



Julie Dash  
presents

# NAKED ACTS



a film by  
Bridgett M. Davis

a Milestone Film and  
Kino Lorber release  
Restored in 4K by  
Lightbox Film Center  
in collaboration  
with Milestone

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*Naked Acts*

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Kindred Spirits Productions in association with Sirron Communications Presents  
A Bridgett M. Davis Film

Naked Acts has been digitally restored and remastered by Lightbox Film Center at University of the Arts (Philadelphia) in collaboration with Milestone Film, with support from Ron and Suzanne Naples. Thank you to Jesse Pires. This 2023 restoration is from the 16mm a/b rolls preserved at the Indiana University Black Film Center & Archive. Thank you to Rachael Stoeltje, Amber Bertin, and JaQuita Roberts. Restoration and release with creative consultation by Maya S. Cade. 4K digital restoration by Metropolis Post. Sound restoration by Rich Cutler Sound Mix & Design. A Milestone Film & Video release.

Written, Produced & Directed by..... Bridgett M. Davis  
Original Music composed & arranged by ..... Cecilia Smith  
Sound Supervisor ..... Pam DeMetruis  
Film Editor ..... Brunilda Torres  
Director of Photography ..... Herman Lew  
Associate Producers ..... Michelle Blackwell, Rita Davis, Rob Fields, and  
Jake-ann Jones  
Executive Producer ..... Ms. Henri Norris

For Selena Diane

**Cast**

Cicely ..... Jake-ann Jones  
Lydia ..... Patricia DeArcy  
Marcel ..... John McKie  
Joel ..... Ron Cephas Jones  
Diana ..... Renee Cox  
Winsome ..... Sandye Wilson  
Randi ..... Natalie Robinson  
Jesse ..... Lee Dobson  
Grandmama ..... Maranantha Quick  
Ronnie ..... Ajene Washington  
Little Cece ..... Annette Myrie  
Leading Man ..... Rodney Charles

Baby Cece ..... London Simone Hunt  
 Daddy ..... Jairus Hunt  
 Comic ..... Sabrina Lamb  
 Comedy Club Waitress ..... Laura Washington  
 Homeboy ..... Jerome Bailey  
 Street Artist ..... Beatrice Brazoban  
 Bathhouse Attendant ..... Peekoo A. Lewis  
 Sauna Woman #1 ..... Tara Greenway  
 Sauna Woman #2 ..... Leslie Hoffman  
 Rae ..... Bridgett M. Davis  
 Wardrobe Assistant ..... Tracie Garvin

### Atmosphere

Glenn Evans	Graceye Nance
K. Bradley Davis	Cheryl Rozier
Karen L. Glover	Bethany White
Deborah J. Evans	Tracie Morris
Charles Henderson	Tynia D. Richard
Carl Hanock Rux	John Morris
David Daniel Pleasant	Lena Glenn
Saul Williams	Andrea Harris
Tammy Hunte	Suzanne C. Cooke
Ivor Alleyne	Thelma Paula Fernanadez
Corine Oliver	Sandra M. Stevenson
Eugene Holley Jr.	Anthony Calder

### Crew

1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director ..... Roger Bobb  
 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director ..... Sonya Lynn  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Director ..... Bethany White  
 Unit Production Manager ..... Carole Anthony  
 Casting ..... E/Quality Imaging  
 Costume Designers ..... Nikki Doss and Tracie L. Garvin  
 Production Designer ..... Donn Thompson  
 Assistant to The Executive Producer ..... Wanda C. Fox  
 Production Office Coordinator ..... Sarah Redd  
 Script Supervisors ..... Lori Doherty and Chantal Bushelle  
 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Camera ..... Mitchell Malpica  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Camera ..... Richard Menzia and Stephen Ramsey  
 Sound Recordist ..... Charles Blackwell  
 Boom Operator ..... Rebecca Williams

Sound Production Assistant ..... Karim Valentine  
 Art Director ..... Fred Holland  
 Set Dresser ..... Kim Howell  
 Hair/Make-up Arts ..... Anthony Jones  
 Still Photography ..... Donn Thompson and Jeff Tischler  
 Key Grip ..... Tristan Gros  
 Additional Grips ..... Lisette Gray and Sean McCardell  
 Gaffers ..... Dwayne Thomas and Peter Yolles  
 Best Boy ..... Kareem Johnson  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Electric ..... Atsushi Takaoka  
 Assistant Editor ..... Karen McMullen  
 Picture/Sound Apprentice ..... Dana Rebeiro  
 Sound Editor ..... Murphy Birdsall  
 Foley Recordist ..... George A. Lara  
 Foley Artist ..... Brian Vancho  
 Assistant Sound Editors ..... V. Renee Taylor and Jonathan Cronin  
 Mixed by ..... Michael Barry  
 Music Editor ..... James Flatto  
 Music Recording Engineer ..... Larry Decarmine  
 Music Supervision ..... Rob Fields  
 Legal Services ..... Lisa E. Davis; Frankfurt, Garbus, Klein & Selz, P.C.  
 Unit Publicity ..... TearSheet  
 Graphic Design Services ..... Jon Shoates Graphic Design  
 Catering Services ..... Palaver Hut Caterers and Snooky's  
 Transportantion ..... Courier Car Rental, Inc.  
 Accounting Services ..... Patricia Kerr  
 Production Assistants ..... Beatrice Brazoban, Clairea Clay, Lisa Herndon,  
 Tyrone McCallum, Tanyeno Waterson, Tom Groggans, Joe Carrerra  
*Cool Mama* Poster Illustration by ..... Gary Crumpler  
 "Yo Mama" (a self-portrait) courtesy of ..... Renee Cox  
 Original paintings courtesy of ..... Laurence Gomez  
 Film Stock ..... Kodak  
 Camera Equipment ..... Camera Service Center  
 Sound Equipment ..... Professional Sound Services  
 Insurance Brokers ..... Waltery Insurance  
 Negative Matching ..... N & D Film & Video Ltd.  
 Color Timer ..... Kent McGrew  
 Opticals by ..... REI Media Group  
 End Titles Designed & Produced by ..... Jon Shoates  
 Music Score recorded at ..... Sound on Sound Recording  
 Color by ..... DuArt Laboratories  
 Mixed at ..... Sound One

## Music

### "Follow Your Heart"

Music and Lyrics by Sandra St. Victor and Tom Hammer  
Arrangement by Cecilia Smith  
Performed by Carla Cook, Cecilia Smith, and Steve Kirby  
Courtesy of EMI Music Publishing and Sony Music Publishing

### "Caution To the Wind"

Music and Lyrics by James McBride and Dana Crowe  
Performed by Pura Fe  
Courtesy of Shanachie/Cachet Recordings

### "Exe-ssential"

Produced by J. Fountain and Mr. Bravo for  
The Jimi Fountain Experience I.N.K.

### "Drive-By"

Produced by J. Fountain and Mr. Bravo for  
The Jimi Fountain Experience I.N.K.

### "Fun Days"

Lyrics and Music by Summer Williams and Yasmeen  
Performed by Yasmeen  
Courtesy of Summer Records

### "No Mirrors"

Lyrics and Music by Ysaye M. Barnwell  
Performed by Yasmeen  
Courtesy of Summer Records

### "Beautiful Galathea: Overture"

By Franz von Suppe  
Courtesy of Promusic

### "Flygirl's Diary"

Lyrics by Kymm Wilson  
Performed by Fresh Kymm  
Produced by Rod Bessart for Bo-School Productions

**Original *Naked Acts* Score Featuring:**

Cecilia Smith..... Vibraphone & Percussion  
Cecil Bridgewater ..... Trumpet  
Lance Bryant..... Tenor & Soprano Saxophone  
Michal Becham..... Vocals  
Freddie Bryant..... Acoustic Guitar  
Frank Wilkins..... Acoustic Piano & Keyboards  
Lonnie Plaxico ..... Acoustic and Electric Bass  
Ron Savage ..... Drums & Percussion  
Cindy Blackman..... Drums

Cecilia Smith courtesy of..... BROWNSTONE RECORDS  
Cindy Blackman courtesy of..... MUSE RECORDS

**Angels**

John & Bernice Drumwright  
Heather Bond-Bryant  
Khadija Kamara  
Liz Streitz & Tom Powel  
Cynthia Tucker  
Angel Williams

**Special Thanks to:**

William & Gladys Ayers  
Jessie Bonaparte  
Luis Brazoban  
Alvin Cantrell  
E.H. Chenault  
Anthony R. Davis  
Lise Funderberg  
Juanita Howard  
Pearl Massey  
Yvonne Moore

Thaddeus Reed  
Marilyn Neimark  
Alisa Solomon  
Virginia Terrell  
Lucille Bearman  
Jane Bond  
Keith Brown  
Robert Cantrell  
Libby Crawford  
Ben Davis

Edith Howard  
Patricia Jackson  
Cordell Montgomery  
Wendell Pierce  
Monty Ross  
David Tager  
Elija Troupe  
Karen and Dale Watson  
Leon Wynter

**Thanks also to:**

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Suzanne C. Cooke  
Ethnic Wears, Inc., & Aurora P.R. Baptiste  
Savvy by Arni and Laura  
Simonette Hakim  
Urban Outfitters  
Liz Claiborne  
Stitches for Misses  
Shades Associates  
Rev. Raymond Daley & The Catholic Center at NYU  
Brooklyn Council of the Arts  
Black Market Bodies  
Tenth Street Baths and Health Club  
Boston Comedy Club  
NY Promotion

Filming Locations: New York City, New York, USA  
Filming Dates: September 1, 1994

International Release Details  
May 5, 1996: Boston Festival of Women's Cinema  
Apr 19, 1997: USA Film Festival

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*"I always had this attitude that I've spent most of my life seeing films that had people up on the screen who never looked anything like me. That never got in my way of enjoying the film. And so, perhaps naively, I set out to make a film that I thought could do the same thing. It just so happened to have people of color on the screen. And I was ... surprised. Basically, I've had a lot more practice at watching images of people who don't look like me, but who tap into the same human emotions I have. It's not so easy in reverse. Particularly if you have industry executives who don't believe that people want to come into the theatre and see people who don't look like them, but who share their values, or share their human frailties. I have found it's not the audiences so much as the industry perception...that's where the work needs to be done." –*  
Bridgett M. Davis, 1999 Great Plains Film Festival panel discussion

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## Synopsis

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Night in the city and standing outside a video store, Cicely (Cece), a young woman in a short bright red wig, stares at a poster featuring the image of a beautiful black actress in an afro and bikini. The film is *Cool Mama* starring Lydia Love and the poster announces, "She's hot... she's badd... she's back." As she unlocks the door and enters the store, we hear in a voiceover, Cece's attempt to write a letter: "*Dear Mom... no, no. Dear Lydia, I know it's been a while. School wasn't what I hoped it would be, but I made it through. I wanted to let you know I'll be back in New York soon, and... no, no, no. Dear Lydia, I know I've been out of touch but things between us being so... tense...*"

As she walks into the video store, Cece calls out "Lydia?" "*I really needed to get as far away as possible after Grandmama... no, no, no, god no.*" Dressed in a long red and white dress with a high collar and a long jacket, she looks around the store. "*Dear Lydia, I made some decisions I'm really excited about, and I'm headed back east, so I'll drop by the store when I get settled. Hope all is well.*" She pauses in front of a display of VHS tapes. The top shelf contains "Black Features" and the bottom four rows are stocked with Lydia Love tapes. "*Hope all is well? Oh god, forget it Cece, just forget it!*" She takes a VHS of *Cool Mama* off the rack and puts it into the VCR on top of the television on the store counter. On the television screen, the film plays: a man and woman are in bed making love as the background music sings "Cool mama, makes you holler for more."

In a flashback, Lydia, the actress in the film, is looking at herself in a dressing room mirror, putting on long dangly earrings while a young girl beside her attempts to stuff her halter top. At first the woman takes out the tissues... then playfully puts them back in. When a man at the door calls out "Two minutes!" Lydia replies, "Okay, sugar, I'm coming." Turning to Cece, she tells her daughter that Ronnie will come to take care of her. When the girl turns away, she says "Come on, you like Ronnie don't you?" In response to Cece's tears, she tells her sternly, "Don't cry! You start crying over every little thing and you'll be crying the rest of your life." Cece replies, "I want my daddy!" Her mother tells her that he left them. Taking off her robe, she walks out the dressing room door in an orange bikini. Soon the door opens, and a man enters and approaches the child. He takes her hand and leads her behind a curtain: "Let's play our little game!" All we see is the man's feet as the girl's halter top falls to the ground.

Back in the video store, Lydia and a man enter, laughing and joking. At first, they don't seem to recognize Cece. Then, Jesse, the middle-aged man, says "Cece, you look good, you look damn good! Lost all that weight — got yourself a fine figure." The young woman tells him she needs to speak to her mother privately. Jesse checks with Lydia to see if that is okay, kisses her, and as he leaves says, "She must of heard you talking about her, that's why she came back... your baby girl is come home a woman!"

Lydia steps behind the counter: "You haven't wanted to talk to me for four years." Cece tells her mother that she is going to be in a film. Lydia replies that she hates the life of an actress. "So, you want to get back at me by coming in here and telling me some shit about how you want..." Cece interrupts her: "A lot has changed since I left, okay? I am not the same big, scared girl that I was when..." Her



mom guesses, “You lost what, 50, 55 pounds?” Cece replies: “57.” Lydia looks her up and down and continues, “So now you have a new body, now you want to be an actress?” “I am already an actress,” she tells her mother. Cece reminds Lydia that she was raised in “every little ratty studio in the city” and spent her childhood in screening rooms. Lydia blames Cece’s grandmother for giving her ideas and talking about “the theater.” “No, she loved me,” Cece replies, “she believed in me.”

Cece tells her mother that she is sure that acting is the career she wants. Lydia says that the only roles she will be offered will be whores and black vamps where she’ll have to take her clothes off. The young woman replies that her film is a “quality” production and that there are some things she will never agree to do. “You want to be an actress?” Lydia tells her daughter, “Don’t ever say what you won’t do!” Cece says she’d gain back all her weight and play somebody’s mammy before she would do that. And she asks, didn’t her mother have a choice taking the roles she did? Lydia tells her that it wasn’t easy. Cece snaps back, “Well, you sure made it *look* easy!” Lydia slaps her daughter, shocking them both. Walking out, Cece says, “This time I’m not coming back!”

Dressed in hot pink blouse, slacks and suspenders, Cecily walks into an office and introduces herself to the man seated behind a desk — Marcel Brown, producer, writer, and star of *Body of Art*. He tells her that she is tardy and is costing him money. Marcel introduces her to Winsome, the young woman perched on a nearby stool, who will be playing the role of his daughter. Their “Lucretia” is also late. When Cece tells Marcel that she doesn’t have current headshots, he chides her. Randi, the actress playing Lucretia, breezes in and says that headshots are a waste of money, anyway — they never look like you.

Marcel hands out copies of his screenplay about a black artist who paints female nudes. Winsome chimes in that as a model, she has experienced that artists see her as “light and shadow and form.” Randi says filmgoers are looking for more and that she is eager to show her body on screen. Cece nervously asks if her character Elena will be naked. She says that Joel told her about the film, but not that she would need to take her clothes off. Marcel argues that his film employs nudity in the tradition of the great European filmmakers and asks Cece why Lydia Love’s daughter is making such a fuss. Is she “trying to get out of her mother’s well-endowed shadow?” Marcel also recalls seeing Cece’s grandmother, a “fine actress,” on stage in “Porgy and Bess.” He says that he is confused about Cece’s “problem.” If she can’t do the role as written, she has no part in the film. Cece walks out.

On the street, Cece sees Joel, the film’s director, saying good-bye to his sister, Diana. Cece recognizes Diana and asks Joel if she has always stayed thin. He talks about the old days and tells her that they need to get to rehearsal. Cece tells Joel that Marcel has fired her. “You forgot to mention that my role does not include clothing!” Nothing to it, he tells her. With her “new slamming body” and as Lydia Love’s daughter, he assumed she would be fine with it. Cece tells Joel that he needs to ask *her* about what she wants to do with her body. Despite their history together, she isn’t comfortable being nude. Joel promises to get her part back, but Cece worries about getting in between director and producer.

Back in the production office, Marcel and Joel debate the issue. Joel goes to bat for Cece, reminding the screenwriter/producer that he has had great success directing Marcel’s plays. Marcel replies that Joel may have directing awards, but does he have a bank account? Joel tells him Cece will do the role. Marcel tells him to make sure that she gets some new headshots.

Cece, in a long dress and shoulder-length black wig, walks into Diana's sunlit photography studio. She looks around uncomfortably at the large photographs of strong naked women. Cece tells Diana that she only needs photos from the neck up. Softening, she apologizes for coming off like "a bitch."

At rehearsal, Cece, in a light auburn wig, floor-length skirt, and bulky vest, reads lines with Randi, Winsome, and Joel. Marcel and Joel argue about both her performance and appearance. When Joel tells Randi that her character needs to express more pain and less anger, Marcel quotes Stanislavsky, telling the actresses that their bodies are "untuned instruments." He then tells Cece that she needs to overcome her modesty so that she can "disrobe at the appropriate moment."

Marcel walks out and Cece follows him. On the street she suggests that if he changes the script, he can save money. Throughout the screenplay Marcel's character talks about her character Elena's body. But the audience does not see her until the end of the film. Wouldn't it be more suspenseful and dramatic, she argues, if the audience *only* sees the artist's vision of Elena on canvas. Reluctantly, he agrees but tells her that emotional work can leave her more exposed than taking off her clothes.

Sitting on Joel's couch, Cece refuses a glass of wine because she says it has too many calories and she needs to drink her daily 10 to 12 glasses of water. When he says, "That's a lot of pissing," she tells him she knows every public restroom in the city. Joel praises the way she handled Marcel and talks about their romantic past. She tells him that he was her savior in high school — her "older" man. He tells her she is new and improved now. Cece isn't so sure. Joel tells her he sees the same person in a different package — still loving and sexy. She tells him he was her first, she could never forget him. Embracing, he carries her into his bedroom. But when Joel tries to undress Cece, she insists: "The clothes stay on!" He tells her he has seen her body before. She replies, "Not *this* body," adding, "Your clothes have to come off, though." He complies, saying "This is some freaky feminist shit." Cece keeps her "Without Struggle there is no Progress" sweatshirt and polka-dot pants on, as she turns off the light.

The cast of the film rehearses as Franz von Suppe's "Beautiful Galathea: Overture" plays. We can't hear their voices but observe the complex dance of egos: Joel works with Cece and Randi as Marcel glares, rants, and rages, while Winsome looks sad and meditates.

Cece is happily watching a 16mm home movie. On the portable screen, we see her father, dressed in a dashiki, cuddling Cece at her third birthday party. The phone rings: it is Winsome reporting that Randi has quit the film. Cece replies that they only have five days before shooting begins. Winsome explains that her own character has been written out of the script and that Marcel thinks that *she* should play Elena, Cece's role. That would mean that Cece would take Randi's old part as Lucretia... which would mean she would have to be nude. Cece objects strongly. Winsome explains that Marcel wants her to take the more emotional role of Elena. Cece points out that Winsome has worked as an artist's model and should take the role that requires nudity. Winsome replies that being unclothed in an art studio is like being in a cocoon but being naked on film is different. The women agree to meet up for dinner at Cece's to discuss. On screen, toddler Cece and Lydia wave.

Cece sits before her mirror rehearsing Lucretia's emotional breakdown scene. But even when she slaps her own face, she can't manage a tear. Defeated, she picks up a small framed black and white photo of a woman on her makeup table.

In a flashback, Cece's grandmother is sitting on an elegant sofa beneath a poster of Josephine Baker. Lydia, in a turquoise pantsuit, lounges by the fireplace. Cece's grandmother is worried because the young girl has nightmares, doesn't play with other children, and hardly ever laughs. Lydia tells her that Cece is just spoiled — all kids have nightmares. Lydia says that her mother never approved of her and won't even go see one of her movies. The two argue about whether "Negro" actresses were exploited back in the day when they "danced and sang, played beautiful music and wore lovely clothes." When Lydia makes fun of her mother's "Negro mentality," Cece's grandmother replies that her "Negro mentality" knows something about morals. Lydia tells her mother that she is going to take her daughter to live with her. Young Cece, wearing a long "dress-up" gown, too-big heels, pearls, and drop earrings, walks into the room, and then rushes away.

Back at her mirror Cece puts eye drops in and tries again. A song plays in the background: "There were no mirrors in my Nana's house."

Cece is working out on an exercise machine in her apartment. The phone rings and Winsome tells her that after meditating she feels that Cece should play Elena and she'll take the role of Lucretia. Cece is relieved. When Winsome asks if it is true that the camera adds ten pounds, Cece tells her to take that up in her group therapy session.

Cece and Winsome are in costume and posing for Diana in her studio. When it's time to get dressed, Winsome just takes off the costume and puts on her street clothes. Cece, however, scurries off to change in private. Winsome admires Diana's necklace, an amulet of a nymph that Diana says protects her from negative influences of life. It represents "the goddess, Nature, woman power." Winsome says she might need one herself. Diana suggests that Cece get one too. Cece replies "It's gonna take a lot more than a naked woman on a rope to make me feel safe." But she adds that if it were made of chocolate — in case of emergency — *that* would be great.

The three women walk down the street, heading to lunch. They discuss Diana's photography and how she is trying to help women reclaim their bodies and their sexuality. A man standing in the sunroof of a passing car catcalls them and when they ignore him, yells that they are bitches. When he singles out Cece, she pretends to be a heroin addict desperate for a fix and tells him she has no sores, not now — how about a quicky? He drives off. Winsome, rattled, says she can't eat now and walks away.

In the restaurant, Diana and Cece talk about the way that media images of women impact society. Rae, the restaurant owner (played by filmmaker Bridgett M. Davis) stops by their table and tells Diana that she'd like to display her photos. Cece asks Diana if she is saying that if a guy sees a sexy actress in a film, he has the right to harass women on the street? Diana replies that assholes like that are products of a society that exploits women — it's not totally his fault. Cece asks, whose fault is it? Hers for walking down the street? And she tells Diana that she will be keeping her clothes on in Joel's film. They argue about whether there is a difference between artistic nudity and exploitation. When Cece gets increasingly upset, Diana tells her that she is just trying to "help a sister spirit come to a better understanding of herself." Cece tells her she's not looking for a "sister spirit" and starts to walk out. But she returns to the table: "I lied. I really could use a sister spirit right about now." Diana invites Cece to join her at a comedy club that evening.

At the club, Diana asks if Cece always goes into attack mode when a friend says something she doesn't like. Cece replies she doesn't have a lot of experience with friends. She explains that it took ten years and many crazy diets to lose the weight. Diana offers to photograph her. When Cece demurs, Diana hands her the key to her studio so she can spend some time there alone.

Picking up a copy of the *Voice* at a newsstand, Cece stops and pages through *Pictorial*, a magazine that proclaims itself as "an erotic celebration of sensuous black women." Disgusted, she tosses it down and walks on. A street artist is selling a lovely painting of a nude black woman that catches Cece's eye. Passing a department store window she notices stark white naked torsos of women with garish jack-o'-lantern heads.

In his apartment, Joel and Cece discuss the film over takeout Chinese food. They debate whether the character of the artist in the movie is using his models or is genuinely inspired by them. Cece says that she believes that "All men demand something from women." "Now that's a hell of an indictment," he replies, and asks if she feels that way about him. "You have your motives," Cece answers. She says that Joel wants her to be good in his movie, which will help his career. Yours too, he responds. Cece says that proves her point, everyone is after something. Joel tells her not to equate him with an asshole in the street. She asks his forgiveness, and they kiss. Joel strips and Cece lets him unbutton her blouse before insisting he turn off the light.

Later, lying together, Joel asks why Cece never told him about this before. Has she told anyone else? Her mom? When he suggests she needs to tell Lydia, Cece gets up and says they are going to be late.

In rehearsal, Joel and Marcel argue about the recasting of the roles. Diana is there, taking photos as Winsome and Cece run lines. Joel praises Cece but Marcel laces into her, criticizing her performance and insisting that she shed real tears. As their argument escalates, Winsome starts crying. Cece tells Marcel that he can't stop her from becoming an actress. He offers her advice: "Go back to your mama's video store. At least that would be honest work." Cece says she can't go back; her mother is waiting for her to fail. "This is all I have," she tells him. She is visibly shaken. Joel urges her to run her lines again. Crying, Cece does. Marcel tells her that now she is making her grandmother proud. Diana walks Cece out of the production office.

Diana takes Cece to the place that she goes to unwind, a Turkish bath. As they sign up for a sauna and massage, Cece asks for a bathing suit, even though the manager insists she doesn't need one. Both women take robes, towels, soaps, and plastic safety razors. Cece asks what the razor is for? Diana replies, "In case I need to commit suicide." In the sauna, Diana undresses and stretches out on the bench as Cece clutches her robe around her. When Cece recalls being afraid to take swimming lessons because she never wanted to be naked in the locker room, Diana tells her to take off her bathing suit. Cece explains that she still feels ugly and dirty. Diana tells her it is time to stop feeling ashamed and puts her nymph amulet necklace around Cece's neck. Cece gradually removes her bathing suit.

Joel and Cece are in the bedroom. Unbuttoning her blouse, he reaches to turn off the light. She stops him. Clearly nervous, Cece allows him to take off her clothes and they make love.

Shooting on the set of *Body of Art*, scene 2, take 2: Marcel and Winsome are performing. Cece arrives late and asks why Winsome is playing *her* role. Joel tells her that he had to make the change because

Winsome couldn't handle the nude scenes. He tells the angry Cece that Winsome freaked out; he was on the phone with her therapist for an hour, to no avail. He says that after the other night he thought Cece would be comfortable doing the nude scene. She asks if Joel was planning this all along. He replies, "No!"— he had to make a snap decision. She says it seems convenient that he made that decision after she slept with him. Marcel jumps up, and asks "What's this? First Randi and now Cicely?"— saying that Joel was the reason that Randi quit the film. Joel explains that he dated Randi long ago and that she was not comfortable working with an ex. Distraught, Cece walks off the set, pulling a camera to the floor as she goes. Marcel fires Joel.

Cece, in a red coat and wigless, enters Lydia's video store. Her mother greets her warmly and asks how the film is going. Cece, looking drawn and distraught, replies by asking her mother why she ever took her away from her grandmother's home. Lydia says that obviously there must be trouble on the set— just as she warned her there would be. She thinks her daughter is just there to pick a fight and says she doesn't have time for that. Cece says, "I was safe there." Lydia says that she doesn't know *what* her daughter's problem is. "My problem," she replies, "is that you were hardly ever home, and I needed you." Lydia defends herself: she was trying to make a living to support them. Cece says that when she started gaining weight as a child, she thought Lydia would finally notice her. Her mother tells her that she always loved her. "But not enough to protect me," Cece replies. "From what?" Lydia asks. "From Ronnie," Cece answers, weeping. "Don't tell me you didn't know!" Lydia is baffled, confused. "Sweet Ronnie? He was good to me, good to us!"

"Really?" Cece asks, crying harder and harder. "While you were out becoming a movie star, sweet Ronnie..." She turns away and takes a VHS of *It's Your Thing* off the shelf. "During this one it was just a little feel, you know, just my breasts." Cece tells Lydia that by the time that her mother made *Gimme Some Skin*, her third hit movie, Ronnie was making her touch him. Cece is crying hard now, and Lydia is shocked and overwhelmed. "And by the time you really hit it big with *Cool Mama*, we had the routine down flat, and we were doing all those things at once." Cece flings the tape to the ground and sinks to her knees. Her mother, weeping, kneels beside her and tells her, "I didn't know, I didn't know. Cece, mama didn't know." Holding her daughter in her arms, Lydia screams, "You motherfucker!"

Cece, wearing her hair in a short afro, walks through Diana's studio at night, looking at the powerful photographs of women. She is wearing Diana's nymph amulet. Peering through the camera lens, she presses the remote shutter and starts taking photos of herself. She removes her blouse, then her bra, skirt, and panties. She sits naked, in her boots and takes self portraits.

In a voiceover, Cece says *"Dear Lydia, a lot of things are hard to say, and I've been afraid of a lot of things for a long time, but I don't want to be afraid anymore. I guess I never really felt good enough. I don't know, smart enough, pretty enough, even nice enough. And although I still don't feel like I am all of those things, at least not all the time, that's for sure, you're right. I'm still your daughter and if you still love me then all that may not matter so much anyway, right?"* Her posing becomes more empowered and open as she continues to shoot. *"Well, I wanted to send you these because it was really hard for me, taking them, but a friend of mine helped me realize I didn't have to be ashamed of myself any more for anything. Because I never did anything wrong. And I guess I wanted to be able to tell you that... or show you that. Anyway, these are for you. And I love you too, Lydia. Forever, Cece."* Smiling, Cece drops the shutter remote.

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## Bridgett M. Davis (Writer, Producer, and Director)

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Bridgett M. Davis is a memoirist, novelist, teacher, filmmaker, and curator.

Davis is the author of the memoir, *The World According to Fannie Davis: My Mother's Life In The Detroit Numbers*, a New York Times Editors' Choice, a 2020 Michigan Notable Book, and named a Best Book of 2019 by *Kirkus Reviews*, *BuzzFeed*, *NBC News* and *Parade Magazine*. She recently wrote a screenplay for the film adaptation of the book, which will be produced

by Plan B Entertainment and released by Searchlight Pictures.

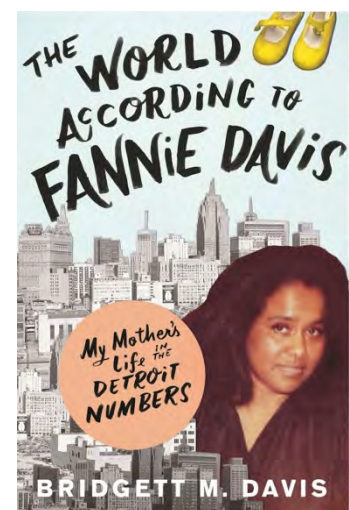
She is currently writing a new memoir, *Love, Rita*, to be published by Harper Books in Spring 2025.

Davis is writer/director/producer of the critically acclaimed, award-winning feature film *Naked Acts*. Touted by *Variety* as “fresh, funny and original,” the film screened at 25 international festivals in the US, Europe, South America, and Africa and won key awards before having its theatrical, DVD and Netflix release. In 2014, Indiana University's Black Film Center honored Davis on the 20th anniversary of the film's production. The film and its elements are housed in the permanent collection of the University's distinguished Black Film Archive. *Naked Acts* is included in the seminal anthology, “The 50 Most Influential Black Films” BFC/A honored Davis again in 2023, with a special campus screening as part of the 25th anniversary of the film's theatrical release.

She is also author of two novels, *Into the Go-Slow*, named a Best Book of 2014 by *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *BookRiot*, *Bustle*, and *The Root* among others, and *Shifting Through Neutral*, her debut novel, which was shortlisted for the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award; the novel was both a *Quarterly Black Review* bestseller and an “Original Voices” selection by Border's Books. Davis was selected as 2005 New Author of the Year by Go on Girl! Book Club — the largest national reading group for African American women.

Davis is Professor Emerita in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions at Baruch College and the CUNY Graduate Center's Biography and Memoir Program, where she has taught creative, narrative, memoir, and film writing.

Davis' memoir *The World According to Fannie Davis* was selected as Baruch College's First-Year Text for 2020, and again in 2021 – the first time the College selected a faculty member's book, and the first time the same book was selected for two consecutive years.



For over 15 years, Davis was a mentor in the City University of New York's Faculty Fellowship Publications Program, for which she conducted writing workshops with junior faculty of color, LGBTQ+ and women seeking to develop and publish creative and scholarly work. Two members of her cohort have gone on to win Pulitzer Prizes for poetry, and another has had her novel short-listed for the Booker Prize.

For several years, Davis was also the director of Baruch College's Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence Program, a unique literary salon that brings distinguished writers to campus. She invited, among others, poet Marilyn Nelson, journalist Beth Macy, novelist Mary Gaitskill, and playwright Branden Jacobs Jenkins.

She is a recipient of the New York Association of Black Journalists' Excellence in Education Award.

As an essayist, Davis' work has most recently appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Millions*, *Real Simple*, *Los Angeles Times*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and *Salon*. During her career as a journalist, Davis wrote news and feature articles for a host of publications, including *New York Newsday*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *London Voice*.

Her editorial, "From Ferguson to Detroit" won First Place for Outstanding Labor Journalism in Metro New York Labor Communications Council's 2014 Communications Awards Contest. A major advocate for promoting and nurturing literary talent by people of color, Davis has created and facilitated key reading series over the years, most recently as co-founder and curator for Words@Weeksville, a monthly series held at Weeksville Heritage Center in Central Brooklyn.

Davis earned a B.A. in English from Spelman College and a MS from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She lives in Brooklyn with her family. Visit her website at <https://bridgettdavis.com/>



Among the influences that helped shape her film, Davis counts co-star Renee Cox and Kathleen Collins's feature film *Losing Ground*, released by Milestone in 2015. Deeply inspired by Collins, Davis notes in [her February 2015 review](#):

"As an emerging filmmaker in the '90's, I felt I'd found a kindred spirit after chancing upon an interview with Kathleen Collins in *Black Film Review*. She was so erudite, so passionate, so inspiring about the life of a woman artist. I used her quote as the opening for my short

film, *Creative Detours*.

*'If there is any way in which women tend to be self-destructive, it's in the area of creativity, where they actually feel their own power and can't either acknowledge it or go to the end of it... They get scared...they detour out of respect for their own creativity.'*



Later, I felt empowered to portray a film-within-a-film for my feature, *Naked Acts*, because I knew that *Losing Ground* included a film-within-a-film. I felt empowered to tell the story of a community of black artists and actors because I knew another black woman filmmaker had done just that. And I felt empowered to explore a black woman's inner life and sexuality on the screen because I knew Collins had already ventured to do so.

The parallels continued: I too was a CUNY professor taking the means of production into my own hands, spurred by the belief that I could contribute to my generation's black-film movement. Learning that Collins had been one of the first African American women to write and direct a feature film, I thought of her as my guardian angel — and that spurred me to become one of the first African American women to write, direct and self-distribute a film. I was deeply inspired by *Losing Ground*."

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### Jake-ann Jones (*Cicely*)

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Jake-ann Jones is an award-winning writer, director, performer, and producer; her career has brought her into collaboration with some of today's most inspired, provocative, and notable artists in the disciplines of film, theatre, and dance.

Jones began her career as an actress and performance artist on stage, working with writers, composers, and directors including Fred Holland, Butch Morris, Craig Harris, Laurie Carlos, Robbie McCauley, Greg Tate, Adrienne Kennedy, Shay Youngblood, Diana Amsterdam, Jonathan Rosenberg, and Judith Jackson, at venues including the New York Shakespeare Festival, Ohio Theatre, Soho Rep, Aaron Davis Hall, Dixon Place, Company One, and Penumbra Theatre.

She appeared in films including *Norma's Lament*, *Smile*, *Malcolm X*, and performed the lead role in Bridgett M. Davis's award-winning independent feature film *Naked Acts*. She also wrote and performed "Bed Opus 1 & 2" with choreographer Cynthia Oliver at Aaron Davis Hall and Tribeca Performing Arts Center and directed Keith Antar Mason's "Kassandra's Tale" at the Public Theater during the Mumia 911 festival.

Prior to writing and producing for film and television, Jones garnered acclaim for her work in the theatre as a playwright (including "portrait of the artist as a Soul Man Dead" (Penumbra Theater, St. Paul), "U(nder) F(rank) O(bservation)" (New York Theater Workshop), "Magic Kingdom" (New Georges/Hourglass Theater Company), "Black Bitches Brew" (Company One, Aaron Davis Hall), her play, "Death of a HJo: a Fairy, Scarey, Whorey Tale" has was published by Theater Communications Group (TCG) in their anthology, *Plays from the Boom Box Galaxy*. she co-wrote the Urban World/HBO Film Festival's grand prize-winning screenplay "Spook City" with Gabriel Tolliver.



Jones recently completed the feature-length screenplay “Cudhial” for the Los Angeles-based production company Sunhaus Films, slated to go into production. She was also the co-writer and co-producer of the Gabriel Tolliver series *Mondo Black* produced by Blackpublic Media and spent five years as a producer/writer on an internationally televised television talk-show with a Tampa, Florida-based media entity.

Her poetic essay “Rainbow(Eyes)” is featured in British photographer Gerald Jenkins’ photonovel *It’s After the End of the World*. She is author of Civil Rights activist, journalist, and press secretary Florence L. Tate’s biographical memoir, *Sometimes Farmgirls Become Revolutionaries: Notes on Black Power, Politics, Depression, and the FBI*, released by Black Classic Press in 2021.

Jones received an MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University and a BFA in Theatre from CCNY. She has taught at the City University of New York, the College of New Rochelle, the Writer’s Voice at the YMCA, and Brown University. She currently writes and produces video and community programs for the *Weekly Challenger* newspaper in St. Petersburg, Florida. In 2022 she was awarded artist laureate for Creative Pinellas.

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## Ron Cephas Jones (Joel)

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**Ron Cephas Jones** (born January 8, 1957) is an American actor best known for his role as William in the drama series *This Is Us* (2016–2022), which earned him four consecutive Primetime Emmy Award nominations, and two Emmys for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Drama Series in 2018 and 2020.

Jones has appeared in the television series. *Mr. Robot* (2015–2016), *The Get Down* (2016–2017), *Luke Cage* (2016–2018), and *Truth Be Told* (2019–2023). He also appeared films, including *Naked Acts* (1998), *He Got Game* (1998), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), *Half Nelson* (2006), *Across the Universe* (2007), *Glass Chin* (2014), *The Holiday Calendar* (2018), *Dog Days* (2018), and *Dolemite Is My Name* (2019).

Born on January 8, 1957, in Paterson, New Jersey, Jones attended John F. Kennedy High School and graduated from Ramapo College. While at Ramapo, Jones originally intended to study jazz under director Arnold Jones (no relation) but changed majors to theater after getting the lead in a production of “Cinderella Ever After” his sophomore year. After graduating in 1978, Jones moved to Los Angeles where he drove a bus for four years. During that time, he stated that he “fell in love, had a child, got separated.” He then “traveled around,” living in San Francisco, Arizona, and New Orleans before returning to New York City in 1985.



Jones began spending time at the Nuyorican Poets Café and performed in a play based on the Billie Holiday song “Don’t Explain.” His performance caught the attention of a casting director, which led to Jones being offered the lead role in the Tazewell Thompson production of Cheryl West’s play “Holiday Heart” in 1994. Jones has performed in theatrical productions with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago; appeared as the title character in “Richard III” with The Public Theater in New York, and has acted in other Off-Broadway productions. In 2014 Jones starred in “Prometheus Bound” through the CalArts Center for New Performance. In 2022, he was nominated for a Tony Award for his performance in “Clyde’s” — in a role that playwright Lynn Nottage wrote for him.

From 2016–2022, Jones starred on the NBC series *This Is Us* as William Hill, the biological father of Randall Pearson (Sterling K. Brown). In 2021–2022 he appeared as Congressman Leon Killbride on *Law & Order: Organized Crime*. Currently, Jones appears in the series *Looking for Alaska*, as well as in the Apple TV+ crime drama series *Truth Be Told*, opposite Octavia Spencer.

In May 2020 Jones received a double-lung transplant after a battle with emphysema. He and British-born jazz singer Kim Lesley have a daughter, American stage and screen actress Jasmine Cephas Jones. Jones is on the faculty of School of Theater at the California Institute of the Arts.

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## Renee Cox (*Diana*)

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Renee Cox is one of the most controversial African American artists working today using her own body, both nude and clothed to celebrate black womanhood and criticize a society she often views as racist and sexist.

She was born on October 16, 1960, in Colgate, Jamaica, into an upper middle-class family, who later settled in Scarsdale, New York. Cox’s first ambition was to become a filmmaker. “I was always interested in the visual” she said in one interview, “But I had a baby boomer reaction and was into the immediate gratification of photography as opposed to film, which is a more laborious project.”

From the very beginning, her work showed a deep concern for social issues and employed disturbing religious imagery. In “It Shall be Named” (1994), a black man’s distorted body made up of eleven separate photographs hangs from a cross, as much resembling a lynched man as the crucified Christ.

In her first one-woman show at a New York gallery in 1998, Cox made herself the center of attention. Dressed in the colorful garb of a black superhero named Raje, Cox appeared in a series of large, color photographs. In one picture she towered over a cab in Times Square. In another, she broke steel chains before an erupting volcano. In the most pointed picture, entitled “The Liberation of UB and Lady J,” Cox’s Raje rescued the black stereotyped advertising figures of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima from their products, labels. The photograph was featured on the cover of the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

“These slick, color-laden images, their large format and Cox’s own powerfully beautiful figure heighten the visual impact of the work, making Cox’s politics clear and engaging,” wrote one critic.

But her next photographic series would be less engaging for some people and create a firestorm of controversy. In the series :Flipping the Script,” Cox took a number of European religious masterpieces, including Michelangelo’s “David” and “Pieta,” and reinterpreted them with contemporary black figures. “Christianity is big in the African American community, but there are no representations of us,” she said. “I took it upon myself to include people of color in these classic scenarios.”

The photograph that created the most controversy when it was shown in a black photography exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City in 2001 was “Yo Mama’s Last Supper.” It was a remake of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper” with a nude Cox sitting in for Jesus Christ, surrounded by all black disciples, except for Judas who was white. Many Roman Catholics were outraged at the photograph and New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called for the forming of a commission to set “decency standards” to keep such works from being shown in any museum in New York City that received public funds.

Cox responded by stating “I have a right to reinterpret the last supper as Leonardo da Vinci created the “Last Supper” with people who look like him. The hoopla and the fury are because I’m a black female. It’s about me having nothing to hide.”



Cox continues to push the envelope with her work by using new technologies that the digital medium of photography has to offer. By working from her archives and shooting new subjects, Cox seeks to push the limits of her older work and create new consciousnesses of the body. Cox’s new work aims to “unleash the potential of the ordinary and bring it into a new realm of possibilities.” “It’s about time that we re-imagine our own constitutions.” states Cox.

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## Sandye Wilson (Winsome)

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As a filmmaker, Sandye's first short film, **SO MANY THINGS TO CONSIDER**, premiered at the New York Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival. Her second short film, *notsoprivate*, a semi documentary featuring the artist, Carrie Mae Weems, explores sex, love and desire through commentary by African-American women.

Wilson's acting career took her from a childhood on the lower east side of New York to the Cannes film festival where she appeared as a featured actor in the film, **Sidewalk Stories**. She has appeared in **Law & Order, Naked Acts** and a host of other performance venues.

Wilson, raised on Manhattan's Lower East Side, studied at Bennington College in Vermont and at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, England. She was a member of the 1980s New York collective, Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater. Presently, Sandye continues to write and is currently co-creator with her creative partner of **Pop Pairings**, a wine show that inspires and highlights their love and passion for wine.



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## Cecilia Smith, Original Music

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[\(From her website\)](#) Cecilia Smith was eight when she began taking piano lessons in Cleveland first with Margaret Heller and later with Earl Todd, who told her, “You are good enough to make music your profession.” When she was twelve, Cecilia studied with Ronald Papalio, adding drums and percussion to her music exploration, and at fourteen moved on to mallet percussion. In her teens she expanded her studies to include composition, working with David Kechley, a doctoral student at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Cecilia attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, where in addition to studying arranging, composition, and film scoring, she studied vibes with Ed Saindon and Mike Hatfield and improvisation and composition with Andy Jaffee and other noted faculty. Following graduation, she continued studying with members of Berklee's



faculty. Cecilia studied vibes with Gary Burton and improvisation with Charlie Banocas. In 1989 she joined them and taught at Berklee for four years before moving to New York City. Cecilia continued to study after moving to Brooklyn. She studied composing and arranging with Cecil Bridgewater and improvisation with Billy Pierce.

Over the past 30 years, Cecilia has built a multifaceted career in music as a performer in concert halls, nightclubs, and festivals throughout North and South America, Europe, Asia, and West Africa, as a composer/arranger and teacher.



In 2000, she was asked to present a concert devoted to compositional work of Mary Lou Williams at Our Lady of Victory RCC where several senior church members had known Williams. In preparation for this gig, Cecilia studied Mary Lou Williams' archives. The breadth and complexity of Williams' work — comprising more than 350 compositions and including works for Big Band, Small Ensemble and Chorus — was mind-blowing. This research led her to a multiple year Artist-in Residence at New England Conservatory of Music's Jazz Studies Department where she was able to further study, lecture and perform MLW's work. Mary Lou Williams became Cecilia's passion and evolved into The Mary Lou Williams' Resurgence Project (MLWRP) to expose audiences to her compositional work. In 2005 the MLWRP presented the Sacred and Secular Music of Mary Lou Williams, a concert that included a big band, choir and vocalist, at The Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

Subsequently this concert was presented, incorporating local musicians into the big band and using local choirs, at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA (2006); the Discover Jazz Festival in Burlington, VT (2007) and at Montgomery Community College in Troy, NC (2010). The National Endowment of the Arts awarded the MLWRP an American Masterpiece Award for this performance.

Cecilia has also appeared or recorded with the following artists: Gary Bartz, Bennie Powell, Cassandra Wilson, Amina Claudine Myers, Cindy Blackman, Jennifer Holiday, Donald Byrd, Alan Dawson, Donald Harrison, Greg Osby, Cecil Bridgewater, Hubert Laws, Milt Hinton, Mulgrew Miller, Billy Pierce, Rufus Reid, Vanessa Rubin, and Mark Whitfield and has performed duets with Jay Hoggard, Randy Weston, and poet Tracie Morris.

Currently one of the leading vibraphonists of the four-mallet technique in the United States, Cecilia is the first woman to release material on vibraphone both nationally and internationally. She has recorded four CDs as a band leader: *The Takeoff* (1992); *CSQ Volume II* (1995) with guest artist Billy Pierce; *High Standards* (1996) with guest artists Billy Pierce and Javon Jackson; and 1998's *Leave No Stone Unturned* featuring Gary Bartz, Greg Osby, and Cecil Bridgewater. Cecilia's collaboration with Japanese vibest Yoshi Karori was recorded in Paris and released in Japan in 1997 as *Carmen R&B*. Her latest CD, *Dark Triumph* (2006) combined music with spoken work. Cecilia composed and arranged all the tracks for this project that included a large ensemble with a string section, and performances by the Boys' Choir of Harlem and vocalist Elon Robin Dixon. *Dark Triumph* can best be compared with

composer Aaron Copeland's *A Lincoln Portrait*, which uses orchestration and narration to highlight Lincoln's life. Cecilia's CD traces the life of an ordinary woman, African American, senior citizen Victoria L. Smith who devoted her life to service. Dan McClenaghan had this to say about *Dark Triumph* in "All About Jazz":

"This is a mix of storytelling and music of the highest order, Ellingtonian in scope and magnificence, unmistakably American, a tale that should be included in every school's curriculum. Cecilia Smith's *Dark Triumph* is a compellingly honest look at an underdog ... A story of uplifting beauty; a masterpiece."

Cecilia's exploration of music and spoken word, which began with her collaboration with poet Tracie Morris, has evolved into a multi-media project, *Decisive Moments*, currently in pre-production. Following her Tri-C performance of *Crossing Borders*, Cecilia began investigating ways to expand this cubistic perspective that mirrors our fast-paced, multi-tasking world. *Decisive Moments* reflects the fragmented way we receive information today from television, radio, the Internet, newspapers, texting, email, and the ever-evolving social media. It explores the issues of identity and the collective human experience through eight stories, written by prominent authors from different cultures, classes and experiences, and one "urban legend" amateur writer. Multiple screens (that will project both video and animation), live theater and live music will illustrate different aspects of each story. Cecilia will compose the music for *Decisive Moments* and is collaborating with filmmaker and video artist Kevin Frech, renowned for his work with The Blue Man Group.

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### Herman Lew, Director of Photography

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Born on February 2, 1955 in California, Herman Lew was an Associate Professor and the director of the B.F.A. Film & Video Program in the Department of Media and Communication Arts at The City College of New York. He received his B.A. from California State University of Los Angeles and his M.F.A. from New York University Graduate Film/TV Program.

Lew's extensive work as a cinematographer was seen nationally and internationally in productions such as the ITVS produced *M.O.T.V* (1993) directed by Ayoka Chenzira, and *Naked Acts* (1996). His documentary work includes *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice* (1993), and *A Litany for Survival:*

*Audre Lorde* (1995), *The Chinatown Files* (2001), *North Korea: Beyond the DMZ* (2003), and *Voices in the Street* (2005). The diversity of Lew's work as a director of photography ranges from commercials for Levi's, Glacier Water, Maybelline, and Ray Ban, to public service announcements for AIDS



awareness and reading literacy. He has also shot numerous experimental and dance projects, music videos, and museum installations. His work with the renowned artist William Wegman can be seen on his *Alphabet* and *Christmas* video projects. Among his last productions were *Hans Richter: Everything Turns, Everything Revolves* (2013), *What Happened to Danny*, and *Something to Say*, a documentary on Asian American performer activists.

Herman Lew was the recipient of a New York Foundation for The Arts Fellowship and received numerous grants from the New York State Council on The Arts for his own film and video projects. From 1989 until his death, Lew was the director of the nationally recognized Film & Video Production Workshop program at Third World Newsreel, the oldest progressive media organization in the country. Lew on September 20, 2014, in New Jersey.

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### Bridgett M. Davis on Cece's character

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In September 2014, filmmaker Bridgett M. Davis visited the Indiana University Cinema. Twenty years before her visit, Davis wrote, produced, directed, and self-distributed *Naked Acts*, a landmark of African American cinema. The film introduces the character of Cece, a black actress searching for more meaningful roles and exploring her identity.

WFIU's Leah Johnson spoke with Davis during her visit to the Indiana University Cinema. They discuss Davis' life and the influence it had on *Naked Acts*. The interview took place on September 29, 2014.

*Leah Johnson:* You went to Spelman [College], but you're originally from Detroit.

*Bridgett M. Davis:* Yes.

*Johnson:* I'm wondering if being in environments with so many people, especially women, of color shaped the characters in *Naked Acts* and your books following?

*Davis:* Absolutely. Absolutely. ... Even when Spike Lee came along, whom I just thought was extraordinary — I'm so grateful for his presence on the landscape for bringing us images of black folks that I recognized — but even he had a particular way he saw black women, and that was made evident in his work. I thought, "Well, we need to add to that conversation." My motivation was to really bring to the screen the kinds of black women I had known my whole life.

Yes, I grew up in Detroit. I grew up in a predominantly black city, and I knew a plethora of women, but you seldom see that breadth of, sort of, characterizations depicted on the big screen or even the small screen, and that was really disheartening. I thought of the women I knew at Spelman too. I thought, "You know...I want to create some black women that are like the ones I know."

*Johnson:* You wrote about your experience creating *Naked Acts* in the book *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, and in your chapter, you wrote, "What I loathe most about

so many black film characters is that they seem to fall out of the sky and onto the screen with no context for who they are or where they come from. I was determined to give Cece a rich backstory.” What was your approach in making the main character more dynamic than you had seen?

*Davis:* Yes. Well, I had a couple approaches. I think what became most helpful for me was to create this idea of who Cece was, like where did she come from. and I created this fictional, sort of question, that would help me get there. So, I said, “OK, Dorothy Dandridge had a daughter. It was Pam Grier. Who is her daughter?” That was really how I created Cece.

I imagine her the daughter of [or] the granddaughter of these two iconic film ancestresses who were in my mind representations of the different phases of images of black women in film. There was that student/scholar in me that was also very aware of that context when I was creating this film. Hopefully, [Cece] feels very real and individual, but she’s also totally representational at the same time. It was the 90’s so we didn’t know what an adult daughter of a Pam Grier would be.

It was great because it opened my creative channels to make her anything I thought she could be or needed to be but within the parameters of a particular context. We all come out of a context, and so that was my impetus.

*This piece is a part of an ongoing series of conversations with actors and filmmakers from the Indiana University Cinema. The series is called On Location.*

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## Articles on *Naked Acts*

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### ***New York Times***

Yannick Rice Lamb

April 2, 1995, Section A, Page 4

The unsettling facts of some students’ lives have helped inspire a feature-length film written and directed by BRIDGETT M. DAVIS, an assistant professor of English at Baruch College in Manhattan.

“Naked Acts” grew out of her regular request that students keep journals or write about their early experiences. At least a few women would recount memories of being sexually molested as children. In some cases, she said, they were recalling these incidents for the first time. “I thought that was astonishing,” said Professor Davis, who has helped some of these students get professional help.

The film centers on a character who was molested by her mother’s boyfriend, and it shows the transformation of her self-image when she reaches adulthood.

“These are women’s issues, but there’s so much for men to learn, too,” Professor Davis said.



Financed largely by a San Francisco lawyer who heard about the project, “Naked Acts” was made for less than \$1 million. As spring approached, Professor Davis was still considering distribution options.

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### **Daily News**

Thursday, October 9, 1998

Success Story in the ‘Naked’ City

Director gets her ‘Acts’ together & reel-izes film goal

By Denise Millner



Never mind that her story includes the maxed-out credit cards and the raiding of pocketbooks from Brooklyn to Detroit and the work-full-time-by-day/film-by-night thing.

Bridgett M. Davis’ guerrilla-style film-making story is not your average Spike Lee “She’s Gotta Have It” tale.

Davis had to work even harder to get her independent flick, “Naked Acts,” onto the big screen.

And in the end, it was Davis alone who got it to the Thalia Theater on the upper West Side — where it debuted two weeks ago — no thanks to what she calls “the gatekeepers” of modern cinema.

The majority of distributors, festival programmers and theater owners (mostly white men, she says) just didn’t get “Naked Acts.”

It has no stars. The acting is over-the-top. And the story intricately explores the issue of black women and body image.

The plot revolves around a young actress who, after being molested as a child, struggles to feel comfortable baring her body for a movie role.

No one in this film is “Waiting to Exhale” or running around pulling off each other’s wigs and talking jive or robbing banks with babies on their hips to get out of the ‘hood. It’s straight talk with straight feelings — real.

But time and time again, Davis had doors closed in her face.

“I listened to that {rejection} for so long — and it was really bizarre to me, because I was hearing this constant lack of belief from the industry but getting all these wonderful responses from the audiences,” she says. “So finally, I just said, “You know what? I’m going to trust the audience.”

It's a good thing Davis did.

During one of the toughest weekends in the city to release a film — it debuted the night the New York Film Festival and 16 other movies opened — the 300-seat Thalia saw a stunning \$9,000 per-screen weekend average during its first six showings.

The films which runs until next Thursday, has continued to attract close to 200 viewers per night since then.

It's an awesome ending to an awesome New York story.

A journalist-turned-Baruch College professor, Davis was looking for a creative outlet when she decided to take a screenwriting class in 1991.

She was so turned on by film-making that she studied it for three years.

Davis raised the first \$30,000 from friends and family in her native Detroit and got the remainder of the \$350,000 it took to make "Naked Acts" from a fellow Spelman College alum, Henri Norris.

Davis finished the film in 1996 and sought a distributor for a year before deciding to distribute, market and promote the film herself.

"I didn't think distribution would be hard," Davis says, then pauses and giggles — "Well, that was a battle."

She started screening the film at colleges and universities, then hit eclectic spots to drum up interest in black art-house crowds — at Meshell Ndegeocello and Nina Simone concerts, museums, jazz concerts and cultural fairs, on the internet.

And the buzz just grew.

Now, "Naked Acts" is proving what Davis knew all along: There is an audience for a black art-house film.

"These are intelligent people who have the money and the interest, but they feed that interest through books because they don't feel there's anything out there for them," Davis says.

"You have that audience feeding that artistic urge, but not necessarily at the movies. They care and they want to support, but they've been ignored by Hollywood and by independent film.

"For me, that's why this is a movement," adds Davis, who is working on her next film, "Abby's Road," about a black alternative singer/songwriter.

"It's showing the industry that this audience exists and it's viable and films ought to be made to respect this audience. I hope it's inspiring to people and giving women some catharsis."

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*Black Women Becoming Whole: Bridgett M. Davis on Naked Acts*  
*Noelle Griffis and Michael T. Martin*

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Noelle Griffis and Michael T. Martin, "Black Women Becoming Whole: Bridgett M. Davis on *Naked Acts*," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2019): pp. 13–39

"I'm fascinated by how women become whole, how they become who they are. I think on a fundamental level, it begins for most of us with a quest to gain our mothers' approval, and by extension, their love. That need, that desire never goes away, and it's certainly more acute, I'm sure, in women who don't get the reassurance they need."<sup>1</sup> —Bridgett M. Davis, 2008

"What do black women want? And what does Hollywood want black women to be?" asked Hilton Als in his 1996 profile of Angela Bassett, the first actress since Diana Ross to appeal to both black women and the American film industry, according to Als. It seemed that there was still only room for one A-list black actress and Bassett's distinctive mix of talent, attractiveness, and sophistication earned her the coveted spot in the early to mid-1990s when she landed a string of powerful leading roles ranging from Tina Turner to Dr. Betty Shabazz. "She is an anomaly in an industry that for the past hundred years has been persistent in its construction of the black girl as Something Freaky or Something Else," wrote Als. At the time of Bassett's rise to fame, writer and first-time filmmaker Bridgett M. Davis (fig. 1) explored the frustrations experienced by generations of black actresses in her work *Naked Acts* (1998, United States).<sup>2</sup> Davis's film is equal parts a critical interrogation of the expectations placed on black women both on-screen and off, and an intimate examination of the matrilineal family.

*Naked Acts* follows twenty-something Cicely ("Cece," played by Jake-Ann Jones), the granddaughter of a once well-regarded theater actress and daughter of a former blaxploitation sensation, as she carves out her own identity as a woman and an actress. Not satisfied with the exotic yet assimilationist sensuality cultivated by the African American actresses of her grandmother's era (Als's "Something Else"), nor the in-your-face, hypersexualization that defined her mother's on-screen persona ("Something Freaky"),



Figure 1. Bridgett M. Davis author photo. Photo credit: Nina Subin.

Cece searches for an alternative but struggles to overcome physical insecurities and sexual inhibitions. Cece views her issues as interpersonal and familial, but Davis, by incorporating and exposing a lineage of black actress types, infers that Cece's body image problems are culturally and historically rooted. Cece knows from her mother and grandmother's experiences that Broadway and Hollywood demand greater submission, and far more concessions, than she is willing to give. She opts instead for independent art house cinema, taking a leading role in a film directed by her longtime friend and occasional lover, Joel (Ron C. Jones); but when Joel demands that she appear naked in a key scene, Cece feels violated.

Cece's refusal to undress on-screen is related to a past sexual trauma that continues to define her relationship with men, but it also refers to the ways that black bodies, especially female bodies, have been used throughout the history of Western art and popular entertainment as subservient figures and exoticized sexual objects. Cece wants control—over her body, her image, and her sexuality—but lacks adequate role models from her immediate family and community. Enter Diana, a female photographer who becomes Cece's friend and unofficial guru. Diana is played by real-life artist and photographer Renee Cox, whose seven-foot-tall nude self-portraits appear in the film. "It had to be Renee," said Davis. She met Cox at a New York art opening and told her about the character she imagined: a black female photographer who specialized in nude portraiture of black women. Before this serendipitous meeting with Cox, Davis did not think that a person like this actually existed. Diana/Cox reclaims the black female body from a long tradition of exploitation and marginalization; the sheer size of her photographs negate the possibility of subjugation, and her bold self-presentation empowers as it resists objectification. With Diana's guidance, Cece discovers the tools— both technological and psychological—to finally take control.

Like her protagonist, Davis also found a creative outlet in low-budget independent filmmaking. In 1994, Davis began fundraising for the screenplay she had written. By 1998, she had not only written, directed, and appeared in her first film, but had also maneuvered her way into a theatrical exhibition at New York's Thalia theater and generated enough publicity through an extensive guerilla-marketing campaign for a successful first run. Despite a strong opening and film festival run, Davis never found a distributor for *Naked Acts*, so she distributed it herself as well. Her one-woman show followed a path laid out by Jessie Maple, who wrote, directed, and produced her first feature, *Will*, in 1982, and anticipated Ava DuVernay's filmmaking practice and establishment of AFFRM (the African American Film Festival Releasing Movement).

Thematically, Davis's focus on family places her work in the tradition of black independent filmmakers associated with the "L.A. Rebellion" such as Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, and especially Julie Dash, and Alile Sharon Larkin, whose work focuses on mother-daughter relationships. Moreover, her representation of a woman grappling with sexual expression is an indirect response to Spike Lee's female protagonists, especially the sexually uninhibited Nola Darling in *She's Gotta Have It* (1986, United States). Davis recounts that in the midst of one of her diatribes against Lee's portrayal of black women from a male point of view, a friend challenged her to do it better. She thought, "I will!"

In person, Davis is remarkably open and willing to discuss her own family history, including past traumas, and the ways that struggle and grief, as well as healing and acceptance, inform her storytelling. She is also upfront about issues that are close to her, such as fatphobia and the media's persistently simplistic and stereotypical depictions of black women. In the two decades since Davis's successful foray into filmmaking, she has continued to confront issues of race, body image, and sexuality through stories of family, healing, and transformation in her novels *Shifting Through Neutral* (Amistad, 2004) and her most recently published work, *Into the Go-Slow* (The Feminist Press at CUNY,

2014). As a professor at Baruch College, CUNY, Davis teaches and mentors students of Creative Writing and Journalism. She also actively supports the literary talent of young people of color through her Brooklyn reading series Sundays@ and as the book editor for the black culture site Bold as Love Magazine. Davis is enjoying sharing her film with new audiences twenty years after its initial run but laments the fact that *Naked Acts* has lost none of its relevancy with age.

*Michael T. Martin:* You've been extraordinarily generous to deposit the film elements of *Naked Acts* with the Black Film Center/Archive. This conversation will serve as an introduction for researchers and students to study your film.

As you might expect, we're going to talk about *Naked Acts*, tread over some familiar territory, and hopefully discern something new. Let's begin with the title, *Naked Acts*.

Bridgett M. Davis: The title was one of the last things that came together for me as I was revising the screenplay and preparing to cast people and raise money to finance the film. I'll spare you some of the titles that I came up with. They were bad. Titles matter.

*MTM:* For example?

*BMD:* One of them was *Breast Strokes*. Finally, a colleague said to me, "Think of *Go Fish* [Rose Troche, 1994, United States]. You know that idea of a very active verb and a two-word framework." That got me thinking: It's active and has impact. I said, "What about *Act Naked*?" She loved it and said, "That's it. That's your title." I thought, "It's not all that I'm trying to say—she's not acting naked." So, then I thought: *Naked Acts*. As soon as I came up with it, I knew what I was trying to say because it's speaking on several levels of interpretation. And on a fundamental level, it was provocative, and enabled me—with Renee Cox's help—to come up with that iconic image that we used [fig. 2].<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2. Promotional image for *Naked Acts* (1998). Photo credit: Renee Cox.

*MTM*: What does *Naked Acts* mean?

*BMD*: It suggests revealing yourself and phases of a process in your life, as in the acts of a play. Different moments that get you to where you can reveal yourself and suggests elements of your personality that pretend to be honest and revealing when they aren't. The main character, Cece [Cicely], is going through all of that. Through much of the film, you see her attempting to reveal herself, but she's not ready. Her clothing, the wigs, all of those things are forms of performance. But I was also commenting on the acting profession. Actors must reveal themselves and not be pigeonholed. They must be able to feel that they have the safety to be their complete selves. However, this poses particular challenges for black actresses. I had to come up with a title that spoke to all of that.

*MTM*: You were working on a novel when you made this film. The topic suggests a historical moment when black female sexuality is being reconsidered and perhaps thought of differently. Talk about this larger context and history of black female sexuality.

*BMD*: When I began to think about this story, all of those issues resonated for me as a young black woman. I was personally dealing with what it meant to come into your sexual self, to have a healthy relationship with your body, and seeing it played out in various ways in culture. An example is Oprah [Winfrey], who, still new to the scene, was several years into her show [The Oprah Winfrey Show, 1986–2011] and evolving as an icon. Her revelations and honesty about her own personal issues of sexual abuse in her childhood and struggles with weight were groundbreaking. I thought how extraordinary that this black woman was being this open and that she had a platform to talk about these things. Oprah was showing us the universality of her story, but also the specificity of it as a black woman. It had never happened before. In the era of social media, it's hard today to fully appreciate this. But at the time, before YouTube and reality shows, it was startlingly new to express and share these stories.

I also understood the link between eating disorders and sexual abuse, or weight gain and sexual abuse. For many women, weight gain becomes a way to protect themselves from a world that has disappointed and exploited them. We were starting to talk about these issues, but not connecting them to black culture or to the lives of black women. And Oprah seemed to me to be an example of that.

And finally, I'm old enough to remember being in my first newspaper newsroom in Atlanta [*Atlanta Journal/Constitution*] when Vanessa Williams, our first black Miss America [1983], had served her reign beautifully. It was so exciting. It was like group pride, right!

*MTM*: And then the other news came out.

*BMD*: Yes, right at the end of her reign, nude photos that had been taken by some guy in her past were published in Penthouse. I was in the newsroom the day they came across the wire. What struck me about that experience was seeing how excited everyone, men, and women, were to see the photos. I was the one black person in the features department and the only one who didn't rush to see them. Someone ran to the store and bought a copy of Penthouse and took it into the women's bathroom. They said, "Look at it." I was stunned and hurt for her. I just couldn't believe the level of complicity in this exploitation amongst journalists.

*MTM*: Did you, too, feel personally violated?

*BMD*: I did. I remember one woman — I'm going to call her a silly features editor — who walked over to me and said, "We have to get this interview with Vanessa Williams. You get it." Because I'm the black woman in the room, I didn't want to be asking her embarrassing questions; but I was forced to do my job. I reached out to her publicist, Ramon Hervey, and he was great. You know what he said to me? "We are giving two interviews: *People* Magazine and the *New York Times* because they have been sympathetic to her [Williams]." Click. As a newspaper, we had not been interested in her before now. Why should they trust us? I was relieved but felt the imprint and it stayed with me. Many years later, that sense of fantasizing the black woman's body and exploiting it was still on my mind. So, that was among three or four issues that were swirling around in my head at the time when I was conceiving *Naked Acts*.

*MTM*: Okay, the subject in the film is personal and immediate. Why complicate the story by the mother-daughter dynamic?

*BMD*: I'm telling you about the cultural things that were going on and the issues black women were going through at the time because it's interconnected, but I wasn't making a documentary. I am a storyteller. It was just as important for me to create a story about a young woman's inner life and personal issues because for black women in society, it always has a cultural and racial overlay. You're trying to be you. You're trying to figure out how to come of age as a young woman, but then you also have to deal with how society is affecting that decision. They are never separate. And my goal was to engage with the personal and familial, and not ignore the cultural history and representation of black women. I felt clear and confident that I needed to find a way to marry these two because that's how we figure out who we are.

*MTM*: I hear that.

*BMD*: It also gave me an opportunity to look at key stages in a young woman's development in this country and, similarly, the key stages in black actresses' development to assess how we [they] have evolved and what's possible and what's not.

*MTM*: In the Susan Henderson interview, you said there's a distinction between fiction and screenwriting because with "fiction the work feels a lot more visceral and internal, and personal." Then you said, "Screenplays are all about structure."<sup>4</sup> What do you mean?

*BMD*: I mean that you are creating a paradigm for an art form that is completely different from the screenplay. It's a blueprint that's going to become something else. As such, that's my analogy; the blueprint for something you would build architecturally. It has to be structurally sound.

*MTM*: What about the content?

*BMD*: The content is shaped by the structure. You just don't pour any story into it. Given what you want to say, you determine the paradigm that story has to hang on to.

*MTM*: That's not the work of a writer, a novelist?

*BMD*: No. It's a different process. Having been a screenwriter, I wasn't afraid of plot the way a lot of creative writers are. They'll say, "I want to write a novel, but it's sprawling, and I don't understand where it's going." I don't write that way. I'm not one who writes, and writes, until eventually it becomes something. I'm always searching for the framework in which the story has to be told. Form meets function. So, it was good discipline having done the screenwriting.

*MTM*: Who was your audience?

*BMD:* Anyone who appreciated the personal journey story, who would be inclined to watch a film in an art house theater, who was comfortable with having their expectations shattered, and who would embrace images new to them on the big screen. The short answer is I wanted someone on a given evening who would not feel the need to make a decision about whether to see a black film.

*MTM:* Is that what you got?

*BMD:* I did, but not in the way I expected. I was naive. I thought, “Well, there’s an independent film movement happening right now in New York City. I’ll just become part of that. How will I become part of that? By providing what I feel is art that speaks to and is consistent with that movement. The key is to do my best work and create something that people haven’t seen before. Make it fresh. Make it funny. Make it relevant and interesting.” I felt that I’d done all these things only to have the gatekeepers of the indie film world say to me: “We don’t know who the audience is.”

*MTM:* Sundance?

*BMD:* Sundance is an aside. I’ll come back to that. It was the distributors, the film companies more suited to put out a film like this who one after the other said: “We don’t know who the audience is.”

*MTM:* Were there black distributors back then?

*BMD:* Not to my knowledge. I spent years on the festival circuit. I broke that rule, too. People said, “Don’t have your film on the festival circuit for too long because then that puts it in a category it shouldn’t be in.” But I was thrilled by the invitations and when I went to a festival and saw the incredibly supportive and enthusiastic reactions, I was reassured that there was an audience for the film. I made a decision to try one more time for a distributor. It didn’t matter how big or small the distributor, as long as they were willing to give it a life. Even if *Naked Acts* opened in four or five cities, I would take it and see what came next. Finally, I got an offer from a small company but was shocked by the rights they wanted in the contract and by the money they were going to put out and the limited distribution they promised. I turned to my husband and said, “I can do this.” He agreed and said, “No, we have to do this. If this is what they call [self] distribution, we’ll do it.”

It wasn’t something I initially planned to do, distribute my own film. When you have written the screenplay, found the money to produce, direct, and complete it, and take it out on the festival circuit, you don’t want to also be the exhibitor/distributor. But I had an obligation to get the film out into the world. I had a responsibility to every person who signed on to my dream and who helped me finish it. I learned a big lesson that I’m taking advantage of today: if the work has integrity, it finds a life on its own and I knew it would have a life.

*MTM:* Here’s what you said in 1998 in an Indiewire interview, “There are other viable ways to get your film before an audience than trying to get into Sundance and get a great offer. I want people to know that this isn’t only a last resort; it’s a viable option.”<sup>5</sup> Do you still feel that way?



*BMD*: I do. You have to be clear about your intent. You can take the Sundance route and maybe no one picks it up, or you can go to a distributor who holds on to the rights and dictates how the film is



released. You can have a very small release and then it's gone, and you don't have control over what to do next. I learned the hard way because I didn't know that going in. If you think of it [self-distributing] as a viable option, then it's empowering rather than a last resort. And that attitude is what helped me. We finally found one theater to show the film—an iconic theater in Manhattan by the way...

*MTM*: Thalia?

*BMD*: Yes, at the time it was owned by an Indian man who was showing Bollywood films. We basically pitched him, and he said, "All right. I'll let you show it this one week." I said, "Well, that's the week of the New York Film Festival, the biggest week in cinema in the city." He replied, "That's the week I have." I thought, "I'm going to be competing with the New York Film Festival, but who can be choosy here?" We took that week and used guerilla style marketing. We treated it like a movement and 600 people showed up the first night.

*MTM*: Is there a template for would-be filmmakers on the ABCs of self- distribution?

*BMD*: I'm not sure about ABCs, but I can tell you that I don't think every film can do this. Some films don't need the actual release at all. They would do better streaming or going straight to video. *Naked Acts* was

a film that had momentum behind it; a kind of movement that, if you came out physically to support it, you would be supporting something larger than the film itself—supporting independent cinema, black directors, et cetera. There isn't this sense that "Well, we're the filmmakers over here, and we're the poets over here, and we're the visual artists here." It's an amazing kind of connection, particularly in New York City, where black artists integrate and co-mingle. That's why I have a relationship with Renee.

*MTM*: You're suggesting that the film enables community and serves an organizing role?

*BMD*: Absolutely and that's what happened inadvertently. Once you start something, people join on. When you make it clear that you're moving in a certain direction, people become part of that movement, and that's what happened. When the theater owner saw the crowd, he extended it another week until we did four weeks.

*MTM*: You said guerilla...

*BMD*: Guerrilla-style marketing was key.

*MTM:* What are the basics?

*BMD:* Twenty years later it seems unbelievable, but an email campaign was not typical. We did incredible e-blasts. We did on-the-ground marketing— spray-painting sidewalks graffiti-style, plastering posters everywhere, and mailing postcards.

*MTM:* You took it to the people.

*BMD:* “We took it to the people.” We hired this guy, Cudjo, whose thing is hand-to-hand marketing. With your flyers and postcards, he would show up at every key event where black folks are going to be.

*MTM:* That’s an unusual mode of distribution.

*BMD:* We tried everything. We had to be creative.

Noelle Griffis: You’ve described *Naked Acts* as an “art film,” marketed towards art houses. Part of the conversation in the film is about the distinction between art and exploitation (or blaxploitation) films. What makes a film an “art film” and where is the line between exploitation and art?

*BDM:* In my mind I think of an art film when it doesn’t have simplistic storylines, isn’t easy to anticipate what’s going to happen, and doesn’t fall into a particular genre. It’s personal, story-based, and the ending is not necessarily a happy one. Those are the things that to me make it art house.

*NG:* Are the filmmakers in *Naked Acts* making an art film or are they just calling it that to justify the nude scenes to the actresses?

*BDM:* Marcel, the producer, believed he was making an art film. The director [Joel] was uncertain because he wanted it to be a film he could be proud of and that delivered what the producer asked for. The director’s career was also at stake, which complicated the purity of what he was doing.

*MTM:* And it was his first film, feeling compelled to defer to the producer.

*BMD:* I understood that because on set the joke behind my back was that people called me Marcel. You recall he had this line, “Time costs money.” I was playing that out. I was also the producer of *Naked Acts* but prefer to think that I was the better part of Marcel.

*MTM:* You were necessarily about management control.

*BMD:* Absolutely! With all the energy required, when that ship takes off from the shore, it’s expensive to stop or for it to run out of control. I was always conscious about that and that there could be a mutiny on the set. As a woman director I had to be in command and needed to establish that early.

*MTM:* You got tested?

*BMD:* Of course. Once you do it [establish authority] in a way that’s understood you don’t have to keep doing it. Think about it: in film production the technical crew—the sound guy, gaffer, everyone—are usually men.

*MTM:* You set an example?

*BMD*: I didn't go off on anyone, but I had to make it clear "I heard you and that's not happening. And I hope you heard me. I asked you to put it over there."

*MTM*: Julie [Dash] said that to me some years ago in a conversation.<sup>7</sup>

*BMD*: Yes. And the other piece was that they [the crew] didn't have anything to point to and say, "Oh, yes, I remember when she was doing this. I've seen her come along." Who was I? I came out of nowhere and was asking them: "Block out these weeks for me because this is happening."

*MTM*: Minimum wage and tacos for lunch.

*BMD*: The crew got paid an actual wage. Once I got into production, someone put in money to finish the last day on the set because I had run out of it. She said, "I'm going to send you \$5,000."

*MTM*: That was substantial.

*BMD*: I almost said, "Ha, ha" because so many people had promised things along the way that never happened. But I just said, "Okay, great. You never know." The check arrived and I was able to cash it. She became an executive producer and kept contributing money to the project. But when in production, you're never absolutely sure unless the money's sitting in the bank that you can finish the film. People don't want to work on a project that's not going to get out in the world. It doesn't help them. I understood this and created an aura that everything was fine even though it wasn't, that they were in safe hands with this first-time director, female director.

*MTM*: You bluffed your way through that.

*BMD*: You have to. I had to get them to be calm, professional, and competent, and not feel that they had to abandon ship because they didn't know if this project was going to be what I was promising. And I'll say, sadly, I had to contend with men who were filmmakers and said things to my crew and my cast about how "It's impossible for her to finish this. She can't do it." They, the cast and crew, would come back on set anxious.

*MTM*: A factual question: *Naked Acts* cost \$90,000 or \$350,000?

*BMD*: \$90,000 was the cost to get it in the can; \$350,000 for post-production.

*MTM*: In the Indiewire interview, describing the motives for making *Naked Acts*, you said, "I want to really zero in on how black women specifically grapple with this issue — body image," and you "had this hypothetical question: 'What if Pam Grier had a daughter who was not an adult and wanted to be an actress? What kind of actress would she be? What kind of person would she be?'"<sup>8</sup>

*BMD*: Do I feel differently? I don't.

*NG*: The film deals with sexuality through different generations of black female actresses. As Cece looks at her grandmother — the Dorothy Dandridge type — and her mother — the Foxy Brown type — she, and the film itself, seems to take a particularly critical view of blaxploitation and Lydia's roles in those films.

*BMD*: I don't see it that way. Lydia had a great point of view because in that scene with the three generations of women when her mother said, "They're just exploiting you, and back in the day we wore beautiful clothes, and we got to really move gracefully," Lydia replied, "And you still got exploited" [fig. 3]. Her point is "I'm upfront here," and that what she did was empowering

because she was able to be a forceful, assertive, sexual woman. So, Lydia viewed that to be valuable, given what she had seen of her mother's roles.

*MTM*: However gratuitous, nudity was in those films.

*BMD*: Exactly! She felt that was a kind of empowerment. And it is. I mean, there are people who love Pam Grier and what she represented. It's also true that those films were exploitative to a certain extent, but that was the process that we [black women] had to go through to get beyond a Dorothy Dandridge smoldering sexuality. Maybe it was about taking your clothes off so you could be sensual, sexy, and in control, and have agency but not blatantly? But can we get there without going through such phases?



Figure 3. Lydia and her mother disagree about the exploitation of black actresses. Screen grab by author.

*MTM*: That's an important question about the limits and possibilities for representation. If I understand you, you're arguing the case that those were the limitations on actors at that time. There were two choices: not to be on the screen or to be on the screen and hope you could tease something out of the mess that would give some dignity and presence to black female characters.

*BMD*: You're describing Hattie McDaniel's circumstance. I did a research paper when I was in college on McDaniel, having no idea that one day I'd be addressing these issues. She was extraordinary in code switching. That's what she was doing. That's what Viola Davis is doing decades later in *The Help* [dir. Tate Taylor, 2011, United States], code switching.

*MTM*: Are you saying the circumstances have not changed between then and now?

*BMD*: Yes, I'm afraid so. It's important to understand that when someone else is in control of your image, you are only going to have so much power over what that image is. That's reality. What can an actor do [when they're] dependent upon someone else to give them the

opportunity? That's the case with black actresses. My heart always goes out to them; even more when I became a director. I saw their woes. I don't hold actors to the same standard as I would someone else when the question comes up of "Why'd you take that role?" Now, for blatantly exploitative roles that's problematic. We might wince if we think about certain roles, but much of this is not as clear cut when we look back. People worked with what they had; black actresses had so few options and took roles so they could do the thing they wanted to do—act. Why diminish a passion and desire to be an actress because of a messed up racialized society? They have the desire to create and they have a right to do so. That's what makes us human. I believe that black actresses, for the most part, have worked with what they could. So, I wasn't happy to see Viola Davis in *The Help*, but I understood her. In interviews, I resented that people kept asking her why she took that role. That's not a question for her. That's a question for the director and producer.

The reality is that the actors have no real control. They are never going to be in full control of what gets depicted. But someone like a black director can give them the roles they need, characters that are worthy of their ability and humanity. I'm afraid that hasn't happened and explains why a line is drawn directly from Hattie McDaniel to Viola Davis. What's better is that she [Davis] could then land in the hands of a Shonda Rhimes, finding more complicated roles on the small screen.

*NG*: Imagine you're making *Naked Acts 2*, or another film exploring similar themes, are there different but related issues you would address?

*BMD*: I would want to address the same issues, but in a modern context.

*NG*: What would change in the contemporary moment besides style or fashion?

*BMD*: The challenges would be different. It would be about how you are depicted on Instagram, and those images of you on YouTube, and what pressures you feel in a certain body type that is now lauded? Oh, you have a nice big behind so should you be twerking to show it? The pressures are more intense, I think, for black women and not only for black actresses because everybody is out there revealing themselves visually. I think maybe if I made that film today, Cece wouldn't be an actress? She'd be a young woman dealing with social media and her image within that realm. And yes, the fashion would definitely change!

*MTM*: Diana is the spiritual center of the story. She's also the underbelly. Why did you cast Renee Cox for the role?

*BMD*: It had to be Renee. I met her at a film conference at NYU [New York University] and told her about the film script. I said, "I've created a character who is a black woman photographer who takes images ... nude images of black women, but I don't think that person exists." She replied, "That's what I do." The rest is history.

*MTM*: Did you know of her work before the encounter?





*BMD*: I didn't, but she thinks I did. She had a showing at a gallery in 1994, but I hadn't seen it. Initially, the deal was for me to use her art in the film, but then I had problems casting her part because I didn't like the actresses I saw. None were right for the part because who has been allowed, as a black actress, to hone their craft? And that's the problem: acting is your profession, but if

you don't get to act, you don't get to hone your craft.

*MTM*: You don't have that stage.

*BMD*: "You don't have that stage." It's not right that people judge you for not being more involved and developed. As the director, I wanted the best and everyone I saw didn't have ownership of their bodies in the way I needed the character to have. I realized, "Well, I know someone who is completely comfortable in that way because it's who she is. She gets it." And I went back to Renee and said, "I want to know if you'll be Diana in my film?" She said, "I've never acted," and I replied, "If you're willing, we'll make it work." You've met Renee and know that she's bold and willing to go there, but I was asking her to get on the screen and carry a part in a way she never had to.

*MTM*: You must have conveyed something for her to trust you?

*BMD*: I guess I did. I don't remember a hard sell either. Ask Renee because we didn't know each other that well. I don't recall her saying, "I need to see that screenplay first." It was synergy.

*NG*: The film within the film in *Naked Acts* fails in part because you have a male director who is exploiting his actresses on screen and off. Is it possible for a straight male director to deal with female sexuality without some degree of exploitation? Does it take a female director to explore female sexuality without objectifying actresses?

*BMD*: In many ways, I was playing out things on the set that were inside the film and part of the story. I had a point of view about a female director and was making a point about Spike Lee and his stumbling when it came to images of black women in his stories. I also became a director because all I was doing was bitching about Lee's female characters. I thought, "Well, is it his job? Maybe it's the job of a woman who better understands those stories." So, I realized, "I'm asking the wrong thing of him. He's telling his stories."

And Joel, the director in *Naked Acts*, I see him more complicated than he may come across in the film. My goal in writing his character was to say, "Here's someone who genuinely cares about Cece. They have a history. He loved her when she was big. He does care about her, but you can both care about someone and exploit them, especially if that person is not clear themselves about what they're doing and why."

*MTM*: He's on shaky ground himself.

*BMD*: Right! He cared about her, but he was vulnerable, too, and needed her to help him.

*MTM:* But Cece writes him off and walks away in that moment even though Joel wants to do the right thing, as he betrays her personally and professionally.

*BMD:* In that moment, Cece [needs] to do whatever it takes to be about her own issues in life. She [realizes] that it [is] for her to figure out what needs to happen next and that her decision can't be based on anyone else's needs or even efforts to help her. In the end, it's about her and her rejection of everyone who [has] helped her get to that point, but could no longer be there in the moment when she had to be about herself [fig. 4].



Figure 4. Cece leaves Joel and the film. Screen grab by author.

*MTM:* I hear that. You dedicate the film to Selena Diane. Who is she?

*BMD:* That's a tough question. Selena Diane was my sister and I dedicated it to her because I was thinking about her when I was making the film. She was murdered by her husband, a victim of domestic violence.

I felt that if she had lived, she would have been able to see the other side of things. I was thinking of the similarity between someone like my sister who couldn't figure out who she was, and the sexual piece was a huge part of it. Had my sister been able to, perhaps she wouldn't have had to make the choice she made in a partner and wouldn't have ended her life in the way it did. That was motivation for me to think how it can all go wrong and why we need to work hard to figure out how to make it go right.

*MTM:* Does the homage to her bring closure?

*BMD:* No, you never have closure. But it seems to me that it's a beautiful honor to have someone that I'm dedicating this work to who helped me. Her life, our relationship, helped me to see more clearly how complicated these issues are and to feel as though perhaps some young woman somewhere is going to see something in this film and not have that same fate. And that matters.

*MTM:* Thank you for that.

*BMD:* You're welcome. It's fine to ask. It's good for me to speak about it and not feel that there's some kind of shame beneath the conversation. So, I should be thanking you.

*NG:* I want to return to what we were talking about earlier about performance; performing as an actress and human being. In particular, the character of Randy and "the big sassy lady" cliché —

as the producer in the film calls her. She doesn't get a chance to come out of that, so is removed from the film. Narratively, this gives Cece the opportunity to step in, but it also points to what you mentioned earlier about the way actresses that haven't had a chance to move past such roles aren't prepared for more fully formed, less stereotypical roles. Would you talk about Randy's character and her trouble performing anything but "sassy" on screen?

*BMD:* Several things were happening there. I wanted to talk about how Randy's perceived and how a director or producer—someone in control of casting the actors—can simplify and categorize that performance. What I had hoped for was that people would see that she was a woman confident about her size and willing to exert her sexuality, or rather sensuality, because that doesn't often happen in popular culture. There is labeling and making jokes simplifying larger black women who, in my personal experience, are quite amazing and many of whom do not shy away from their physical size.

*MTM:* They work it to their advantage?

*BMD:* Yes. They're in control of their bodies: "This is part of what makes me who I am." That was the goal, to show that control and joy and pleasure by a woman in contrast to how she's being perceived. [That's] why [there's] the soundless scene, when they're all arguing and everyone's going nuts [fig. 5]. [It] was a way to say that everyone can express anger over how they're being treated. And it isn't a matter of sassiness; everybody's just arguing over their point of view. It's the way you see things.

*MTM:* By the way the scene with the waltz in the background was beautifully rendered.

*BMD:* Chopin.

*MTM:* Many filmmakers deploy music to punctuate or transition from one scene to another. You deploy it as narration. *BD:* I do.

*MTM:* That's a powerful way to explain a story. It's also economical. There are two scenes that you use music very effectively: the first by the lyrics in the song, "There were no mirrors in my nana's home, and the beauty I saw in her eyes," is expressive of this. And then later, during that playful love scene between Cece and Joel when she doesn't demand that he turn off the light: in the background lyrics of the score say, "Seems to me security is just a waste of time. What's here today can blow away tomorrow."



Figure 5. Marcel and Randy argue about Randy's performance as Joel mediates. Screen grab by author



*BMD:* I think this has a lot to do with my growing up in Detroit. I was a little girl and we lived around the corner from The Supremes on Buena Vista. Diana Ross had the corner home, the big one, and I would stand on the corner to see if I could see her. So much of the Motown sound was the backdrop for the Civil Rights Movement that made me understand on a visceral level that you can have a soundtrack for your life, and that the lyrics, and the words were all working together to amplify what we're all trying to talk about. I guess it really affected me because even in my fiction I have so many musical references. They anchor you in a time and place. They evoke memories. And that was how I looked at it when I made the film. The songs would have to be very particular to provide the narration for the points being made. It made sense to me.

*MTM:* It made sense to me as a viewer.

*BMD:* Good, because I don't think of music as background.

*MTM:* Or a means to move the audience from here to there to identify with the character?

*BMD:* Exactly, to manipulate.

*MTM:* What's with Cece's wigs [fig. 6]?



Figure 6. Cece with a wig. Screen grab by author.

*BMD:* Don't you love those wigs? The costume designer and the makeup artist were loving the different looks because Cece is beautiful. She looked fabulous in each one. The different looks and wigs were making the same point: this is someone moving from a life of trying to disappear to coming out and allowing herself to be exposed. Nothing happens dramatically or all at once. It's a progression, the progression of black actresses in this country. And I wanted you to see Cece's progression. We usually don't allow that to happen for black characters. They just jump on the screen as they are. We have no understanding of their history. They just change. It's like, "No."

*MTM:* Are these accessories—the clothes, wigs—metaphors for Cece's fears and repressions?

*BMD:* Yes. We got specific about which wig to use at certain points in her evolution. You wouldn't believe the conversations we had over the wigs. Yes, definitely, it mattered. It was about making it a metaphor for something happening internally in Cece. I'm about showing the interior life of a character; but film characters are what they do and what they say, so there's a contradiction. How am I going to show you Cece's interior life, her internal journey, unless I do a selective voice-over that comes at the right moment. And costumes, things visual, help do that work. If not, the story shouldn't be a film.

*MTM:* At the end, she takes the wig off [fig. 7].

*BMD:* Yes, she does. She couldn't have done that at the beginning. She couldn't have taken those photos at the beginning. She couldn't have said those things to her mother at the beginning. They're all interrelated.



Figure 7. Cece without a wig. Screen grab by author.

*MTM:* You have insights into the human condition, particularly of women, that speaks knowingly of how to heal, how to address and recover from trauma. What precipitates Cece's confrontation with her mother following Joel's betrayal? She longs for her mother as much as she strikes out for not protecting her from Ronnie, who abused her when a child. Th at moment she comes out of the closet seems a precondition for recovery, for healing. I'm stating a thesis rather than asking a question. Here's the question: are you saying that without disclosure there can be no reconciliation and recovery from traumas of the past?

*BMD:* I believe that. Just as denial is dangerous, secrecy is poisonous because that's the twin sister of shame, and Cece [needs] to get over the shame that [she's] been carrying around.

*MTM:* Through no fault of her own.

*BMD:* "Through no fault of her own." She needed for her mother to know. Some of what film is about is what you wish life could be. We're always aspiring toward an ideal world that will give

us something to hang onto. That sadly is so often the case with sexual abuse. Mothers are sometimes unable to believe it happens because then they have to accept their own culpability and break down the only life they've known. So, it's painful because when something happens to you, you want it to be acknowledged. The victim is so often afraid to tell people for fear of hurting them. My goal was to create a scenario in which Cece could finally say what happened to her and tell her mother. And that her mother could respond in the way we all want our mothers to: "I didn't do what I was supposed to do, and I'm sorry." Just that: "I'm sorry" [fig. 8].



Figure 8. Lydia apologizes to Cece. Screen grab by author.

*MTM:* Does Cece forgive her?

*BMD:* I think she does.

*MTM:* Why, from the beginning to the end of the film, does Cece call her Lydia? When my daughter is mad at me, she says, "Michael." And then I know I'm in trouble [Laughs].

*BMD:* I debated with Cece doing the voice-over and ending it with "Mom." That would make people feel good, but I've already pushed the reconciliation to the point that some would say isn't probable. I wanted the audience to feel she's better. That's it. She's better.

*MTM:* And someday reconcile with mom?

*BMD:* Right, but not totally trusting. After all, I'm sending this to you in the mail. I still need a safe space for myself.

*MTM:* You didn't cop out with the happy ending of mom and daughter reconciled in the final embrace, suggesting things would work out, when nine times out of ten it doesn't.

*BMD:* Exactly. The worst starts now.

*MTM:* Because the door's opened?

*BMD:* That's right. I felt that way with the weight too. That was the point I was making. People used to ask me back in the day, "Why didn't you show a before and after?" I said, "Because this is not a before and after." People set up that simple dichotomy and infer that all you need to do is lose the weight and then your life will be really great.

*MTM:* Bullshit.

*BMD:* Bullshit. I wanted to create a character who when you meet her has lost the weight and her problems start. That's the character I'm interested in.

*MTM:* We talked about that earlier, how at the core of the film it's really not about the weight because the weight is symptomatic of deeper trauma in the past.

*BMD:* Absolutely.

*MTM:* And yet in public spaces, weight matters.

*BMD:* But it didn't solve a thing. Once the weight's gone, the problems are naked. It revealed them.

*NG:* Filmmakers often don't want to explain the endings of their films, but I'm wondering if Lydia wasn't there, if something had happened to her, if she had left, if she had died, could Cece have healed?

*BMD:* Sometimes people heal faster when the mother's not there. Someone will say, "I'm only dealing with this now that my mother died because I didn't feel I had the ability to do so before. I was very concerned about her and what she thought, and I couldn't push on." It's unusual for someone [to be] brave enough to confront their mother head-on.

So, I think she would have definitely been able to heal. You realize how much you love someone when they're gone, the sense of "Oh my God, I love her. Now, I've got to work through whatever I was feeling so I can hold on to that love because that's all I have of her now."

*NG:* Do you want to see your novels come to the screen?

*BMD:* Yes. I would love to see my novels adapted for film. After publication of my first novel, *Shifting Through Neutral*, people said to me, "It sounds like a film title." I would love for that book to be adapted and for my new novel to be adapted.

*NG:* By someone else, or do you want to direct again?

*BMD:* I have some interest in writing the screenplay. In terms of making another film I have this to say: Film gets under your skin. It's just so raw, it's sexy, and there's a part of me that will never let go of that. It changed my life. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences I've had, including having two kids. *Naked Acts* was my first child. I worried, and cried, pleaded, and begged and did everything I didn't even know I was capable of.

*MTM:* It was a love affair.

*BMD:* Whatever its flaws—and I'm the first to admit that it has flaws, I was a first-time filmmaker—it means everything to me because of what I put into it, and what it represented and gave back to me. That's kind of a hard act to follow. And my life's changed. I can't envision what it would take to direct a film again.

*MTM:* Is the prospect terrifying?

*BMD:* I think I just haven't allowed myself to consider how it would happen. I was single with no children when I made *Naked Acts* and gave it everything I had. I don't have that space now in the same way. If someone approached me and said, "Here's an opportunity, what do you think?" then I'd have to reexamine everything I just said to you.

*MTM:* Because the ideas are there, the energy is there, but it's really the circumstance and adequacy of resources to do something. *BMD:* Exactly.

*MTM:* Here's something you also said in the Henderson interview that's deep: "I believe that it's less important finally who loves (mother, father, sister) than how much that child knows she's loved."<sup>9</sup> That threw me because it's not about who's doing the loving and how they love, but rather that the child feels loved. Are you suggesting that self-worth is not necessarily determined by the same gender?

*BMD:* Absolutely. I know exactly what you mean and that's exactly how I feel.

*MTM:* It's not because you're a mother, but rather the kind of mothering?

*BMD:* Well, it's interesting. People make assumptions based on the mother characters I've created in my fiction as well; but I say to people, "It's because I had a mother who was so present and there for me, who loved me and never questioned. I can imagine imperfect mothers who are out there not being what they need to be for their daughters." I feel like that foundation gave me the ability to leap out there and imagine all kinds of scenarios between mothers and daughters. That coupled with the fact that I had a very close relationship with my father who loved me, unconditionally. I didn't understand until I became a young woman what a gift that was. I have never, ever assumed that I needed to find love from a man because I didn't get it at home. I got it in spades, so you have to come to the table and try to match this.

*MTM:* What is it they say: that a daughter's first love affair is with the father?! He sets the standard in a heterosexual context, that is.

*BMD:* I said to my husband, "Trust me, the best way that you can be a good father is to love your children's mother." I didn't have to tell him that. He's very good at it. But I let him know that's my standard.

*MTM:* And the children will get it.

*BMD:* Yes, they totally get it. They think we're corny. You create out of who you are, and you think about what you've been given that you can use to form your art. I was given these unique gifts, and one of them was having a loving father who accepted me for who I was and this strong mother who was so clear about being there for me: "You need not worry. I'm here."

*MTM*: Are your parents around?

*BMD*: They're not.

*MTM*: Your children have missed that.

*BMD*: They have. I try to make them aware of whom I am because of my parents. I felt this very strongly with *Naked Acts*. I thought, "Well, I'm in a position to explore these issues. If not me, who?" I felt I've been given these gifts that allow me a context, a perspective that maybe someone else wouldn't have and it was my responsibility to take those gifts and do something with stories from a point of view that feels unique. I also had sisters who were overweight. I never was. And growing up, people would always say to me, "Wow, you seem to be sensitive to fat girls." I wouldn't allow my friends to make comments about anyone overweight. The way thin people think they can make jokes around you about others who are fat. I was always like, "No." It gave me a perspective. I was on the outside watching those struggles but not a part of them. Then as a writer, I realized, "Okay, that's a unique perspective. I need to utilize that." And that's how I feel about everything I've created, that I have been given these gifts and a perspective that allows me to interrogate issues on a level that maybe someone else can't.

*MTM*: In 2008, on the 10th Anniversary of *Naked Acts*, in an interview with Eisa Nefertari Ulen, you remarked [rhetorically]: "Is this film still relevant? Or have we triumphantly said goodbye to all that?" You replied "Maybe."<sup>10</sup> Seven years later, what have you to say?

*BMD*: Oh, my goodness — super relevant. Maybe in a fresh new way? Yes. I recently showed it at Spelman College and those young women made it clear to me that it was still relevant. Their comments are the same ones I heard in 1998. They were excited to see a dark-skinned woman as a lead and show her natural hair.

*MTM*: Issues haven't gone away?

*BMD*: Yes, they have not gone away. I'm of two minds: I'm excited that *Naked Acts* is still relevant, but a big piece of me wants it to be less relevant.

Noelle Griffis is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Media Arts at Marymount Manhattan College. Her recent work on media representation, location shooting, and activist filmmaking has appeared in *Black Camera* and in the edited volumes *Hollywood on Location: An Industry History* (Rutgers University Press, 2019) and *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* (Duke University Press, forthcoming 2019). She is the Reviews Editor for *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities & Culture*.

Michael T. Martin is the Editor-in-Chief of *Black Camera* and Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at Indiana University Bloomington's The Media School.

#### Notes

1. Susan Henderson, "Bridgett M. Davis," <https://www.litpark.com/2008/02/13/bridgett-davis/>, 2.
2. Raised in Detroit, Bridgett M. Davis began her career as a newspaper reporter at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* after graduating from Spelman College and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.
3. Renee Cox is a photographer and performance artist known for provocative images of black women.
4. Henderson, "Bridgett M. Davis," 5.



5. "Interview w/Bridgett M. Davis and 'Naked Acts,'" Indiewire, September 28, 1998, <http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview-w-bridgett-m-davis-and-naked-acts>.
6. Ibid., 2–3.
7. Michael T. Martin, "'I Do Exist': From 'Black Insurgent' to Negotiating the Hollywood Divide—a Conversation with Julie Dash," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2, (2009): 8–9, 12.
8. "Interview w/Bridgett M. Davis and 'Naked Acts.'" "
9. Henderson, "Bridgett M. Davis," 3.
10. Eisa Nefertari Ulen, "Guest Blog: Filmmaker and Author Bridgett M. Davis on the 10th Year Anniversary of Her Film, 'Naked Acts,'" <http://eisaulen.com/blog/index.php/2008/12/01/guest-blog-filmmaker-and-author-bridgett>.




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*Other Media Quotes by Bridgett M. Davis*

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Q: Now, did you base this black exploitation queen on anyone in particular?

Well, I couldn't help myself. Uh, yeah, it's definitely based on Pam Greer. (At *Urbanworld*, 1999)

Q: Now the video store looks ... familiar actually.

A: It's right here in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. And it is a video store [Video Basket] I used to go to quite a bit when I lived in the neighborhood. And the owner was wonderful and let me shoot there... we couldn't go in there during business hours. We had to shoot at night. So that's what you call an all-nighter on the set. (On *Reviews, et cetera* with Marilyn Foster)

Q: And the whole wig changing, you seen with Sicily, what was that all about?

A: Yeah, I have the lead character go through a whole series of wigs throughout the film, and it's basically about her trying to find herself. And at first she's trying to really kind of hide in those wigs. Not really reveal who she is. And because she's not sure who she is. And so as she gets clearer about herself and her own identity, the wigs get less elaborate and shorter and simpler. And by the end, she actually has her own natural hair, which is like a metaphor I think, for finding yourself. (from *Sauti: A Voice*, Athens International Film Festival, Ohio, May 5, 1999)



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## Guest Blog: Filmmaker and Author Bridgett M. Davis on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of her film, *Naked Acts*

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December 1, 2008

When my film *Naked Acts* premiered at the Thalia Theater on the Upper West Side of Manhattan 10 years ago, it felt bold and daring to debut a story about a black actress' struggle over taking her clothes off for the camera.

Oprah was our emblem of a black woman struggling with body issues writ large. Angela Bassett was the black actress of our generation, and she'd already drawn her line in the sand: no nudity, never. Too many of us still remembered Vanessa Williams' fall from grace. And we never could have conceived of a world in which a black actress would win an Oscar for a performance that included a nude scene showing her backside in its full glory.

In fact, there was one thing we never could have imagined: a First Lady who possessed a black woman's body — curvaceous behind and all — and didn't try to hide it.

Back then, media images of black women skewed largely negative. Film felt like the most powerful way to counteract those images. There was a lot to counter, namely an endless stream of video hos on MTV, tired variations of boys-in-the-hood films, Martin's loud-mouth girlfriend Gina and Spike Lee's disappointing depictions of women. *Girlfriends* and Gray's *Anatomy* were still on the horizon. Tyra Banks was just a model, not a Top Model mogul. And discourse about this skewed media depiction was controlled by those who had the access. Youtube, blogs, Facebook and MySpace hadn't been invented. We just had websites and email. We used words like "eye candy." No one "uploaded" photos from their digital cameras. You could make your own film from a video camera, but who would see it? Had the term "streaming video" even been invented yet?

It was a different world.

So, I wrote and directed a feature-length film to deal with what was for me a growing concern: that black women, with a particular sexualized history in this country, still had a lot to overcome before we could accept and love our bodies. That what writer Rosemary Bray once said — "My body and I have never been friends" — was too true for too many of us. That it was time to examine this reality and launch a larger discussion about it. That I could do so by dramatizing one woman's journey from shame of her body to acceptance of it.

*Naked Acts* resonated with audiences. The film showed for four weeks at that uptown theater, and traveled around the US and to Europe, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Brazil and the Cape Verde Islands. Everywhere I went, women told me their stories — about tortured relationships with,

newfound love for, and yes, violation of their bodies. It confirmed my belief in the power of film. It felt cathartic.

But that was then. *Naked Acts* is having its 10th anniversary screening this Sunday as part of the annual African Diaspora Film Festival and as the day approaches, I'm asking myself: Is this film still relevant? Or have we triumphantly said goodbye to all that?

Maybe.

Something else has changed since I debuted my film a decade ago: I now have a daughter. And while she was indeed born into a different world than the one I found in 1998, I'm taking nothing for granted. So I guess I am glad *Naked Acts* is still around, to help counterbalance those lingering negative images of black women — the ones still lurking within our ever-expanding media landscape.

Just in case.

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### **“Directing the Gaze: An Inside Look at Making *Naked Acts*” by Bridgett M. Davis**

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*“When, I ask, do we start to see images of the black female body by black women made as acts of auto-expression...? When, in other words, does the present. Begin?” — Lorraine O’Grady visual artist, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Subjectivity”*

If we are our bodies, then who are we as Black women? And further, how do we form a sense of sexuality out of whatever it is our bodies reveal us to be? This complex question is the one I posed for myself as a Black feminist back in 1992 when I set out to write a screenplay that would focus on a Black woman’s journey to explore her own sexuality. The film that emerged from that screenplay, *Naked Acts*, was completed four years later and tells the story of Cece, a contemporary African American actress who does everything in her power to avoid doing a nude scene in a movie and almost gets away with it. But to everyone’s surprise, Cece ends up revealing herself in ways she never imaged. Emotional nakedness, she finds, is much harder than just taking your clothes off.

*Naked Acts* ultimately become much more than, and much less about, one woman’s sexual coming-of-age. I soon discovered that in my efforts to explore a Black woman’s sexual identity, I needed to first explore the myriad influences — personal, familial, communal, and societal — that have an impact on her sense of herself as a sexual being. Then and only then did it make sense for me to deal with her having a healthy sex life. Besides, what I loathe most about so many Black film characters is that they seem to fall out of the sky onto the screen, with no context for who they are or where they come from: I was determined to give Cece a rich backstory.

I reached for historical context out of which to create this prototypical contemporary Black woman. I started by acknowledging that we've had a markedly different *sexualized* experience in this country than that of white women. I knew that as a justification of acts of brutality; white slave owners had created myths about Black women's abnormal sexual appetites; had made us out to be sexually aggressive exotics, forever lascivious, forever "asking for it." I knew too that considering this historical baggage, it was no wonder that Black mothers had admonished their daughters over the years to "keep your dress down and your panties up" in an effort to counteract the whorish image that laid unfairly upon us.

Extending the context, I looked to the dominant film portrayals of Black Women in this country's cinematic history. Much, after all, of how we see ourselves is shaped by how we have been represented. No other image was more ubiquitous, of course than that of the Mammy. The Mammy image had haunted my psyche since my college days, when I wrote a research paper on Hattie McDaniel, whose 1940 Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in *Gone With the Wind* seemed to forever immortalize the overweight, subservient, yet bull-strong Negro woman in popular culture — what Hollywood Black actress Sheryl Lee Ralph calls in a New York Times article the "Fat Mama on the Couch Syndrome: Joy Horowitz, "Black Actresses Still Waiting for Star Roles," (May 28, 1992).

My challenge with *Naked Acts* was to provide some subjectivity, to tell the rest of the story. Without that, I strongly felt Black women on the screen would forever stay relegated to the two extremes — asexual mule or oversexed jungle bunny. To be sure, there is a third stop on the continuum of extremity of terms of our image within popular culture — that of the nagging bitch, the ball-buster, the castrator. Actress Ralph has a name for those portrayals as well. She calls them examples of the "Sassy Sister on the Corner Syndrome." It's interesting to note that no matter how demure and sexually repressed Black women have been in real life, we've never been portrayed as pure women, as the Virgin Madonna. That image has been reserved for our white counterparts.

And so, I knew that with *Naked Acts*, I wanted the present to begin — that is, I wanted us to get beyond the limitation placed on our bodies by our racialized past. Namely, I wanted the Black woman's body to be a source of beauty, an "object" of desire. But this is a tricky slope to climb, as the line between celebration and exploitation can be thin — especially in a medium as powerful as film and particularly with all the baggage we carry around this subject as Black women. I was further complicated by a radical decision on my part to showcase Black female nudity in the film. I believed it would be a cowardly act to tell a story about a Black woman learning to accept her own body and yet never reveal her nude body at any time on screen. Still, I knew it would be tough to avoid the very stereotyping I was critiquing. I ultimately decided that none of the women characters' nudity would be used in any sexual contexts, rather in natural, everyday settings. (I had a little fun with the main male character's body. He gets to take *his* clothes off during love scenes.) Too, the audience would anticipate seeing Cece's body as she strove to keep it covered but would go on this journey with her, as she slowly peeled off more and more layers, shedding cultural baggage along with her clothing and wigs, until finally viewers would see her body only as she revealed it to herself. The effect, I

hoped, would be for audiences to feel that they were witnessing a private moment, a private yet empowering moment that had nothing to do with sex but everything to do with self-awareness and the individual's own sexuality — because we are our bodies. Still, I knew this was risky.

I knew that for this woman, Cece, to be a genuine African American woman of the 1990s, she would have to embody all of those women who were influences upon her, who helped to shape and form what her sexual image of herself would become. I also knew that this character's sexual identity would have to evolve out of my personal research, my effort to gather and look at the stories of contemporary women within my own life. I started with my siblings.

All three of my sisters were overweight, two of them obese. I saw how each made life choices, sometimes destructive ones, that I now feel were highly influenced by their relationship to their own bodies — and, in effect, by how they felt about themselves as Black women. I was equally influenced by a close friend from my days as a newspaper reporter in Philadelphia who had just lost fifty pounds when I met her. A beautiful Puerto Rican woman, she once told me that the two biggest changes she had to get used to after her weight loss were the flirtations from men who had barely noticed her before she lost weight and accepting what she now saw in the mirror; or as she put it, “In my head, I'm still fat.”

Another influence, also stemming from my early reporting days, was my memory of being in an Atlanta newsroom the day “cropped” photos of Vanessa Williams posing nude came across the news wire. I'll never forget the glee with which white reporters rushed out to buy copies of Penthouse Magazine, then clustered around the pictures, feigning shock and shaking their heads yet drinking in every photo nevertheless. So close in age to Vanessa Williams, and as another Black woman, I took the public and media denunciation of her personally. I felt that a naive young woman exploring her sexual power and her liberation had stumbled into a quagmire of stereotypes swarming around Black women's bodies, societal roles for women, and men's exploitation of those women. I felt she was a symbol of the schizophrenic attitudes toward sex and race and gender that America embraces (the Good Negress became the Bad Nigger-Girl). The fact that Williams overcame the debacle, rising in fame with her sexy image intact, only highlights the hypocrisy with which she was publicly denigrated and “punished” in the first place.

Finally, there was Oprah. Watching her over the years go through a public battle with her weight, which in effect has really been a private battle to conquer low self-esteem, has provided an extraordinary metaphor for Black women in this country. So many of us don't have the features or the figures that the dominant culture embraces, which naturally leads a lot of Black women to feel inferior. Luckily for us, here was a national figure, a woman who looked like us, working through her own similar issues on a public stage. Oprah is another symbol of America's darker-hued daughters triumphing over the damage done to the Black female psyche.

Because I always envisioned *Naked Acts* as a historical, iconographic story told through a contemporary lens, I incorporated all of these various Black women's lives and stories and portrayals into both the characterizations and the plot of the film. Cece became a twenty-seven-year-old actress who has just lost fifty-seven pounds when you meet her. Her mother, Lydia Love, is a former Blaxploitation Queen who now owns a video store. And her grandmother is a former Black actress from the 1950s. Imagine that your grandmother was Dorothy Dandridge, your mother was Pam Grier, and you wanted to be an actress. Who would you be? How to combine the smoldering-yet-nice-girl sensuality of one influence with the buxom, afro-haired, in-your-face sexiness of the other to emerge with something that is uniquely you? This is Cece's struggle.

The other women populating the film are Winsome, Randi, and Diana. Winsome represents a rarely seen type of Black woman — one who suffers from the belief that she can't be thing enough, one who sees her body as a tool for her work as a dancer/art model/actress. Randi is the full-figured character who flaunts her body, overcompensating for the asexual image usually laid upon Black women her size by relying on an over-the-top sexiness. Finally there is Diana, the "sistah spirit" who eases Cee through her struggles to regain control of and love for her own body. Diana is the emotionally centered female character of the story; she embodies what the others would be if the best parts of each of them were integrated into one woman.

The two male characters in the film represent the complex roles that Black men have played in helping to define what Black women feel about themselves as sexual beings. Joel, Cece's old flame and first-time director of the film she is cast in, is the man who both loved her when she was heavier and wants her to show off her newly svelte body in his film. His character speaks to the ambiguous agendas of Black men in the entertainment business who genuinely love Black women and yet willingly compromise them for their own success. Marcel, as an older Black actor and producer, represents the voice of integrity and uncompromising principles. He is Cece's father figure — the man who tells her what's good for her, who pushes her to be honest, who will settle for nothing less than the best of herself.

I chose to make Cece's actual father someone whom she idolized, a man who loved her but who left her mother when Cece was a little girl. Shortly after his departure, Cece became the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of one of her mother's boyfriends.

Three major factors influenced my decision to give the main character this particular history: (1) I knew that many experts believe there is a correlation between childhood sexual abuse and eating disorders — which for Black women often result in obesity. Oprah is our most prominent example of that. (2) As an English professor, I often gave a writing assignment to my students: describe in detail your first childhood memory. I'd given this assignment at least twenty times, and without fail, in every class, I found young women writing about sexual abuse. I teach at an institution with a large population of students from other countries, and what affected me so profoundly was that these brave women were from Eastern Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America, as well as the United States. I couldn't help but believe that this random sampling was representative of a silent epidemic. Herein lay the universality of the satory.

Women around the world, I realized, suffer from sexual abuse as young girls. I wanted in some small way to comment on that. (3) I felt Cece need a motivation for resenting her mother as she did. Surely, if she felt her mother had not protected her as a child, she would grow to feel abandoned by her and would be struggling more with defining herself, with “stepping out of her mother’s well-endowed shadow,” to quote Marcel, the producer.

Finally, I made a decision not to show a “before” picture of Cece when she was fat nor to begin the film before she lost the weight. Some people have questioned me on that decision — feeling that perhaps seeming Cece struggling with her weight would help explain her problems. But I strongly believe that obesity is often the symptom of an internal, psychological battle, and I felt it important to show that Black women’s body issues are not corrected simply by “losing weight;” I didn’t want viewers to subconsciously think that Cece’s problems could be solved if she just learned some discipline and ate less — a bad rap placed on so many overweight women. I wanted to show viewers that her was a woman whose problems began *after* she shed the pounds — because she hadn’t shed the mental weight of her poor sense-of-self.

Casting a film that would include the nudity of Black women — even if it *was* nonsexualized — turned out to be its own major challenge. I wrote the screenplay with the lead actress in mind, so I was thrilled when she, Jake-ann Jones, agreed to do the part. I only found out days before shooting that the issues facing her character were in fact issues Jake-ann Jones had faced in her own life. She’d been overweight as a child and teenager, and she too had been sexually abused as a girl. I knew too that she was taking a professional as well as emotional risk by agreeing to be in a film that required complete frontal nudity by story’s end. At one point, I entered our production office just before the shoot began and found her standing at the top of the stairs, completely naked.

“You have to see what I look like,” she said. “You have to know what you’re getting.”

It was a powerful, defining moment. I understood then that she was trusting me with her career, her body, her image. She needed to feel she was literally in good hands. After all, here she was, a Black actress, willingly exposing her nude body in a film. In my journal, dated 23 July 1994, I wrote: “Jake has to be treated very tenderly throughout this shoot... She is laying herself open for this role. She has to be protected.”

I assured her not only that her body was perfect for the film but that I would see to it that it was photographed in a sensitive way. And thanks to my cinematographer, Herman Lew — a feminist Chinese American man — it was. Shooting that final scene of the film, in which Cece strips while taking photos of herself, required several preparations. First, I insisted on a closed set, so that only myself, Jake-ann, and the cinematographer were allowed on. Next, I made sure the scene was shot at the end of the first week of productions — just long enough for the actress to feel accustomed to the shoot but not so far in that her anticipation and anxiousness about the scene would have worn her out emotionally. Finally, I told her to think of the undressing as a dance, one she would perform only for herself. And so, with a cassette player on set, we played an evocative song by Annie Lennox chosen by Jake-ann, and I let her do the

entire scene as one long take. That meant that she was able to get through it without stopping. This was important for the pacing that I was after and for her own comfort. This way, we only filmed the scene twice. I felt it would be too trying if I forced her to take her clothes off over and over and over again, just so I could get “coverage” I needed as the director. Subsequently, I simply used jump cuts to move the scene along.

In trying to cast for the part of Diana, the “sistah spirit” in the film, I initially couldn’t find the right actress to play the part. The problem was that Diana had to do a nude scene in the sauna room. I auditioned several actresses, and when they found that the part required nudity, they refused it. This I found both understandable and ironic. Understandable because Black actresses feel fully the double standard placed on them in the industry: a white actress can disrobe in a film and launch a career (e.g., Sharon Stone and Annette Bening); a Black actress is tainted by it and related forever to “those” kinds of parts (note Tracy Camilla Johns, *She’s Gotta Have It*). Therefore, most Black actresses make it a rule not to take their clothes off in a film. Ironic because this need to “cover up” to compensate for historical stereotyping, to avoid societal punishment, was the very issue I was attempting to explore in the film — attempting to show how it cost us a true relationship with our own bodies. Yet the situation I wanted to examine on film was potentially thwarted by the reality of that very situation. Real life was imitating art.

Luckily. I was saved by a chance meeting with a Black woman art photographer, Renee Cox, whom I met while still writing the screenplay.

“I’m creating this woman character who takes nude photographs of Black women,” I said to her. “But I don’t think such a person really exists.”

“That’s what I do,” she said. I couldn’t believe my good luck, but in fact, Renee had built a career out of doing self-portraiture photography of herself in arresting, self-affirming, and challenging nude poses. In fact, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani went on a censorship rampage against the Brooklyn Museum of Art for showing one of her pieces in a February ’01 exhibit. The piece, entitled “Yo Mama’s Last Supper,” depicts a revised version of The Last Supper, with a nude Renee portraying Christ at the head of the table surrounded by her disciples, who are all Black men. Seemingly so outraged by the temerity of a Black woman representing Christ in her own naked image, Giuliani threatened to create a Decency Commission to review art that would be shown in publicly financed institutions. We subsequently used one of her most stunning pieces in the film (a large-format photo of herself, nude, holding her son in her arms). More importantly, Renee was completely comfortable with the concept of nudity within artistic contexts, and she agreed with me that we as Black women needed to get beyond our own reticence about revealing our bodies. Although she was not a professional actress, I ultimately cast her as Diana because I believed the comfort she felt with her own body would transcend performance. And it did. And fortunately for the film, she had no problem with the sauna scene.



The themes of the film continued to play themselves out in the making of it. Most notable to me was the intensity with which the actresses playing Cece and Winsome worked out with a trainer throughout preproduction so that their bodies would “look good” on film. This again seemed like an irony. Here I was trying to comment on how visual media forces Black women to conform to a prescribed body type, and my film was prompting these two women to do just that. It was both enlightening and unsettling.

Since its completion, *Naked Acts* has gone on to screen in more than two dozen film festivals throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, Cape Verde, and Brazil. The film also enjoyed a one-month theatrical run in New York City in 1998, where more than 600 ticket buyers showed up for the opening night screening. Audience response has been consistently supportive and, in many cases, effusive. Men express gratitude over the chance to view women’s bodies from a fresh perspective. As a male colleague said to me, “Here I am, a man who’s not opposed to the male gaze, finding myself watching Cece strip from *her* point of view. That’s a first for me.”

Women, of course, have offered the most emotional responses to *Naked Acts*, many shedding cathartic tears by the film’s ending. Black women especially seem to appreciate the emotionally raw journey taken by an African American woman struggling with an internal, personal issue. One friend, who brought her eighteen-year-old daughter to see *Naked Acts*, said to me afterward that she was glad her daughter saw the film because “she doesn’t like breasts, even though she has large ones herself, and this was the time she didn’t say ‘uggh!’ when she saw a woman’s breasts on the screen.”

Too, many seem relieved that the main character is *not* a lighter-skinned woman. As one Spelman College student said to me after a screening, “It was so good to see a dark-skinned, *thin* Black woman as the heroine for a change.” She and her fellow Spelmanites talked back to the screen when Cece refused to take her clothes off in a love scene and insisted that her lover take his clothes off instead. “You go, girl!” they yelled.

White women have embraced the film’s body image these as well — finding a universality in Cece’s character. In one instance, after a screening in New York, a young white woman approached me in tear. She was crying so hard, she couldn’t speak. Finally, she just hugged me, said “thank you,” and walked away.

Similarly, after another festival screening, a heavyset white woman ran up to me and said, “I understand Cece!” She began to recount in breathless detail how once, when extremely depressed, he’s picked up an Instamatic camera and begun snapping photos of her nude self. “I need to do it,” she said. “It made me feel valuable again.”

Nowhere was the audience response to the film more intense and complex than on the African continent. *Naked Acts* was invited to be the opening-night film for the 1996 Southern African Film Festival in Harare, Zimbabwe. The film showed before a full auditorium of four hundred people, including African dignitaries, U.N. representatives, and African filmmakers, as well as hundreds of local residents. I was not prepared for the responses.

As soon as the lights came up, an older African woman came up to me and said, “Why did you have to show her body like that? Something so private?”

“Have you ever seen your own body in a mirror?” I asked.

She walked away in anger.

I then met a woman, a UNESCO representative, who quietly approached me after the screening and — referring to the flashback scene in which Cece is abused by her mother’s boyfriend — explained that the rape of young girls in Zimbabwe was rampant. In fact, she told me that many African men from that region falsely believed that the cure for AIDS was to have sex with virgins, the younger the better. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu is now bringing that issue to light as the continent faces decimation from the epidemic.

Later, during a reception, another Zimbabwean woman whispered to me that she really liked my film but that I would have to understand that the love scenes in my films were disturbing because Africans don’t kiss. “Well, we know that we do, but no one has ever seen it,” she explained. Certainly not, I realized, on the big screen in Africa or in recycled black sitcoms exported to the continent from America.

I subsequently discovered that the Zimbabwean culture is a very modest, conservative one, and so the nudity in the film was disturbing for obvious reason. Yet equally disturbing were the sex scenes between Cece and Joel — because they weren’t married.

By the time a Zimbabwean man launch into an intense discussion with me, insisting that the sexual abuse Cece suffered had nothing to do with her problems, I at least knew enough to receive his comments within the context of an African perspective. No surprisingly, my film, which was to have screened two more times during the festival, was quietly pulled from the screening schedule.

That hypocrisy arose again for me when I showed the film in, of all places, our nation’s capital. Invited by the Women Make Movies film festival in Washington, D.C., I sent the stand promotional picture to the festival coordinators. The photo shows Cece’s nude body covered up by rolls and rolls of film. To my surprise, one of the coordinators of the festival — a white woman — called to ask if I had alternative photos I could send. “Cece’s nipple is showing on the photo,” she said.

I looked and looked at this publicity still that had been printed in newspapers and magazines in numerous U.S. cities and at least seven other countries. What nipple? I never found it, but she was insistent that it was there. Another example of American schizophrenia about the Black woman’s body.

In contrast, the same photograph was displayed in full color as part of a centerpiece article in a weekly magazine in Milan, Italy. Attitudes toward women's bodies are so different in Italy that the female programmer of *that* festival fell in love with the image and wanted to showcase it wherever she could.

Industry response to the film has been a completely different matter. Critics have lauded it, calling the film, "Fresh, funny and original," "smartly written and charmingly neurotic," and "a rewarding and invigorating find.: Yet while many film distributors — from the biggest Hollywood studio to the smallest independent label — saw *Naked Acts*, none trusted that it had marketing potential. For one, it's not easily categorized, isn't "like" else they've seen. (The best label I could come up with has been, "It's a weak cross between *All About Eve*, *Cinema Paradiso*, and *Hollywood Shuffle*.") The most consistent response I've heard from distributors is "We don't know who the audience is for this film."

That ludicrous comment no longer surprises me. Without realizing it, I made more than a progressive film; I made a radical film with a Black woman at its center, a context for her complex life, and a multi-layered plot. I've learned that the more textured a story by a Black filmmaker, the more troubling it is to mainstream marketers — especially if that texture is not directly exploring the race issue but instead is exploring the humanity (rather than pathology and stereotypes) in contemporary Black life. If the story is neither a comedy nor a dramatization of history, that's even more troubling. That is why we ultimately chose to self-distribute the film.

What impresses me most as I reflect back on the life of *Naked Acts* is that considering all of the times it has screened — at festivals, in museums, at community centers, in classrooms, at conferences — people have asked me unnumberable questions about the film but have rarely asked about the final scene — when Cece strips for herself before the still camera. That scene I expected to create the most controversy, and yet people don't mention it. I've come to view the silence as success, because it suggests that viewers have lived with this character in such a way for ninety minutes that by the time they witness her unveiling, they fell less like voyeurs, more like allies. They are, I would like to believe, cheering Cece as she finally liberates herself and lets go. The silence suggests to me that I've done what I set out to do with *Naked Acts*: I've presented a Black woman who embraces and celebrates her own nakedness — and gets away with it.

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*Remembrance: FESPACO, Twenty-three Years Ago*

*Bridgett M. Davis*

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Upon learning that the feature film I had written and directed, *Naked Acts*, was an official selection in the 1997 Pan-African Film and Television Festival, I was thrilled. Throughout the previous year, my film had traveled along the festival circuit, screening at African film fests in Italy, the United States, Brazil, and Zimbabwe, so what an honor to be invited to the most prestigious and largest African film festival in the world!

That week in Ouagadougou became and remains the gold standard of my festival experience. I'd always wished I'd been at FESTAC, the seminal arts festival that took place in Lagos back in 1977, and FESPACO felt like a 1990s version of that international Black cultural event. Being in dialogue with and seeing films by filmmakers from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and Canada broadened my understanding of African cinema and connected me to a diasporic community of fellow artists. Meeting Sharon Wilkinson, then US ambassador to Burkina Faso, also impacted me, as she modeled what an African American woman could achieve on the world stage.

Another lasting impression was seeing Ouaga's locals attend various film screenings. I was moved by the sight of everyday people sitting on folding chairs, watching cinema projected onto outdoor screens throughout the city. Without free access to the festival's lineup of films, how many of Ouaga's residents would ever see images of people like themselves reflected back on the big screen? Inclusivity was clearly a mission of FESPACO, which further distinguished it. Of course, Burkina Faso was and remains a struggling African nation, and there's no escaping the frictions and challenges created by bringing a world-class festival to a poor country. Still, there's beauty in the effort.

*Naked Acts* screened during FESPACO at the Mèliés Theater inside the French Cultural Center, a lovely proscenium-style open-air venue. Throughout the screening, as the packed audience watched my film, I kept glancing up, eying a plethora of tiny stars twinkling above in the night sky. Sitting there, I had an epiphany: *This* is why I worked so hard to make a good film — so that one day it could be shown beneath the stars in a proud West African country, seen by hundreds of beautiful Black people from all over the globe. "Remember this," I told myself. "Remember this moment."

And I'll never forget it.

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## Milestone Film & Video

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In 34 years in film distribution and restoration, Milestone has built a reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, groundbreaking documentaries, and American independent features. Thanks to the company's work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as



Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's, *The Exiles*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out*, Ayoka Chenzira's *Alma's Rainbow*, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors. Important contemporary artists who have co-presented Milestone restorations include Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Kopple, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme, Dustin Hoffman, and Charles Burnett.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis at *LA Weekly* chose Milestone as the 1999 "Indie Distributor of the Year." In 2004, the National Society of Film Critics awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award. That same year the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award and the New York Film Critics Circle voted the company a Special Award "in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films." In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission's first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. In January 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association chose to give its first Legacy of Cinema Award "to Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Film & Video for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation." And in March 2008, Milestone was honored by Anthology Film Archive for its work in preservation.

The company won Best Rediscovery in the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for its release of *Winter Soldier* in 2006 and again in 2010 for *The Exiles*. In 2015, Il Cinema Ritrovato honored Milestone for Best Blu-ray, for the *Project Shirley* series. In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of Film Critics for the releases of *On the Bowery* and *Word is Out*. The American Library Association selected *Word is Out* for its Notable Videos for Adults, the first classic film ever so chosen.

In December 2012, Milestone became the first two-time winner of the prestigious New York Film Critics' Circle's "Special Award" and also received another National Society of Film Critics Film Heritage Award, this time for the company's work restoring, preserving and distributing the films of iconoclast director Shirley Clarke. In 2019, Doros and Heller were honored with the Art House Convergence's Spotlight Lifetime Achievement Award and the

Denver Silent Film Festival’s David Shepard Career Achievement Award. In 2023, Milestone received the Ambler Cinematic Arts Award.

In 2009, Dennis Doros was elected as one of the Directors of the Board of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and established the organization’s press office in 2010. He served three terms on the board. In 2016, he was honored with AMIA’s William O’Farrell Award in recognition for services to the field. From 2017–2021, Doros served as President of AMIA, and on the board of Co-ordinating Council of Audio-Visual Archives Associations. From 2018–2021, Doros was a member of the National Film Preservation Board, which helps select the Library of Congress’s yearly additions to the National Film Registry.

Heller and Doros have lectured internationally on the importance of saving and screening films outside the mainstream. In recent years, Milestone premiered pristine restorations of Nancy Savoca’s *Household Saints*, David Schickele’s *Bushman*, Bridgett M. Davis’ *Naked Acts*, Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I Am Cuba*; Lois Weber’s *Shoes* and *The Dumb Girl of Portici*; Kathleen Collins’s *Losing Ground*; George T. Nierenberg’s *Say Amen*, *Somebody* and *No Maps on My Taps*; the films of Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, including the Oscar®-winning *Common Threads*, Ayoka Chenzira’s *Alma’s Rainbow*, and Eleanor Antin’s *The Man without a World*. They produced Ross Lipman’s acclaimed essay film *Notfilm*.

In 2021, Milestone entered into a distribution agreement with Kino Lorber, which has allowed co-founders Doros and Heller more time to focus on the rediscovery and restoration of films that will delight viewers and challenge the cinematic canon. The pair — along with filmmakers Nancy Savoca, Rich Guay, Ira Deutchman, Mary Harron, Geoffrey Fletcher, and attorney Susan Bodine — have also been actively involved in the founding of a new non-profit organization, Missing Movies, dedicated to addressing the current cinephile’s dilemma — thousands of films that are no longer available to the public.

“They care and they love movies.” — Martin Scorsese

“Among the distributors dedicated to the preservation and circulation of classic cinema, none deserves more commendation and affection than Milestone Film & Video.”

— David Sterritt, Quarterly Review of Film and Video

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