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Note from Roger â?? Daughters of the Dust

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Dear Cinephiles,

Julie Dashâ??s DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST is one of the most important indie films. It was the first film directed by an African American woman to receive a wide release 25 years ago. The film is beautiful, haunting and a true work of art. Beyonceâ??s groundbreaking feature length music film â??Lemonadeâ?• pays homage to â??Daughters of the Dustâ?•.

Below is an article about the film from the Los Angeles Times. Come check out the 25th Restoration of this masterpiece tonight (Thursday) at 7:30pm at the Riviera Theatre.

See you at the movies!
Roger Durling



â??Daughters of the Dust,â?? Julie Dashâ??s 1991 triumph, makes a welcome return
By Justin Chang

â??Daughters of the Dust,â?• Julie Dashâ??s magical 1991 debut feature, captures a sad, thrilling moment of transformation for a community of Gullahs, who are the descendants of African slaves who lived on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. On an August day in 1902, several generations of the Peazant family are preparing to move to the U.S. mainland, bidding farewell to their island home and the vibrant, uniquely African-influenced culture theyâ??ve succeeded in keeping alive.

All good period pieces achieve and sustain a sense of immersion in a different time and place. â??Daughters of the Dust,â?• which Dash spent many years researching, producing, writing and directing, goes further than most. Its examination of a bygone way of life is so patient and evocative, so beholden to its own storytelling conventions and rhythms, that watching it is a bit like submitting to a form of time travel. You emerge from the experience feeling slightly dazed and disoriented, but also deeply and thoroughly ravished.

This is partly due to the hypnotic pull of Arthur Jafaâ??s cinematography (which won a prize at the Sundance Film Festival) and the atmospheric drumbeats of John Barnesâ?? score, which conspire to establish an enveloping, dreamlike mood at the outset. But it is also because of the strong, vividly detailed personalities of the women at the filmâ??s center, each one representing a different voice in a timeless tug of war between tradition and modernity, assimilation and isolation.

There is the familyâ??s octogenarian matriarch, Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day), who is determined to remain on the island with her rituals and herbal potions to the chagrin of her embittered granddaughter-in-law, Haagar (Kaycee Moore), who looks forward to the prosperity that she hopes awaits them on the mainland.

Two other women have returned for the Peazantsâ?? final island gathering after leaving home years ago, though their experiences could scarcely have been more different. Viola (Cheryl Lynn Bruce) has become an outspokenly devout Baptist while Yellow Mary (Barbara O.), who returns with her girlfriend (Trula Hoosier) in tow, is ostracized by her family members for being a prostitute.

One of the few who openly embraces Yellow Mary is the spirited Eula (Alva Rogers), who was raped by a white man on the mainland and may be carrying his child, to the horror of her husband, Eli (Adisa Anderson). It is Eula who becomes the filmâ??s wrenching voice of conscience and sanity when she cries, â??Letâ??s live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds!â?• â?? a plea that, even for ears unaccustomed to the thick, West African-inflected creole of the region, cuts to the bone.

Viola has brought a photographer (Tommy Redmond Hicks) to the island to document the occasion. Heâ??s something of a stand-in for Dash, whose father was a Gullah, and whose film becomes its own striking act of witness. The manner of that witness â?? including the use of voice-over narration from the perspective of Eulaâ??s unborn child â?? shows a remarkable integrity.

Rather than telling her story via clean, linear strokes and manufactured crises, Dash lingers on the sights and sounds of Sea Island life, from the unforgettable images of women on the beach in floor-length white dresses to the close-ups of fresh-cooked prawns, hard-boiled eggs and other dishes served at the Peazantsâ?? feast. These moments are not incidental to the narrative; they are essential

to it, as Dash seeks to convey the very look, feel and texture of something that is about to be lost forever.

When â??Daughters of the Dustâ?• premiered in the dramatic competition at Sundance in 1991, the field included two other major indie breakthroughs: Todd Haynesâ?? â??Poisonâ?• (which won the grand jury prize) and Richard Linklaterâ??s â??Slacker.â?• That their directors have gone on to become prominent auteurs on the independent scene is an undeniable testament to their genius.

But it also speaks to the cultural and gender-based norms that kept a singular talent like Dash from the filmmaking career she deserved â?? in part because â??Daughters of the Dust,â?• one of the most striking American independent movies ever made, didnâ??t conform to any studio executiveâ??s ideal of what a â??blackâ?• movie should look and sound like. (The year 1991 saw a mini-renaissance for African American commercial cinema, including â??Boyz n the Hood,â?• â??New Jack City,â?• â??Jungle Feverâ?• and â??A Rage in Harlem.â?•)

Even still, â??Daughters of the Dustâ?• hasnâ??t exactly languished in obscurity. Although it struggled to find a distributor post-Sundance, it did become the first film directed by an African American woman to receive a wide theatrical release (courtesy of Kino International). Its reemergence in theaters is timely for any number of reasons, a widely spotted shout-out in BeyoncÃ©â??s â??Lemonadeâ?• not least among them.

The present-day resonance of a movie about an immigrant community caught between a traumatic past and an uncertain future can largely speak for itself. But itâ??s especially meaningful in a year marked by a remarkable range of serious new works from black filmmakers, from Barry Jenkinsâ?? â??Moonlightâ?• and Nate Parkerâ??s â??The Birth of a Nationâ?• to Denzel Washingtonâ??s forthcoming â??Fencesâ?• â?? each one offering a different vision of African American families trying to rise above a deeply entrenched legacy of oppression.

As an example of how to realize that vision without compromise, â??Daughters of the Dustâ?• remains a pioneering work of art â?? a vibrant dispatch from our historical and cinematic past that continues to look ahead to a more hopeful future.

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