

Ava DuVernay makes history with Venice premiere of 'Origin'

Crispian Balmer :: 07/09/2023



VENICE, Sept 6 (Reuters) - Award-winning director Ava DuVernay on Wednesday became the first African American woman to present a movie in competition at the Venice Film Festival, overcoming sceptics who had tried to talk her out of applying.

"As Black film makers we are told people who love films in other parts of the world do not care about our stories," DuVernay told reporters ahead of the screening of her powerful, thought-provoking movie "Origin".

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"I can't tell you how many times I have been told: 'Don't apply for Venice, you won't get in'. And this year it happened. Thank you. Something happened that hadn't happened in eight decades before, an African American women in competition."

"Origin" dramatises how Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson came to write her best-selling, 2020 book "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents", while simultaneously exploring its themes of race and deep-rooted discrimination.


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Made in just 37 days, "Origin" jumps from personal tragedies in Wilkerson's own life, to recreations of Nazi Germany, Jim Crow segregation in the southern United States and the indignities suffered by the Dalit "untouchable" caste in India.

The film shows how lower-caste members throughout history have been dehumanized and trapped at the bottom of society through cruelty and terror, forbidden to marry members of the higher castes or change their predetermined lot in life.

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Director Ava DuVernay attends the photo call for the film "Origin" in competition at the 80th Venice Film Festival, September 6, 2023. REUTERS/Guglielmo Mangiapane [Acquire Licensing Rights](#) 

"Wilkerson cast a light on (something) that our reader desperately needs to know or else we will be shooting at ourselves without even knowing why," said Suraj Yengde, an Indian scholar who plays himself in the movie.

DuVernay, who made the 2014 film "Selma" about Dr. Martin Luther King's campaign to secure equal voting rights for Blacks, started working on "Origin" within a studio structure, but then turned it into an independent project, giving herself greater artistic freedom, including over who to cast.

Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor plays the main role, while Jon Bernthal portrays her husband. Elsewhere, as with Yengde, real people play themselves.

DuVernay said it would have been impossible to put together such a cast with a studio in charge.

"There is an aspect of control (in the studios) over who plays what and there is an idea about who makes money, who attracts attention and sometimes that sits at odds with who might be the best person," she said.

"This cast ... is populated with blood, sweat and tears working actors ... together you see how they shine like stars."

"Origin" is one of 23 movie competing for the coveted Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival, which ends on Sept. 9.

Reporting by Crispian Balmer; Editing by Nick Macfie

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