

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY  
OCTOBER 13, 2019  
2 PM • WHITNEY  
HUMANITIES CENTER

## DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



It is shameful that no feature film by an African-American woman received general theatrical distribution across the United States until January 15, 1992, when writer/director Julie Dash's *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* was released by Kino International. Its sold-out festival screenings over the preceding year (starting with a Sundance world premiere in early 1991) showed the film industry that audiences were eager for stories by and about Black women, and showed the world that a visionary new talent had arrived.



In this “mythopoetic adventure” (Richard Brody), “astonishing, vivid portrait” (Rita Kempley), and “elegiac, dreamlike drama” (Kate Muir), Dash tells the story of generations of the Peazant family as they gather together one last time on St. Helena, a Sea Island off the Georgia and South Carolina coast, before many of them move north in the Great Migration. “I envisioned it as a kind of ‘Last Supper’ before migration and the separation of the family,” Dash wrote. The film was inspired by the stories—and storytelling styles—of her own Gullah family who relocated to Queens, as well as by the turn-of-the-century photographs of Black women by James Van Der Zee. The result, in the words of Christina N. Baker, is “a film that illuminates an under-examined part of the history of African-American people, and radiates the beauty and complexity of Black womanhood.”

Dash studied film production at CCNY, AFI, and UCLA, and became a key figure in the influential movement/community of independent Black filmmakers dubbed the “L.A. Rebellion.” “When I first became involved with film, I was interested in correcting certain distortions about Black people, distortions that I had been bombarded with by the media since my childhood,” Dash has said. “None of the images I saw of African-American people, especially the women, suggested that we could actually make movies. We were rarely even in them.” Dash's earliest work was documentary but she says she switched to fiction films “after discovering Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker. I wondered, why can't we see movies like this?”

*DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* was Dash's first feature film after a number of well-regarded shorts, most significantly 1982's *ILLUSIONS*, which won the Jury Prize for Best Film of the Decade by the Black Filmmakers Foundation. She began researching and writing *DAUGHTERS* in 1981, a full decade before it was released, with the challenging 28-day shoot taking place in late 1989. Hurricane Hugo narrowly missed their shooting location, which was a mile-long hike from base (requiring the crew to haul in heavy gear daily) and was beset by mosquitoes and sandstorms. Without the ability to use a generator, award-winning cinematographer Arthur Jafa worked exclusively with natural lighting.

The low-budget film was largely financed from non-profit sources, primarily the PBS *American Playhouse* series. Dash included dialogue in *DAUGHTERS* at *American Playhouse's* request (she had first envisioned it as a dialogue-free film), but she refused to subtitle the Gullah dialect, preferring for the audience to have an immersive language experience. Dash has said she “wanted to do a film that was so deeply embedded in the culture, was so authentic to the culture that it felt like a foreign film.” Roger Ebert observed, “The fact that some of the dialogue is deliberately difficult is not frustrating, but comforting; we relax like children at a family picnic, not understanding everything, but feeling at home with the expression of it.” Justin Chang, another of the film's many admirers, wrote that 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.” Calling it an “evocative, emotional look at family, era, and place,” the Library of Congress added *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* to its National Film Registry in 2004.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **JULIE DASH**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **ARTHUR JAJA**

PRODUCED BY **GEECHEE GIRLS**

(1991) 112 MINS.

STARRING **CORA LEE DAY, ALVA ROGERS, BARBARAO, TRULA HOOSIER, UMAR ABDURRAHAMN, ADISA ANDERSON, KAYCEE MOORE, BAHNI TURPIN, AND CHERYL LYNN BRUCE**

**DID YOU KNOW:** THOSE WHO WANT TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH THE PEAZANT FAMILY CAN READ DASH'S 2007 SEQUEL, *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST: THE NOVEL*. SET 20 YEARS AFTER THE EVENTS IN THE FILM, IT FOCUSES ON AN ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENT FROM HARLEM WHO RETURNS TO HER FAMILY'S ISLAND HOME. DASH DEDICATED THE BOOK TO “THE WOMEN OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA WHO DARE TO DREAM ALOUD, AND ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE NOT AFRAID TO SEE THEIR OWN REFLECTIONS INSIDE THOSE DREAMS.”

**NEXT UP:** OUR SPECIAL SERIES, **THREE BY KUBRICK**, CONTINUES WITH A BRAND-NEW 35MM PRINT OF **THE SHINING** (1980) IN A SPECIAL HALLOWEEN SCREENING, **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31 AT 7PM**. TREASURES' CELEBRATION OF 50/150 YEARS OF COEDUCATION AT YALE CONTINUES WITH THE SECOND FEATURE FILM DIRECTED BY YALE ALUMNA JODIE FOSTER '85, **HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS** (1995), STARRING HOLLY HUNTER, ANNE BANCROFT, ROBERT DOWNEY, JR., AND CLAIRE DANES, SCREENING **SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17 AT 2PM**.