

Daughters of the Dust

Daughters of the Dust is a 1991 independent film written, directed and produced by Julie Dash and is the first feature film directed by an African-American woman distributed theatrically in the United States.^[1] Set in 1902, it tells the story of three generations of Gullah (also known as Geechee) women in the Peazant family on Saint Helena Island as they prepare to migrate to the North on the mainland.

The film gained critical praise for its lush visuals, Gullah dialogue and non-linear storytelling. The cast features Cora Lee Day, Alva Rogers, Barbara-O, Trula Hoosier, Vertamae Grosvenor, and Kaycee Moore and was filmed on St. Helena Island in South Carolina. *Daughters of the Dust* was selected for the Sundance 1991 dramatic competition. Director of photography Arthur Jafa won the top cinematography prize.^[2] The film is also known for being the first by an African American woman to gain a general theatrical release.^[3]

Dash has written two books about "Daughters of the Dust," one about the making the film, co-authored with Toni Cade Bambara and bell hooks, and one novel, a sequel set 20 years after the film's story. In 2004 the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." For its 25th anniversary *Daughters of the Dust* was restored and re-released in 2016 by the Cohen Media Group.^[4]

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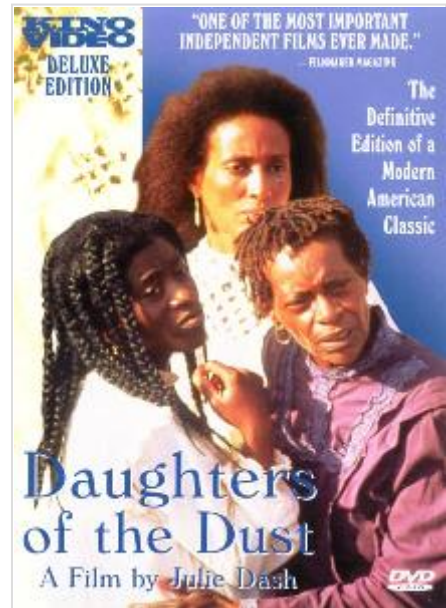
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Plot

Daughters of the Dust



DVD cover

Directed by	Julie Dash
Produced by	Lindsay Law Julie Dash Arthur Jafa Steven Jones
Written by	Julie Dash
Starring	Cora Lee Day Barbara O Alva Rogers Trula Hoosier Umar Abdurrahamn Adisa Anderson Kaycee Moore
Music by	John Barnes
Cinematography	Arthur Jafa
Distributed by	Kino International
Release date	January 1991 (Sundance Film Festival) September 10, 1991 (Toronto Film Festival)
Running time	112 minutes
Country	United States

Daughters of the Dust is set in 1902 among the members of the Peazant family, Gullah islanders who live at Ibo Landing on St. Simons Island, off the Georgia coast.^[5] Their ancestors were brought there as enslaved people centuries ago, and the islanders developed a language and culture that was creolized from West Africans of Ibo, Yoruba, Kikongo, Mende, and Twi origin.^[6] Developed in their relative isolation of large plantations on the islands, the enslaved peoples' unique culture and language have endured over time. Their dialogue is in Gullah creole.^[5]

Language	English
Budget	\$800,000

Narrated by the Unborn Child, the future daughter of Eli and Eula, whose voice is influenced by accounts of her ancestors, the film presents poetic visual images and circular narrative structures to represent the past, present and future for the Gullah, the majority of whom are about to embark for the mainland and a more modern way of life. The old ways are represented by community matriarch Nana Peazant, who practices African and Caribbean spiritual rituals and who says of the Unborn Child, "We are two people in one body. The last of the old and the first of the new"

Contrasting cousins, Viola, a devout Christian, and Yellow Mary, a free spirit who has brought her lover Trula, from the city, arrive at the island by canoe from their homes on the mainland for a last dinner with their family. Yellow Mary plans to leave for Nova Scotia after her visit. Mr. Snead, a mainland photographer, accompanies Viola and takes portraits of the islanders before they leave their way of life forever. Intertwined with these narratives is the marital rift between Eli and his wife Eula, who is about to give birth after being raped by a white man on the mainland. Eli struggles with the fact that the unborn child may not be his.

Several other family members' stories unfold between these narratives. They include Haagar, a cousin who finds the old spiritual beliefs and provincialism of the island "backwards," and is impatient to leave for a more modern society with its educational and economic opportunities. Her daughter Iona longs to be with her secret lover St. Julien Lastchild, a Native American, who will not leave the island.

While the women prepare a traditional meal for the feast, which includes okra, yams and shellfish prepared at the beach, the men gather nearby in groups to talk. The children and teenagers practice religious rites on the beach and have a Bible-study session with Viola. Bilal Muhammad leads a Muslim prayer. Nana evokes the spirits of the family's ancestors who worked on the island's indigo plantations. Eula and Eli reveal the history and folklore of the slave uprising and mass suicide at Igbo Landing. The Peazant family members make their final decisions to leave the island for a new beginning, or stay behind and maintain their way of life.

Cast

- Cora Lee Day as Nana Peazant – Matriarch of the Peazant family, determined to stay on the island.
- Adisa Anderson as Eli Peazant – Nana's grandson, torn between traveling north and staying on the island.
- Alva Rogers as Eula Peazant – Eli's wife, who was raped by a white man and is now pregnant.
- Kay-Lynn Warren as Unborn Child – The spirit of Eula's unborn child, who is Eli's daughter, narrates much of the film and magically appears as a young girl in some scenes before her birth.
- Kaycee Moore as Haagar Peazant – Nana's strong-willed granddaughter-in-law, who is leading the migration north.
- Cheryl Lynn Bruce as Viola Peazant – One of Nana's granddaughters, she has already moved to Philadelphia and become a fervent Christian.
- Tommy Hicks as Mr. Snead – A photographer from Philadelphia, engaged by Viola to document the family's life on the island before they leave it for the North.
- Bahni Turpin as Iona Peazant – Haagar's daughter, in love with St. Julien, a Native American who will not leave the island.
- M. Cochise Anderson as St. Julien Lastchild.
- Barbara-O as Yellow Mary – Another of Nana's granddaughters, she returns from the city for a final visit to the island and her family, along with her lover, Trula.
- Trula Hoosier as Trula – Yellow Mary's young lover.
- Umar Abdurrahman as Bilal Muhammad – A practicing Muslim, and a pillar of the

island community.

- Cornell Royal as "Daddy Mac" Peazant – Patriarch of the family.

Production

Development

Originally conceived in 1975, Dash planned to make a short film with no dialogue as a visual account of a Gullah family's preparation to leave their Sea Island home to a new life in the North. She was inspired by her father's Gullah family, who migrated to New York City in the early 20th century during the Great Migration of African Americans from the southern states. Her narrative forms were also inspired by the writing of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Melville Jean Herskovits.^[7] As the story developed for more than 10 years, Dash clarified her artistic vision and together with Arthur Jafa, her cinematographer and co-producer, she put together a short film to use for marketing.

She was initially rejected by Hollywood executives, as this was to be her first full-length film. Dash said they thought it was "too different." She thought their reaction was part of a systematic exclusion of black women from Hollywood. Persisting, Dash finally got \$800,000 financing from PBS' *American Playhouse* in 1988.

Casting

With funding secured, Dash cast a number of veterans of black independent cinema in various roles, as a tribute to the work they had done and the sacrifices they had made to work in independent films. She also hired a mostly African-American crew. Considering she had cast principal actors who were union members, as well as hired union technicians, her budget of \$800,000 was very small.

Dialogue and narrative structure

For the sake of authenticity and poetry, the characters from the island speak in Gullah dialect. Ronald Daise, author of *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage* (1987), was the dialect coach for her actors, none of whom knew Gullah at the start of production.

The narrative structure is non-linear of which Dash explained:

I didn't want to tell a historical drama about African-American women in the same way that I had seen other dramas. I decided to work with a different type of narrative structure...[and] that the typical male-oriented western-narrative structure was not appropriate for this particular film. So I let the story unravel and reveal itself in a way in which an African Gullah would tell the story, because that's part of our tradition. The story unfolds throughout this day-and-a-half in various vignettes. It unfolds and comes back. It's a different way of telling a story. It's totally different, new.^[8]

Principal photography

Director of photography Arthur Jafa began shooting on location at St. Helena Island and Hunting Island, off the South Carolina coast.^[9] The shoot took 28 days with most of the shots take place outdoors, either on the beach, in front of rustic homes, or further inland, where Nana's home is located near the island's graveyard. The sets, including cabins, the graveyard, and a figurative-sculpture dock at Igbo Landing, were constructed mostly using materials the Gullah would have had available at the time of the story. The costumes feature the women in long indigo-dyed and bright white dresses. The majority of closeups in the film are on the women, and the majority of dialogue is spoken by women and girls.^[8]

Post-production

Editing began in January, 1990, and it took nearly a year to complete the film.^[10] Dash chose not to use subtitles, preferring to have audiences be immersed in the language.^[11] The soundtrack was composed by John Barnes, featuring a blend of synclavier percussion with traditional instruments, including the Middle Eastern santour and African bata and talking drums.^[12]

Release

Daughters of the Dust screened at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize and won the Excellence in Cinematography Award.^[13] It was released by Kino International—the first feature film made by an African-American woman to be distributed theatrically in the United States.^[1]

Reception

The film opened in January 1992 to mostly critical acclaim. *The Boston Globe* called it "Mesmerizing ... a film rich with [black women's] faces, voices and movement."^[14]

The New York Times lauded the film's languid pace and "spellbinding visual beauty" while noting that its unconventional narrative structure made the characters in relation to the story at times difficult to follow. Critic Stephen Holden said the individual stories in the film formed a "broad weave in which the fabric of daily life, from food preparation to ritualized remembrance, is ultimately more significant than any of the psychological conflicts that surface." He hailed Dash as a "strikingly original filmmaker."^[15]

Roger Ebert called the film a tone-poem and highlighted the screenplay's Gullah dialect: "The fact that some of the dialogue is deliberately difficult is not frustrating, but comforting; we relax like children at a family picnic, not understanding everything, but feeling at home with the expression of it."^[16]

Upon its 2016 re-release, *The Village Voice* review commended the film's "stunning motifs and tableaux, the iconography seemingly sourced from dreams as much as from history and folklore."^[17] *Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw called the film "mysterious, fabular and sometimes dreamlike," comparing it to Chekhov or a performance of Shakespeare's *Tempest*.^[18]

The film holds a 97% rating on Rotten Tomatoes from a sample of 33 critics.^[19]

Despite the positive reviews, the promise of an illustrious film career did not pan out for Dash. She concluded that industry executives were uncertain about the film's unconventional form, stating in 2007 that "Hollywood and mainstream television are still not quite open to what I have to offer."^[20] Nonetheless, the film has continued to resonate with critics and audiences and Dash would go on to a productive television career.^[7]

The Library of Congress added *Daughters of the Dust* to the National Film Registry in 2004, noting its status as the first feature-length film by an African-American woman to receive wide theatrical release, calling it an "evocative, emotional look at family, era and place."^[21]

Restoration and re-release

For its 25th anniversary, the Cohen Media Group restored *Daughters of the Dust* for a screening at the 2016 Toronto Film Festival and a theatrical release. When Beyoncé's acclaimed visual album *Lemonade* aired on HBO and online in the spring of that year, critics noted that *Lemonade* made several visual references to *Daughters of the Dust*. Beyoncé's modern take featured young women, some in long white dresses, walking toward a beach or settled on the front porch of a rustic island cabin. The homage brought attention to the film in articles for *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, NPR, and *Essence*, among other media outlets. With new acclaim, *Daughters of the Dust* was re-released in theaters in November along with a new trailer and poster.^[22]

Awards and nominations

- Sundance Film Festival– Excellence in Cinematography Award, nominated for Grand Jury Prize, 1991^[23]
- Selected for National Film Registry of the Library of Congress 2004

- Cascade Festival of African Films, Portland, Oregon – Excellence in Cinematography Award, 2005^[24]
- New York Film Critics Circle Awards – Special Award, 2016^[25]

Related books

Dash has written two books related to *Daughters of the Dust*

- Co-authored with Toni Cade Bambara and bell hooks, Dash wrote *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992). The book includes the screenplay
- Dash wrote *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* (1997), a sequel set 20 years after the passage explored in the film. Amelia, a young anthropology student who grew up in Harlem, goes to the Sea Islands to meet her mother's relatives and learn about their culture. The novel was selected in 2011 for the Charleston County Public Library's "One Book Program."^[26]

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External links

- [Official Site](#)
- [Daughters of the Dust](#) on IMDb
- [Daughters of the Dust](#) at the TCM Movie Database
- [Daughters of the Dust](#) at Rotten Tomatoes

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