



Black Debutantes: A Collection of Early Works by Black Women Directors
Special Preview of new 4K Restoration

Compensation

Compensation

Director: Zeinabu irene Davis

Production Company:

Wimmin With A Mission Productions

Producers: Zeinabu irene Davis, Marc Arthur Chéry,
Yvonne Welbon, Dana Briscoe

Screenplay: Marc Arthur Chéry

Director of Photography: Pierre H.L. Désir Jr

Editors: Zeinabu irene Davis, Dana Briscoe

Production Designer: Cathy C. Cook

Music: Reginald B. Robinson, Atiba Y. Jali

Cast:

Michelle A. Banks (*Malindy Brown / Malaika Brown*)

John Earl Jelks (*Arthur Jones / Nico Jones*)

Christopher Smith (*William Young / dancer*)

K. Lynn Stephens (*Aminata Brown*)

Nirvana Cobb

(*Tildy Evans / children's library reader*)

Kevin L. Davis (*Tyrone*)

USA 1999

92 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

Digitally restored in 4K by The Criterion Collection,
UCLA Film and Television Archive, and Wimmin
With a Mission Productions in conjunction with
The Sundance Institute

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Zeinabu irene Davis on 'Compensation'

The inspiration to make *Compensation* grew out of a journal entry. I frequently work with non-actors and, in order to keep cast members engaged and in character, I ask them to write in their diaries. While I was making *A Powerful Thang* (1991), when I was living in southwestern Ohio, lead actor Asma Feyijinmi wrote a response to a simple, beautiful poem, entitled 'Compensation', by Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was from nearby Dayton. Though Dunbar composed the poem in 1905, as he was dying from tuberculosis, Asma felt its relevance to the contemporary AIDS crisis. Thus the seed of the story was planted.

The film was not initially conceived with a Deaf actor in mind. I was on a grant panel in St. Paul, Minnesota, and went to see a theatre performance one evening. Michelle A. Banks was in a Black Deaf production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Northern Sign Theater. Screenwriter Marc Arthur Chéry and I were totally mesmerised by Banks. After the show, I asked if she would be interested in film acting, and she said she would. I began studying American Sign Language (ASL) and familiarising myself with Deaf culture – in particular, Black Deaf culture. To date, my research has uncovered no other feature films with Black Deaf lead characters.

There is far too little media or literature written and/or directed by or for Deaf African Americans, or indeed any Deaf Americans. In some small way, I hope this film has contributed to the artistic and cultural voices emanating from the Deaf community. In addition to Banks, the cast and crew of *Compensation* includes the participation and performance of Black Deaf actors and technicians, most notably actor-dancer Christopher Smith, filmmaker Jade Bryan, and Chicago-based photographer Devon Whitmore.

Producing and directing *Compensation* continued my development as an artist in search of a cinematic language that moves beyond mass-media stereotypes and that reflects some of the rhythms and nuances of African American culture. Shifting away from conventional narrative structure, a formal language was melded between cinematic discourse and Deaf ways of knowing. Cinema, much like sign language, is a visual language that is understood by many – a bridge of communication for people of many languages and cultures.

Compensation incorporates and references silent film devices such as ornate title cards, tableau-like compositions and syncopated ragtime music. I hope my handling of the subject matter will incite reflection and discussion among viewers about Deaf/hearing communication as well as issues of loss and illness.

Stylistically, *Compensation* is an outgrowth of my previous films *A Powerful Thang* and *Cycles*. With every movie I make, I try to set up new technical challenges. I had never used an optical printer before. The contemporary story of *Compensation* includes what I call the 'depression montage', performed on an optical printer at a pivotal point in the film to explore the psychologies of Malaika and Nico. This sequence was edited by adapting filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's theory of metric montage, which simulates a feeling of unsettledness. The audio design was carefully constructed to approximate

**Black Debutantes:
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by Black Women Directors**

25 & Under: Introduction to Black Debutantes

Thu 1 May 18:40 Blue Room

Pariah

Thu 1 May 20:50; Sun 25 May 18:20

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: Will

Sat 3 May 18:10; Thu 15 May 20:30

Losing Ground

Sat 3 May 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by Nina Lorez Collins); Sun 11 May 15:20

Sugar Cane Alley Rue Cases-Nègres

Sun 4 May 18:10; Sat 17 May 20:40

What My Mother Told Me

Mon 5 May 14:50; Wed 21 May 20:40

Welcome II the Terrordome

Mon 5 May 18:30; Sat 17 May 12:30

Naked Acts

Thu 8 May 18:20 (+ extended season intro by Rógan Graham); Wed 14 May 18:15

**Special Preview of new 4K Restoration:
Compensation**

Thu 8 May 20:55; Sat 24 May 18:20

Drylongso

Sun 11 May 18:45; Thu 22 May 20:30

Black Debutantes Shorts Programme:

Performance Pains

Wed 14 May 20:30; Fri 30 May 18:15

A Way of Life

Fri 16 May 18:15; Tue 27 May 20:50

Exhibiting Black Cinema

Thu 22 May 18:20

UK Premiere: Test Pattern

Fri 23 May 18:40; Sat 31 May 18:10

Woman with a Movie Camera: Mountains

Thu 29 May 18:15

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Deafness through such techniques as silence and breath awareness, exaggerated volume, heavy bass frequencies and vibrations, and underwater sound reproduction. Effects in this section include aural distortions of communication devices like telephones, answering machines, and the TTY (teletypewriter).

Inspired by some styles of African cinema, which effectively reduce conversation in order to reach broad, multilingual audiences, *Compensation* employs sparse dialogue – in fact, there is none on-screen until the character of Arthur is introduced, after 15 minutes of the film have already passed.

It is important for me as an artist to communicate with others about difficult topics. Illness, especially AIDS and tuberculosis, is not an easy subject to discuss. What really interests me is how we handle the loss and death of those who are afflicted by such diseases. The human mind copes in many different ways, amazingly able to remain generous and giving even in dire situations. In most cases, no words need be spoken in order to evoke compassion and solidarity.

As an African American woman video- and filmmaker who has been producing work for multiple decades, I feel a strong affinity for – and a sense of responsibility in – crafting images of African American women. I am interested in expanding our horizons as Americans and as women – we are not invisible, and certainly not ‘bitches and hos’. *Compensation* focuses decidedly on its women characters, telling the story primarily from their points of view. Through this film and others, I have tried to contribute to the challenge that independent filmmaking presents to the domain of mass media in the United States.

As a university professor, it was very important to me that the *Compensation* crew include students, many of whom were women; 85 percent of the crew ended up being female. My practice has been to mix professionals with students, and to also mix the production crew along the colour line. In doing so, I feel that I have been successful in making some small changes to the world of media. I will continue to employ these practices as I tell my stories and endeavour to influence other creators.

Janus Films press notes