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Direct Action

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Filmmaker, marketer and film distributor Ava DuVernay is the founder of entertainment marketing firm The DuVernay Agency and the organizer of film company AFFRM, which puts on African-American film festivals and orchestrates theatrical releases for black independent films. Earlier this year, she became the first African-American woman to win the Sundance Film Festival's best director award for her latest feature *Middle of Nowhere*.



Q: With double majors in English and African-American studies, how did you end up in PR?

A: I was interested in producing for broadcast journalism and secured a very coveted internship with CBS News, working on the national evening news with Connie Chung and Dan Rather during the

O.J. Simpson trial. I was one of 10 interns who were dispatched to cover a juror. I was to sit outside the juror's house, look through trash and do all the things I thought were not becoming of a broadcast journalist. I became disenchanted with journalism, so I pivoted to publicity. My first job out of college was at a small studio as a junior publicist. That position really birthed the start of my company, The DuVernay Agency.

Q: Why did you transition to making films yourself?

A: As a publicist, being on movie sets brought me in proximity to great filmmakers like Steven Spielberg, Michael Mann, Clint Eastwood, Raoul Peck and Gurinder Chadha, and I became interested

in directing. In 2003, I started writing my first script. In 2006, I made my first short. In 2007, I made my first documentary. From there, I started to accumulate work for hire doing television documentaries for VH1 and MTV and BET. In 2010, my first narrative film, *I Will Follow*, was released. My current film, [*Middle of Nowhere*](#), will be released in theaters in October.

Q: Tell us about *Middle of Nowhere*.

A: It's set in Los Angeles and follows Ruby, a happily married woman whose husband is unexpectedly incarcerated. It's about her interior life and how she very intimately works through the challenge, struggle and chaos of a relationship that's defined by separation while struggling with her own identity. The film was based on my interest in exploring complex characterizations of black women, which I feel is lacking in cinema. It also shares my interest in shedding light on women from all walks of life who are in waiting due to the incarceration of a loved one. At one point, I thought I might pursue the subject as a documentary. But in the writing, it [became clear] that this was a love story.

The film [presents] a black woman in a part of town we don't often see. That juxtaposition of a woman with a lot of dignity and character unfortunately is really rare when that woman happens to live in Compton or South Central. Then, also, there's the characterization of a woman in conflict over her own identity. I think that's something we all can identify with [regardless of] color and gender.

Q: Obviously, having a film chosen to be shown at Sundance is a huge win. How did that happen?

A: It was submitted with the intention of doing so and forgetting about it, as opposed to waiting every day for them to call. I've done that before. I think I've matured as a filmmaker, where I was able to place my own value on films as opposed to waiting for some external value to be placed on the film. Of course, the one time you submit it and you're like, "Eh, I love it. If they don't like it, oh well," is the time that they love it.

I own a distribution company called AFFRM, the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement, which has distributed three films in theaters internationally. So I went in not fretting over acquisition, something a lot of filmmakers worry about when they go to Sundance. Any time you present work for the first time, it's nerve-wracking. You hope that it's well-received. I went with a lot of friends, family, cast and crew. It was more sharing the film, hoping people liked it and celebrating the moment.

Q: What was it like when you heard you'd won best director?

A: Floored. Stunned. Jaw-dropping. All words I usually don't use. There was another film at Sundance that was expected to sweep. It was really delightful to have this surprise upset. It was lovely that the jurors saw something in what we made and honored the film with that vibe. It definitely helped raise the profile of the film.

Q: How have things changed for you since receiving the award?

A: I don't think things have really changed. I work from a very self-empowered place where if I can't

get through a door, I'll just build another door. That's a lot of what AFFRM is about. Films that are more art house in nature with black and brown people are not popular with studios and distributors, so we created our own distribution company. So for me, the award was a nice vote of confidence and will hopefully draw more eyeballs to *Middle of Nowhere*.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: A *30 for 30* documentary for ESPN about a little-known time in history when Venus Williams and Tony Blair were fighting for equal pay for women athletes in the UK. Then the press campaign around *Middle of Nowhere* this month. And I'm shooting my next film in February. It's a romantic drama set in Los Angeles.

Q: One of your more interesting "credits" is writing for the UCLA African-American student magazine, *NOMMO*.

A: UCLA is unique in that it has news magazines born out of civil rights initiatives and progressive student cultures that cater to students of different cultural backgrounds, whether it's *La Gente*, *NOMMO* or TenPercent. At the time I was there, *NOMMO* had a rich legacy and was offering students interested in progressive culture around African-American history and contemporary issues the opportunity to report, opine and write about whatever we wanted.

I was proud to be a staffer on *NOMMO* my freshman and sophomore years. I also did a little dabbling with the Daily Bruin. It was a beautiful community. The Afrikan Student Union, the black student social life, writing for *NOMMO* — all of those things were really encouraged and abundant during my time at UCLA and are directly related to my world view.

Q: Do you have any advice for young filmmakers?

A: I didn't attend UCLA film school; I was an English and African-American studies major. A lot of people get locked into whatever they studied or what their degree is in. It's OK to change up, grow, evolve and change your mind. I had a great career doing one thing for 15 years, and it's never too late to say, "I want to follow this passion, desire or energy that's been placed in me to do something else." You can pivot. Don't be afraid to try.