't. I mean, you know, even when I walk into a room, people say Viola Davis, I'm like, "who's she?".

Actually, here is what I will say: "I hope", is what I'll say. I hope. But I know that when I left *How to Get Away with Murder*, I don't see a lot of dark-skinned women in lead roles on TV, not even in streaming services.

So, once again, that goes into ideology and ethos and mentality. And that is speaking in the abstract.

Why aren't you hiring a dark-skinned woman? When she walks into the room and you say she blows you away, then create space and story-telling for her, so that when she thrives, she is not thriving *despite* her circumstances, she is thriving *because* of the circumstances.

But I see that there is quantity more out there, because there are 400 shows on streaming services. So, I see that. But in terms of story-telling that is expansive, that is as expansive as one's imagination, that's not happening yet. There are certain genres and certain story-telling that, when you are in a room as a producer, you have to really fight for those stories.

Like, if I wanted to play a mother whose son, we lived in a challenging neighbourhood, low-income neighbourhood and he was a gang member who died in drive-by shooting – I could get that made.

If I played a woman who, I don't know, looking to recreate herself by, I don't know, flying to Nice and sleeping with five men at the age of 56, looking like me, I am going to have a hard time pushing that

one. Even as Viola Davis. Because people can't reconcile the blackness with spiritual awakening and sexuality.

It's too much. It's too much when you look like "my maid, Louise". And I say that because I actually had a director who did that to me, who said, "Louise!". I had known him for like ten years and he called me Louise. Then, I found out that it is because his maid's name is Louise. So, that has not changed.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Did that happen recently, when you were "the" Viola Davis? Or was that earlier? Not that it's OK at any time, but I'm just curious, because we see and we hear about a lot of those things happening on set, in the world, beyond movies. So, I'm not asking you to reveal who it is, of course, but at what moment in your career did that happen?

### **Viola DAVIS**

That happened at, sort of... I always have to think. It was the beginning of my career. I have had a long career. So, I was maybe around 30, so that was a while ago.

But what you have to realise is that those sorts of micro-aggressions happen all the time.

But to answer your question in terms of the storytelling out there, I always say, you put two kids in a room, you give one some crayons, some pencils, a canvas, you put them in a room with like blank walls, and you tell them to go crazy. And then you put another kid in the room and you don't give him any pencils, nothing, and you tell him not to go crazy, you tell him to sit in his seat, don't do anything, but I want the two of you to create a masterpiece. But I'm giving this one all the tools to be able to do it, and I'm giving this one all the tools to not be able to do it – but I expect the same results.

That's what it feels like. That you are an artist, you want to create, you want to put something out in the world that explodes or whatever, but you just don't have the tools or the access to the tools to be able to do it, so then you have to figure it out – without getting mad. That's where we are. If I were to be so bold to say.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

And I am so glad you are, because you are in a position where you can speak honestly, and you are one of –

### **Viola DAVIS**

Well. Well.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

I think so. Let me say this, you have the courage to speak honestly. Because a lot don't.

I am being told that it's almost time for audience questions, but I do want to make sure that I can ask you one more thing. You said you walk into a room and people say, "That's Viola Davis", and you're like, "who's that?"

Well, little girls at home are looking up to you, and seeing what you didn't see when you were growing up. You also just got to play Michelle Obama, in your latest series. Little girls at home got to see the first black President, the first black First Lady. I know you can't speak too much about that and the work. We won't ask you to reveal your conversations with Ms Obama.

But what did it mean to you to have the first black First Lady, the first black President in your country, at that moment? What did that mean to you?

### **Viola DAVIS**

Hope. Everything. That's what it means. You have to understand when people give you affirmations growing up, saying, "you can be anything", "you can do everything", "you know you are beautiful, right? Ohh, who told you that you weren't beautiful?" – and then you don't see any examples of people who look like you, people who are saying you are beautiful.

That's the big thing with dark-skinned women: people are like, "don't listen to that, do not listen to that, Viola! Dark-skinned women are beautiful too". And then you don't see any. There is no vision. And then you walk into the room and people don't really know that they are doing that, because I'm sort of famous so people see me. But when people don't know who I am, it's interesting how invisible you get. You feel seen.

And that's why, even with young black girls, I'm really, really really cognizant of this, and always telling them that they are worth it and beautiful, first of all, because that is what I see – and that's what I know that I know that I know is the birthplace of everything. It's the birthplace of survival, it's the birthplace of self-love, it's the birthplace of keeping breath in your friggling lungs. Everybody is always putting a value on you based on your finances, your looks, how much you mess up, but don't. I just tell people, even my daughter: "even if you do mess up, I don't care – you're still worth it. You don't have to barter for it, you don't have to do anything for it. You don't have to be a certain weight, you don't have to do nothing. You're worth it."

And that's what seeing a physical manifestation of anything in the world does.

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

I was about to say that we need more Viola Davises in the world. But they exist. They just need to be given the space and the opportunity. But thank you for everything that you have said, everything that you are doing. We have a few minutes for audience questions. I believe that a mic will be coming around.

### **A Journalist**

I wanted to ask you, throughout your illustrious career, you have taken lot of roles that could be perceived through the angry black woman trope, and instead, given us the many many layers of a strong black woman: her vulnerabilities, her successes, her weaknesses.

I just wanted to know: was this a conscious thought and idea throughout your career, at the beginning of your career, that you wanted to do that, to switch the narrative?

### **Viola DAVIS**

That is a good question. Thank you. I think that is naturally just what you do as an actor, when you step into a role, you want to humanize them, and human beings are not just all one thing. They are not just all angry, there is softness, even with Annalise Keating. She was definitely angry, but I wanted a vulnerability with the anger, I wanted people to see her sexuality – not her sexiness, the "sexiness" drives me a little bit crazy. I mean, in acting, it drives me crazy, not in pictures. It's naturally what you do because you're trying to humanize them. See, once again, it's my anger as a little girl, I feel like I am trapped in there somewhere, little Viola always saying, "do you know who I am?", "do you see me?"

Because really, truly, people ask questions like that all the time: like, “how do you choose your roles?” “Why don’t you choose roles out there that are not so angry?”, or “that are prettier”

People have to understand that the social media have bow-guarded the definition of what it means to be an actor. Most actors have no choice. I’m going to repeat it: Most actors have no choice.

You’re not sitting at home... and if any actor says that, they are lying. You know, it’s like women who say, “I have a fast metabolism, I can eat bread, I can eat dessert at midnight”, and I’m like, “who are you?”. It’s the same thing. They’re lying to you.

You’re not sitting there going, “You know what? I want to do an action movie!” I don’t care if you’re 25 or whatever and then calling your agent and saying, “You know what? My next role better be an action movie, and I want to do it with Tom Cruise.” Come on.

And with me, and I have it in my book, I almost never had a choice. Never, OK? So, you make do with what you have. And what I had were a lot of crappy roles that I had to humanize, so I had to use my acting skills to create a three-dimensional character, even in *Antwone Fisher*, where I had one day of work, where people can enter the story and at least say, “OK, there is more going on than her smoking crack.”

### **Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

We have time for one more question.

#### **A Journalist**

Hi, good morning. I would like to ask you: we know that your art will live forever, as your legacy, but I was wondering, as a human being, what would you like to be remembered for? Just out of curiosity, is there something you are less good at? It seems that you can do and achieve anything. So, thank you.

### **Viola DAVIS**

Thank you for saying that. Say it to my 11-year-old, when I was trying to get her to do her homework last night.

I just want people to feel less alone. I think we just went through a whole year – I mean, two years now, right? almost three – with the pandemic, where you had mental health issues that were exposed.

And I think that a lot of that – well, I’m not going to say what a lot of that is, but I just feel for it. And I think, in general, with people, it’s really crappy to feel alone and isolated. Like everything you feel and you think and you’re doing makes you almost a monster and there is no way to connect. It’s so hard to connect with people nowadays. Let me tell you something, it’s hard to connect with yourself.

So, if I can do anything to make people feel less alone, those moments where you feel, “You know what? I’m not even worth it. My life is not even worth it, because I do A, B, and C.” I want people to know that A, B and C: there is nothing wrong with that. It just proves that you are alive. I would feel good with that. I would. And I get a lot of testimonials from people who say that they were moved by my life. And that means a lot to me. I think if I achieved that, I’m good. Even if I didn’t win another award. I’d be good with that.

**Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Viola, we have a lot of questions from social media. I've said now three times that we are out of time, so we'll just get to one of them, but Alexandra from Instagram sent in a question and she wants to know: "for little girls around the world who are watching you, what would be your message for them?"

**Viola DAVIS**

I think I said that earlier.

**Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Yes, we've hit on it, but I wanted to make sure we got one question in. There were a lot from the social media, so we want to make sure we are answering them.

**Viola DAVIS**

So, I had the message of being worthy.

And they don't have to do anything to be worthy, OK. I don't care what you look like, where you came from, whatever. You're worth it.

But also, do the best you can to not let the world label you. Do the best you can to not do that. I think the world got at me. The world can say all these things, and then you forget the child in you, that just had unending dreams and nobody could tell you anything. And you had energy to really try to even pursue them, and that energy brought you so much joy.

And you could believe. It's like when I tell my daughter, "Genesis, you look so cute, today!" She's like, "Yeah, I know, right?" I love the little girls who are like, "I know, right?"

Yes, you are beautiful. And be as overly confident as you possibly can. Be as self-loving as you possibly can. And as Glennon Doyle says, "It's your job, if it comes down to disappointing other people and disappointing yourself, choose [to disappoint] other people every single time". In fact, your job in life is to disappoint as many people you possibly can to satisfy yourself. At this point, that is what I would tell them. Especially the little girls. I would.

**Elizabeth WAGMEISTER**

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Thank you everyone.

*[applause]*