



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 60=

Daughters of the Dust

The ascension of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* to recognition as one of the greatest films of all time hardly comes as a surprise to Black women moviegoers, who championed the film from its earliest screenings and fiercely defended it against wilful misunderstandings in the decades that followed. Black women, in whose image the 1991 feature was directly created, saw then what is now widely understood: Dash's visionary visual marriage between Afrocentric aesthetics and the rich emotional depth of Black womanhood is a cinematic triumph.

Daughters rapidly engulfs you with the lush, matriarchal world of the Peazant family, residing in South Carolina's Sea Islands at the turn of the 20th century. The fundamental crisis takes shape as the women-centred family is split between migrating north or staying in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Dash's multilayered narrative unfolds by allowing the youngest member of the clan, an unborn child, and the eldest members, the ancestors, to weigh in, in an energetic display of shared narrative.

Through a union of African diasporic storytelling techniques, visually arresting imagery (assisted by cinematographer and co-producer Arthur Jafa) and dynamic character scope, *Daughters* offers a deep reading of how ancestry and the depth of Black souls are fractured between a longing for modernity and tending to their roots. As the women try to work towards a collective solution and honour their individual paths, Dash invites us through their interiority. By doing so, we are granted access to the cinematic language of Black women defining themselves for themselves.

The film, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, remains an enduring symphony that sings, reframes and reignites a Black girl's song. By refusing a Eurocentric understanding of African-American identity, Dash's seminal work challenges us all to believe in cinema's creation – and viewing – as an act of communal healing. With this cinematic heirloom leading the way, may we all continue to.

Maya S. Cade, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

As a sequel to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* was never made, we never knew what became of the Peazant girls after they crossed over to the mainland from the Sea Islands of South Carolina. That is, until Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* dropped in 2016 and seemed to pick up the story of its gorgeously garbed Black women as they struggled to find their way in the New World. Thanks to *Lemonade*'s distinct homage, Dash's pioneering movie was rediscovered by a new generation and has now been restored and rereleased in time for its 25th anniversary.

There is something wonderfully apposite about this binding together of eras, given that *Daughters of the Dust* is itself a contemplation of time's circularity. The overlaying of past, present and future is the framing device for the film, which offers a rare insight into African women's spirituality shared across lineages and throughout the diaspora. At a moment when third-wave feminism meets pop culture meets a refreshed Black identity politics, *Daughters of the Dust* remains a futuristic glimpse into the past.

The film is set at the turn of the 20th century among the isolated Gullah community inhabiting the islands off the coast of South Carolina. The descendants of West African slaves, they lived in relative paradise away from the

Jim Crow South, speaking their Yoruba-influenced dialect and practising their customs freely.

The tight community is threatened when the sophisticated Yellow Mary, played by Dash favourite Barbara-O, returns from the mainland to take the family with her. Grandmother Nana Peasant represents the past. Her ancient rituals shape the film's sensual poetry. The present resides in her offspring who, in various states of excitement and anxiety, prepare to leave. The future is embodied in the voice of an unborn child who narrates the last few days in the coastal idyll, highlighting the tension between what once was and what is to come. 'How you can leave this soil?' laments Nana Peasant. Watching today, as the #BlackLivesMatter refrain echoes across America's northern states, we find ourselves lamenting with her.

The marriage between director and material in *Daughters of the Dust* feels near perfect. Not only is Dash herself a descendant of the relatively small crop of Gullah people, she is also a child of the LA Rebellion, a school of pan-Africanist filmmakers based at UCLA in the 1970s, who took inspiration from post-colonial cinematic movements in Latin America and beyond as well as European neorealism. However, it was her one-time relationship with cinematographer Arthur Jafa, and with production designer Kerry James Marshall (now an internationally renowned painter), that creates the extraordinary feel of the film: the sumptuousness of the costumes, the locations peopled by beautiful Black actors, redefine the turn-of-the-century period film. Here the pale blush of Edith Wharton's heroines become the rich tonal hues of actresses Cora Lee Day, Alva Rogers and Adisa Anderson.

Daughters of the Dust took more than ten years to make, having begun as a silent short. The script was rejected by most, but PBS American Playhouse finally stumped up the relatively small \$800,000 budget. Particular attention was paid to the verisimilitude of the design. The film was shot on location in the Sea Islands and only materials that the Gullah would have had access to at the time were used, including the hand-dyed indigo and white cotton of the women's dresses.

In 1992, *Daughters of the Dust* became the first feature by an African-American woman to be theatrically distributed – helped by another Black woman, promoter Michelle Materre of KJM3 Entertainment Group. Materre borrowed pioneer filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's distribution techniques and spread the word through Black churches and communities.

Like Beyoncé's *Lemonade* today, *Daughters of the Dust* became symbolic of the alternative aesthetic that Black female artists had been forging for years, an aesthetic that merged fact with metaphor, the physical with the metaphysical. While Hollywood was still treating Black woman as mulattoes, mammies or maids, Dash had already made three seminal shorts – *Four Women* (1975), *Diary of an African Nun* (1977) and *Illusions* (1982) – and filmmakers such as Kathleen Collins (*Losing Ground*, 1982) and Camille Billops (*Finding Christa*, 1991) had crafted intimate, subjective features based on their experiences as complex artists.

Despite its critical and box-office success, another feature along the lines of *Daughters of the Dust* never came. Instead Dash continued her trajectory predominantly on the small screen. She made a number of TV movies over the next ten years, including one about civil rights activist Rosa Parks, and worked with leading actresses such as Angela Bassett, Alfre Woodard, Loretta Devine and C.C.H. Pounder.

Twenty-five years on, *Daughters of the Dust* still feels remarkable. Its rich cinematic language breaks open formal storytelling, allowing a distinct, possibly ancient, voice to emerge that changes the possibilities of cinema for Black female filmmakers and viewers.

Gaylene Gould, *Sight & Sound*, June 2017

DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST

Directed by: Julie Dash
©/Production Company: Geechee Girls Productions
In association with: American Playhouse, WMG Pictures
With financial assistance from: Public Broadcasting Service, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Endowment for the Arts, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies
Presented by: American Playhouse
A Kino International release
Executive Producer: Lindsay Law
Producers: Julie Dash, Arthur Jafa
Line Producer: Steven Jones
Associate Producers: Pamm R. Jackson, Floyd Webb, Bernard Nicholas
Production Co-ordinator: Teresa Yarbrough
Production Controller: Kathy Richter
Location Manager: Eric Mofford
Post-production Supervisor: Amy Carey
1st Assistant Directors: C.C. Barnes, Nandi Bowe
2nd Assistant Director: Miller Tobin
Casting: Len Hunt
Written by: Julie Dash
Director of Photography: Arthur Jafa
Camera Operators: Arthur Jafa, N'jia Kai
1st Assistant Camera: William Hudson
Additional 1st Assistant Camera: Robin Melhuish
2nd Assistant Camera: Tommy Burns
Gaffer: Alex Vlacos
Key Grip: Kevin Hamm
Special Effects: Willard Stephens
Editors: Amy Carey, Joseph Burton
Production Designer: Kerry Marshall
Art Director: Michael Kelly Williams
Set Dresser: Ricardo Butler
Prop Master: Peter Knowlton
Construction Foreman: Umar Abdurrahamn
Costume Designer: Arline Burks
Set Costumer: Tiffany Taylor
Make-up Supervisor: Rose Chatterton
Assistant Make-up: Bryan A. Seabrook
Hairstylist: Pamela Ferrell
Titles/Opticals: Atlanta Films Effects, John E. Allen
Dailies: DuArt Film Laboratories
Negative Conforming: J.G. Films Inc
Laboratory: John E. Allen
Original Music by: John Barnes
African Percussions/Vocals: Jesus Pedro Orta, Menge Hernandez, Francis Awe, Bill Summers, Elo
Eastern Percussionists: Manoocheher Sadeghi, Ashhad Khan
Vocalists: Rosa Parrilla, Valentina Soares, Abiola, Dianne Richburg, Felicidad, Yvette Bostic, Radhaz, Hanif Noor Mohammed, Allen Fovary III, Micki Butler
African Percussions/Vocals Co-ordinated by: Bill Summers
Music Recorded at: Off Melrose Studio
Music Mixer/Engineer: Jack Rouben
Sound Recordist: Veda Campbell
Boom Operator: Chris Sibert
Re-recording Mixers: Jeremy Hoenack, Robert Manahan, Melissa Sherwood Hofmann
Re-recorded by: Sound Trax

Supervising Sound Editor: Michael Payne
Dialogue Editors: Ingeborg Larson, Melissa Peabody
Sound Effects Editors: Doug Blush, Ray Greene, Sabrina Stephenson, Jeff Schiro, Joseph Zappala
Walla Group: Holiday Marble, Sparkle Duncan, Teddy Gross, Guadalupe Jones, Rudy Costa, Agusta Stone, Charles Burnett, Geraldine Dunston
ADR Voices: Afemo Omiliani, Taira Miller
ADR Editor: Kris Campbell
Gullah Language Consultant: Ronald Daise

Cast

Adisa Anderson (*Eli Peasant*)
Barbara-O (*Yellow Mary Peasant*)
Cheryl Lynn Bruce (*Viola Peasant*)
Cora Lee Day (*Nana Peasant*)
Geraldine Dunston (*Viola's mother*)
Vertamae Grosvenor (*hairbraider*)
Tommy Hicks (*Mr Snead*)
Kaycee Moore (*Haagar Peasant*)
Eartha D. Robinson (*Myown Peasant*)
Alva Rogers (*Eula Peasant*)
Cornell Royal (*Daddy Mac Peasant*)
Catherine Tarver (*woman with baby*)
Bahni Turpin (*Iona Peasant*)
Kai-Lynn Warren (*the unborn child*)
Trula Hoosier (*Trula*)
Umar Abdurrahamn (*Bilal Muhammed*)
Malik Farrakhan (*newlywed man*)
Sherry Jackson (*older cousin*)
Rev Ervin Green (*baptist minister*)
Marcus Humphrey, Bernard Wilson (*boatmen*)
Althea Lang (*newlywed woman*)
Jasmine Lee, Dalisia Robinson (*Peasant babies*)
Willie Faulkner, Joe Taylor, Frank Brown, Rueben Fripp (*Peasant men*)
Derrick Coaxum, Neil Howard (*Peasant boys*)
Jared Warren, Zenovia Green, Taira Miller, Tiffany Hills (*Peasant children*)
Jamar Freeman (*Pete*)
Detrell Freeman (*re-Pete*)
Vivian Dawson, Inez Griffin (*rice huskers*)
M. Cochise Anderson (*St Julien Lastchild*)
Darrel Cook, Julius Cook (*moss gatherers*)
Benjamin Gillens (*minister's assistant*)
Ronald Daise (*processional man*)
Marie Smalls (*woman being baptised*)
Lonnie Moon, DeWitt Parker, Emma Robinson, Taylor Thompson, Virginia Green, Maceo Griffin, Archie Thomas, Raymond Paige, Ervena Faulkner, J.R. Wilson, Wilhemina Wilson (*baptismal processional*)
Tarell Brown, Shanna Parker, Belle White, Stanley White, Maxine Royalle, Georgia Wiggins, Carolyn Garris, Ella Powell, Bernice Jenkins, Lillian Johnson, Jackie Parker (*indigo plantation*)
Shanna Johnson (*young Nana Peasant*)
Leroy Simmons Jr (*young Daddy Mac Peasant*)
Leroy Simmons (*Shad Peasant*)

USA 1991©
112 mins

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